

Land-Grant University Capacity to Support Recreation Economies in National Forest Gateway Communities



NATIONAL EXTENSION
TOURISM NETWORK

RRDC
Regional Rural Development Centers



About this Report

The report was developed by Doug Arbogast, Rural Tourism Specialist West Virginia University Extension Service, with support from the Extension Foundation, Regional Rural Development Centers, and the members of the National Extension Outdoor Recreation Working Group (NEORWG).

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Background

The U.S. Department of Commerce Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA)'s 2022 Outdoor Recreation Satellite Account showed the most significant economic impact in the account's history, demonstrating outdoor recreation's powerful, positive economic impact on the U.S. economy. These new figures reveal that outdoor recreation generates \$1.1 trillion in annual economic output (2.2% of GDP) and 4.98 million jobs comprising 3.2% of U.S. employees. Outdoor recreation is a growing and diverse economic super sector that is a vital cornerstone of thriving communities. Yet many rural communities lack the capacity and resources needed to support and benefit from the recreation economy.

In response to these trends, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) identified the outdoor economy as an emerging and priority area of national need in 2017. It published the Recreation Economy Resource Guide to link resources and capacity-building activities across component agencies. Using the recommendations in the resource guide, the Monongahela National Forest (MNF), in partnership with West Virginia University Extension and USDA Rural Development, in 2017 began engaging stakeholders in ten gateway communities to create a shared recreation vision for the region surrounding the MNF. The resulting Mon Forest Towns Partnership cultivated relationships across agencies and among stakeholders in forest gateway communities. Developing these relationships, and the subsequent planning, research, and capacity-building activities, has enhanced the economy and quality of life for residents and visitors, resulting in over \$8 million in additional federal, state, and private funding leveraged to support the recreation economy in the region to date.

In January 2023, the USDA released an MOU on supporting the nation's outdoor recreation economy seeking to coordinate activities to support the economies of communities adjacent to National Forests and Grasslands, and the sustainable development of the recreation economy nationwide. USDA Forest Service, Rural Development, and the National Institute for Food and Agriculture (NIFA) seek to build on their collaboration and coordination to support the economy of gateway communities.

In response to the MOU, the National Extension Outdoor Recreation Working Group (NEORWG) was formed in February 2023 (NEORWG is hosted by the National Extension Tourism Network, in partnership with the Regional Rural Development Centers) to take the pulse of Extension and its role in outdoor recreation. While the MOU states that the Cooperative Extension Service has broad educational, research and technical assistance resources that can help with planning associated with the recreational economy to enhance the local recreation economy, the sentiment from the participants in NEORWG is that while Extension is increasingly being called upon to engage in tourism and outdoor recreation, the sector remains an underserved component of Extension work nationally, primarily due to a lack of capacity to fully engage.



Project Description

Subsequent NEORWG meetings have focused on regional identification and alignment of Extension faculty conducting outdoor recreation-related programming. The expectation is that each region could identify synergies where, in partnership with the RRDCs, pilot programming to support the MOU could be proposed. With limited Extension resources to support the outdoor economy, NEORWG members have agreed that the first step should be to conduct a national assessment of Extension's current and potential role in developing recreation economies.

Thus, in partnership with the RRDCs, a feasibility study was proposed to assess the capacity of the Land Grant Universities (LGUs) to provide both Extension and research support for the development of recreation economies, and to determine the best places in each RRDC region to deploy resources for program implementation to align capacity and interest among the agencies to achieve outcomes similar to those realized by the Mon Forest Towns Partnership. A national assessment of the role of Extension and the RRDCs was proposed to identify hotspots in each region where pilot implementation projects to improve coordination of programs and services to gateway communities and recreation industry stakeholders would be highly likely to succeed.

Methodology

This project was funded by a New Technologies in Ag Extension grant awarded to West Virginia University Extension Service by the Extension Foundation. A survey was developed using Qualtrics survey software by Doug Arbogast, Rural Tourism Specialist, West Virginia University Extension Service with input from NEORWG members and the Northeast and Southern RRDCs. The survey was distributed by RRDC Directors to Extension Community Development Program Leaders at 1862, 1890, and 1994 LGUs in states with a National Forest. Data were collected from May – June 2024. The survey included questions designed to explore Extension's current and potential capacity to support a recreation economy development process, current and potential research opportunities related to the recreation economy, and what additional Extension and research activities could be conducted with additional funding.



