

NATIONAL EXTENSION TOURISM NETWORK

The Outdoor Recreation Economy and Cooperative Extension: An opportunity to address a growing need in the nation's communities

What's the issue?

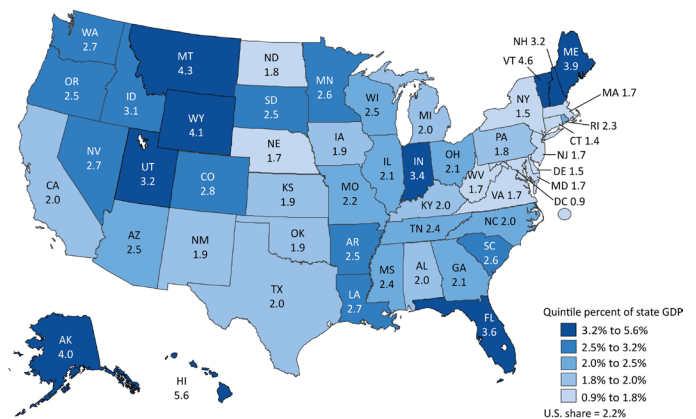
Outdoor Recreation (OR) is a growing sector of the U.S. economy. It is 2.4 times larger than the oil/gas sector and 2.8 times larger than the air transportation sector.¹ The OR economy — which encompasses the goods and services generated by the outdoor recreation industry — accounted for 2.2 percent (\$563.7 billion) of the nation's GDP in 2022 and it grew at a rate more than twice the overall U.S. economy.² This growth is also reflected in the record number of people participating in OR in 2022 — 55% of the U.S. population over age six, including greater numbers of Black, Hispanic, and LGBTQIA+ participants.³

Recreation economies are intertwined with multiple community domains — from workforce, housing and infrastructure to cultural traditions, youth development, and health and wellness.

With expertise across these domains and in leading collaborative approaches to community problem solving, the Cooperative Extension System is uniquely positioned to assist communities with managing and leveraging their OR assets to achieve multiple goals.

This fact sheet shows how Extension is currently engaging with the OR sector and makes the case for greater investments to help communities manage the challenges and opportunities OR presents.

State Outdoor Recreation Value Added as a Percent of State GDP, 2022



What is Cooperative Extension?

Cooperative Extension — or just “Extension” — is a nationwide, non-credit educational network that addresses public needs by providing non-formal higher education and learning activities to multiple audiences. It is operated through the nation's Land-Grant University System in partnership with the federal, state and local governments.

Outdoor Recreation and the Cooperative Extension System

The Cooperative Extension