Results

Forty-two survey responses were received from LGUs (seven from the Northeast region, seventeen from the Southern region, eight from the North Central region, and ten from the Western region). LGUs were divided into three categories based on their current capacity and a map was produced to highlight the survey findings and identify the locations of Forest Service and USDA Rural Development offices.

A total of fourteen LGUs either are currently engaged with their National Forest Gateway communities, have current expertise and capacity to engage in Extension's role directly, or would be willing to reallocate existing resources to support this work. An additional twenty-five LGUs are interested but would need external funding to support increasing capacity to engage. Three LGUs said this work does not fit into their current Extension priorities.

Regarding research on recreation economies, faculty at twenty-five LGUs are already conducting research in National Forest gateway communities. Twenty-one LGUs have either Extension or academic faculty with research expertise that could be applied to forest gateway communities but would need external funding to support this work. Seven LGUs do not currently have expertise or capacity for research related to developing recreation economies in forest gateway communities but would be willing to increase their capacity and expertise if external funding were available to support this. Two LGUs indicated that research on recreation economies is not a current priority.

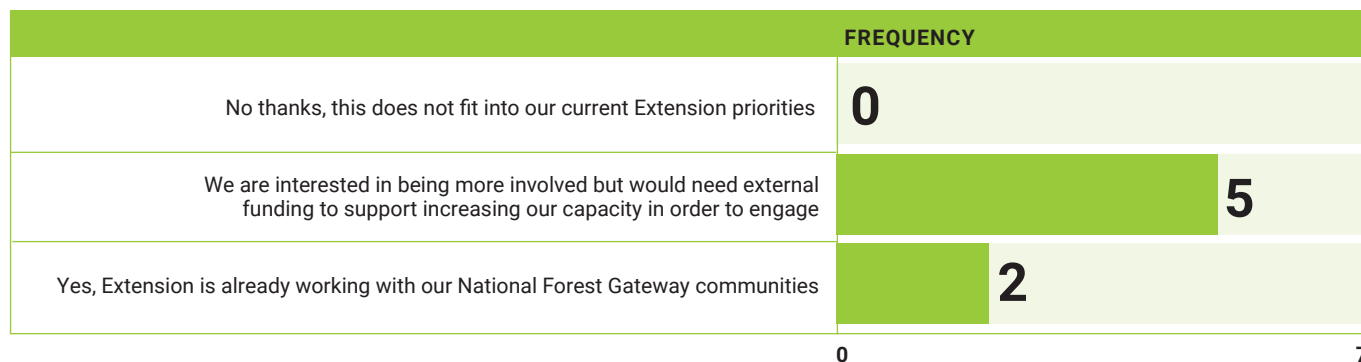
Northeast Region

In the Northeast, seven LGUs responded to the survey. Within Extension, two LGUs are currently engaged with their National Forest Gateway communities. Five LGUs are interested but would need external funding to support increasing capacity to engage (see figure 1). Regarding recreation economy research in the Northeast, two LGUs are already conducting research in National Forest Gateway communities. Three LGUs have research expertise that could be applied to forest gateway communities; however, external funding would be needed to support this work. Two LGUs currently need to gain expertise or capacity for research related to developing recreation economies in forest gateway communities. Still, they would be willing to increase their capacity and knowledge if external funding was available (see figure 2).

“It will be great to have some sort of personnel support for this type of program and we know there is a need”

Extension

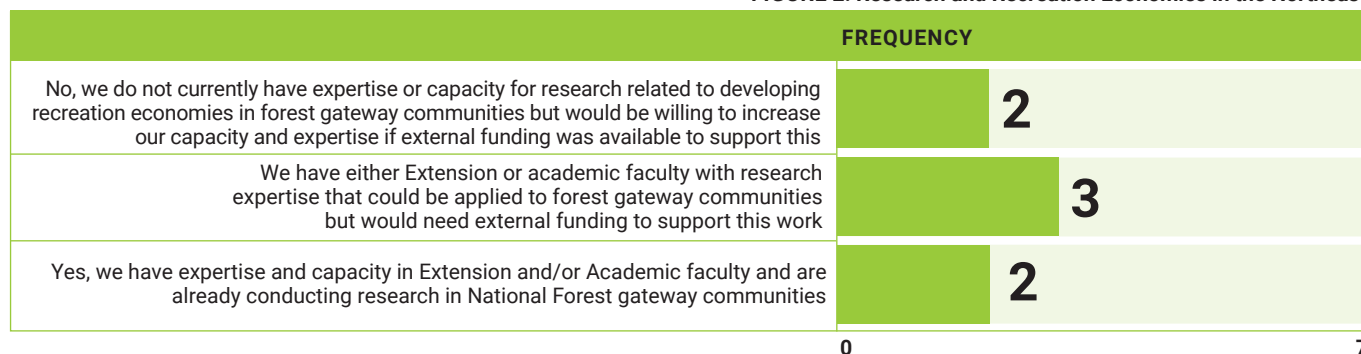
FIGURE 1: Extension and Recreation Economies in the Northeast



Interest in expanding the role of Extension in support of recreation economy development included hiring a new faculty or staff position to increase capacity to develop programming and work in gateway communities, additional funding could be utilized to work on economic/community development programming to help the towns (or the area) develop and implement a solid plan, and another university indicated that they could fund part of an Extension professional salary on a fixed-term basis to implement recreation economy development and with longer-range funding could consider developing a State Specialist for Tourism Business and Community Development through potential collaboration/joint appointment.

Research

FIGURE 2: Research and Recreation Economies in the Northeast



Research expertise that could be applied to the development of recreation economies in the Northeast includes ecological economics (including economic impact analysis), recreation planning, business retention and expansion, and main street vibrancy, agricultural economics, rural sociology, fishery research, agroforestry extension efforts, and invasive species with interest in utilizing funding to support existing faculty, hire grad students, and create new faculty positions.

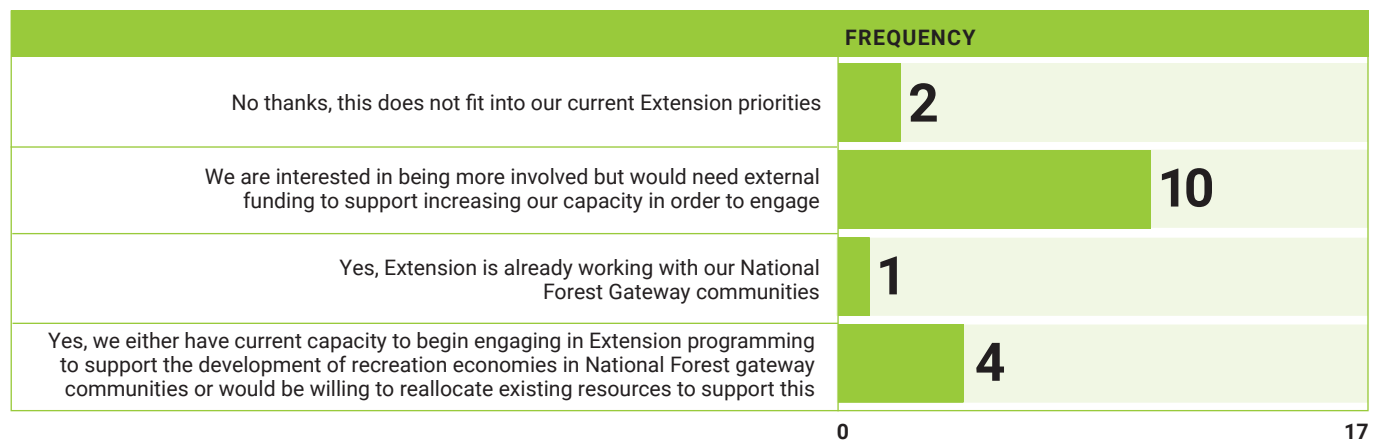
Southern Region

In the South, seventeen LGUs responded to the survey. Within Extension, five LGUs are either already working with their National Forest Gateway communities, have current expertise and capacity to engage in Extension’s role directly, or would be willing to reallocate existing resources to support this work. An additional ten LGUs are interested but would need external funding to support increasing capacity to engage, and two LGUs indicated that this does not fit into their current Extension priorities (see figure 3). Regarding recreation economy research in the South, six LGUs are already conducting research in National Forest

Gateway communities. An additional eight LGUs have Extension or academic faculty with research expertise that could be applied to forest gateway communities, however, external funding would be needed to support this work. Two LGUs currently need to gain expertise or capacity for research related to developing recreation economies in forest gateway communities. Still, they would be willing to increase their capacity and knowledge if external funding was available. One LGU indicated that this is not a current priority for their university (see figure 4).

Extension

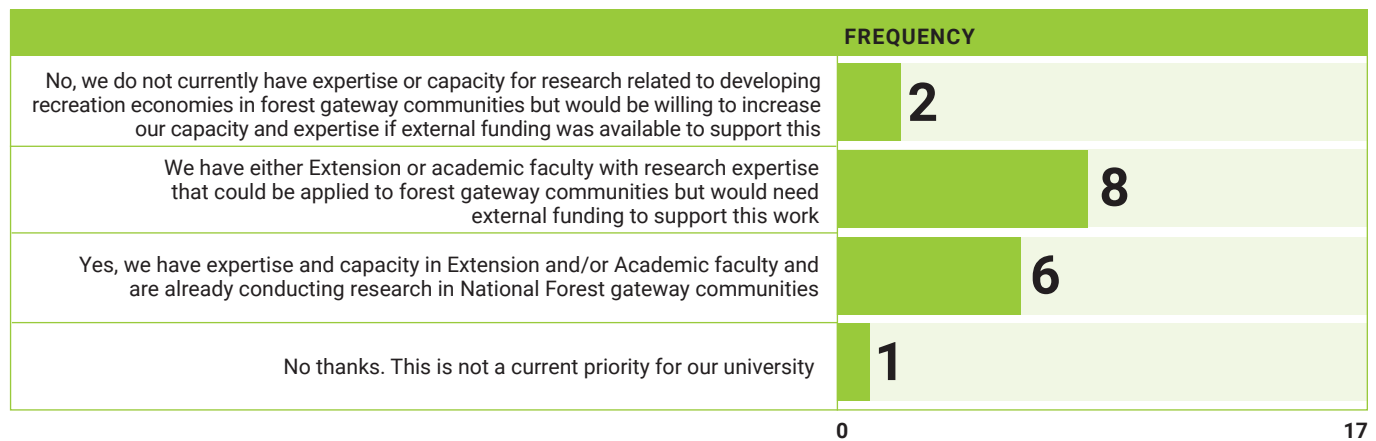
FIGURE 3: Extension and Recreation Economies in the South



In the south there are currently Extension programs doing educational programming with federal partners in the National Forest, facilitating asset-based community development initiatives, providing capacity building in trail development, marketing, action planning for gateway communities, and developing educational programming for gateway communities. In addition, some Extension programs responded that they do not currently have extension appointments in recreation or tourism but would like one and that their communities need facilitation, planning support, technical assistance, and education/capacity building.

Research

FIGURE 4: Research and Recreation Economies in the South



A wide variety of research expertise exists in the south that could be applied to the development of recreation economies including an urban forestry program, agricultural and natural resource economics, rural public policy and development, forestry, ag economics, tourism, data analytics and cluster analysis, outdoor recreation/visitor management, rural sociology, eco and agritourism, planning, economic development, recreation, and tourism, wildlife, forestry and environmental resources, parks, recreation and tourism management, tourism economics, market analysis, trail development, rural tourism, nature tourism and outdoor recreation, economic impact analysis, and business and workforce development.

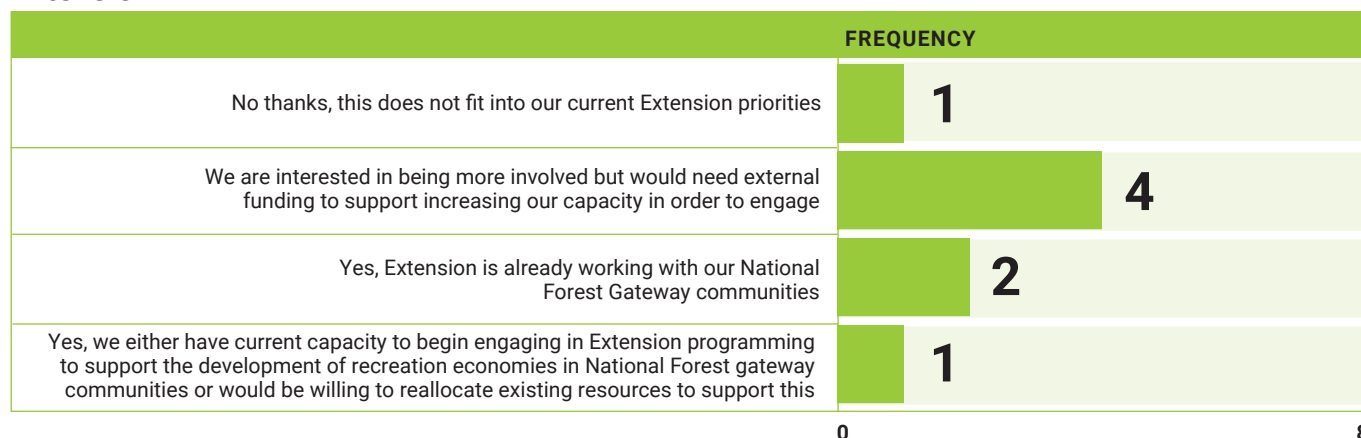
North Central Region

In the North Central region, eight LGUs responded to the survey. Within Extension, three LGUs are either already working with their National Forest Gateway communities, have current expertise and capacity to engage in Extension’s role directly, or would be willing to reallocate existing resources to support this work. An additional four LGUs are interested but would need external funding to support increasing capacity to engage. One LGU indicated that this does not fit into their current Extension priorities (see figure 5). Regarding recreation economy research in the North Central region, one LGU is already conducting research in National Forest Gateway communities, six LGUs have Extension or academic faculty with research expertise that could be applied to forest gateway communities but would need external funding to support this work, and one LGU needs more recreation economy research expertise or capacity. Still, it would be willing to increase its capacity and knowledge if external funding was available (see figure 6).

“Great work! This is an area that is ripe for expansion and Extension should be a major player!”

Extension

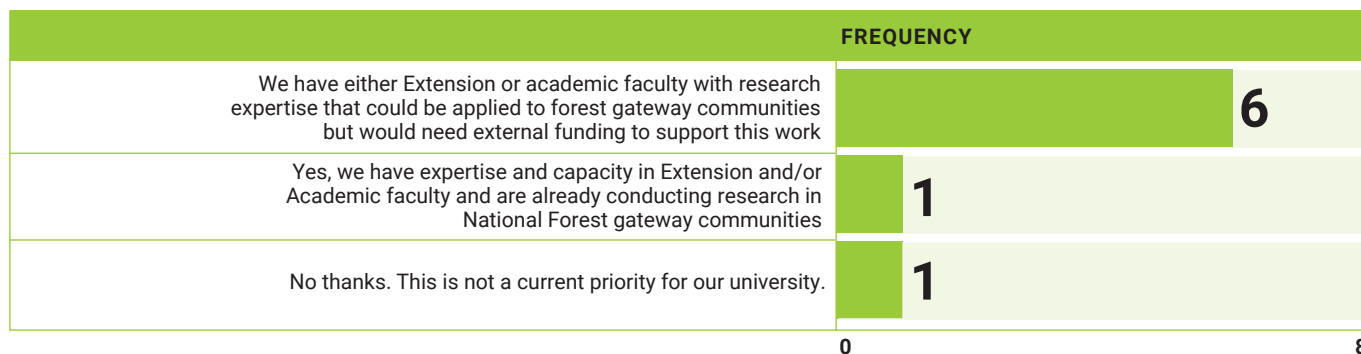
FIGURE 5: Extension and Recreation Economies in the North Central



In the North Central region one Extension program identified a lack of staff as the biggest barrier they face in being more effective in leveraging their National Forests to grow its recreational economy noting that Extension would use additional funding to prioritize hiring statewide specialists in recreation economies who would work with existing municipalities and economic development organizations and leverage their relationships with other local partners and also be able to coordinate their statewide specialists and response teams and coordinate efforts with external partners including state agency partners and regional planning commissions and regional economic development organizations. A barrier identified in being able to be fully mobilized was that teams require the presence of a strong local Extension staff partner who can convene, organize, and implement response. The response teams and statewide specialists that could be mobilized by a dedicated specialist include: the Community Vitality & Placemaking Team, and statewide specialists in 1) community design & planning, 2) downtown development, 3) community marketing, 4) economics, 5) economic geography, and 6) entrepreneurship.

Research

FIGURE 6: Research and Recreation Economies in the North Central



Research opportunities identified in the North Central region that could be applied to recreation economies include community design & planning, downtown development, community marketing, economics, economic geography, community development, entrepreneurship, forestry, parks rec and tourism, natural resources and conservation, and natural resources/sustainability.

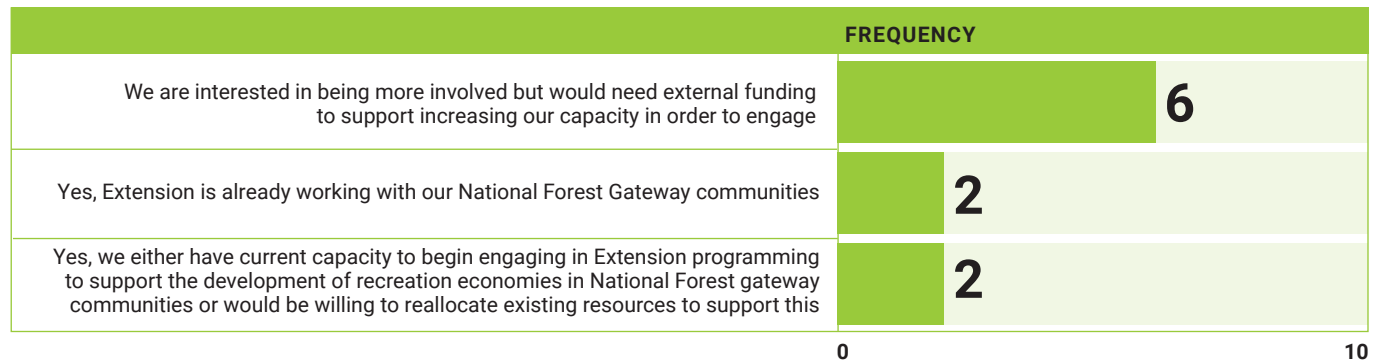
Western Region

In the West region, ten LGUs responded to the survey. Within Extension, four LGUs are either already working with their National Forest Gateway communities, have current expertise and capacity to engage in Extension’s role directly, or would be willing to reallocate existing resources to support this work. An additional six LGUs are interested but would need external funding to support increasing capacity to engage (see figure 7). Regarding recreation economy research in the Western region, three LGUs are already conducting

research in National Forest Gateway communities. Four LGUs have either Extension or academic faculty with research expertise that could be applied to forest gateway communities; however, external funding would be needed to support this work. Three LGUs need more expertise or capacity to research on developing recreation economies in forest gateway communities. Still, they would be willing to increase their capacity and knowledge if external funding was available to support this work (see figure 8).

Extension

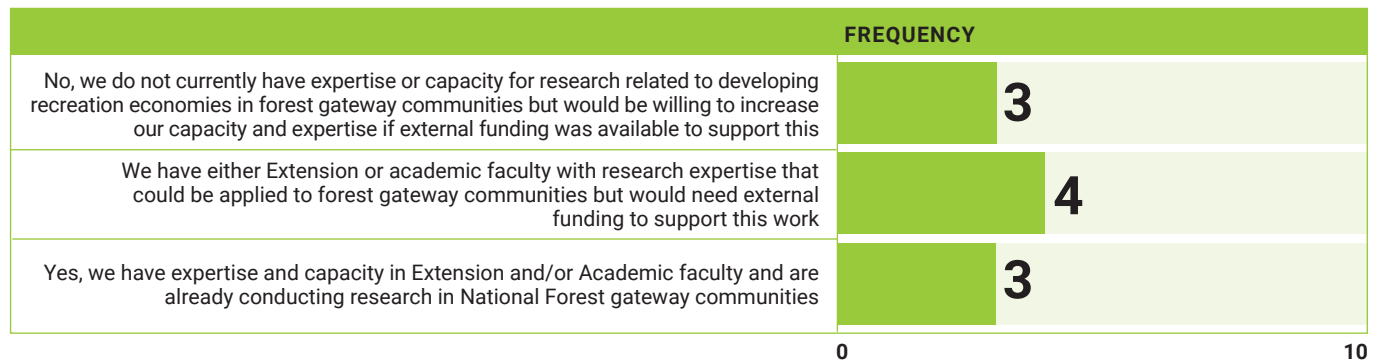
FIGURE 7: Extension and Recreation Economies in the West



The West region has the highest concentration of National Forests and as such, there are some Extension programs that have existing resources being directed to support the development of recreation economies. For example, in one state there is a Tourism Extension Educator as well as Ag & Natural Resources Educators working with communities. Another state has an Institute of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism that does lots of programming in addition to a Landscape architecture Extension Specialist that does work in gateway communities along with many county faculty. Another state is standing up an Outdoor Recreation Institute and committing resources (specialist, advisor/agent, and administrative support) to work with its existing cohort of economic development advisor/agents that will directly partner with National Forest gateway communities. Another state has Extension Specialists with expertise in wildlife, range, rural economic development, and tourism that currently work with communities near and in the National Forest in the state. Another state has legislative funding to study affordable housing issues in gateway communities and would be interested in expanding its work to ensure gateway communities consider the affordable housing for residents and hospitality workers as economies are developed.

Research

FIGURE 8: Research and Recreation Economies in the West



With additional funding these states would add tourism positions which would provide them with the capacity to expand beyond the current footprint and to enrich programming and research capabilities in addition to supporting Tourism Agents/Specialists to build capacity to better address needs. Several states expressed interest in having funding to hire Extension Specialists to lead and provide programming for these communities that could support increased research, community engagement, and program development/implementation in addition to expansion of their Extension Internship program to include partnerships with agencies and communities focused on outdoor recreation needs in gateway communities.

Regarding research there also existing resources being committed to study the impacts and opportunities of recreation economies in the West including with Extension faculty that do research in this area who partner with faculty experts to advice on what would be most helpful. With additional funding they would work on building the connection between research and application at the local level. Another state has established a Center for Outdoor Recreation Economy. Research expertise in the West includes expertise in hospitality, sociology, agritourism, ecotourism, community economic development, wildlife enterprises, and fee hunting/fishing. Additional research funding in one state would be utilized to focus on ensuring communities plan for or address affordable housing issues for both residents and seasonal/hospitality-based employees.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This project sought to determine the extent to which the Cooperative Extension Service has broad educational, research and technical assistance resources that can help with planning associated with the recreational economy to enhance the local recreation economy.

The national assessment of the current and potential role of Extension in developing recreation economies clearly indicates that significant opportunities exist to activate the Extension system in support of developing Recreation Economies and that this role is critical to the development of sustainable partnerships and program coordination in order to achieve the anticipated results articulated in the MOU. In addition, both the need and opportunities for research in this area are significant. Artificial intelligence applied to analysis of big data such as those available through cellphones provide enormous opportunities for research to provide evidence-based information for Extension programs.

opportunities for Extension to support recreation economies specifically within the domains of: Research (defining outdoor recreation, understanding of impacts on individuals and communities, analysis of previously funded programs, identification of gaps in the field), Community Development Expertise (for guiding strategy and praxis), a Comprehensive Approach to Development (e.g., social-cultural-economic-environmental factors that intersect outdoor recreation), and Cross-Topic Expertise that Impact Gateway Community (e.g., broadband access, transportation, behavioral health, environmental conditions, and cultural traditions).

This study confirms these opportunities clearly exist, and that Extension's support within these domains is unique and critical, which could result in significant and sustained impacts for National Forest gateway communities. There is broad support from Extension

Additional funding to support the educational, research and technical assistance resources in the Land-Grant University system could result in increasing the capacity of Extension Specialists and local Extension Educators to support the development and activation of these resources for a broad, nationwide application of the partnership activities defined in the USDA Recreation Economies MOU. There also is a great need for leadership development and training within communities, to benefit from recreation economy development in sustainable ways.

A presentation by Dr. Sarah Rocker, NIFA National Program Leader Division of Family and Consumer Sciences, at the 2023 National Extension Tourism conference described



leadership for an increased role for Extension to activate its community development expertise to leverage local assets and address the needs of the gateway communities by providing education, technical assistance, facilitation, engagement of partners, strategic planning, and coordination of research. A wide range of research expertise was identified in each region that could be applied to studying the impacts and opportunities associated with the development of recreation economies.

With additional funding, the Regional Rural Development Centers can be key partners in advancing both the Extension and research opportunities identified in this study. They link the research and educational outreach capacity of the nation's Land-Grant Universities with communities, local decision-makers, entrepreneurs, families, and farmers and ranchers to help address a wide range of development issues. The RRDCs bring together the most innovative minds — from inside and outside universities — to address cutting-edge rural and community development issues, such as recreation economies, without regard to state boundaries. They respond to emerging issues, generate credible science-based information to clarify and inform these issues, and create public-private partnerships to address them.

Examples of previous RRDC supported multistate programs include the Stronger Economies Together



(SET) program that was launched in 2010 by USDA Rural Development and the nation's four RRDCs and their Land-Grant University partners; this initiative is now in place in more than 50 regions in 28 states and provides a possible model. SET enables communities and counties in rural America to work together in developing and implementing an economic development blueprint for their multicounty region that strategically builds on the current and emerging economic strengths of that region.

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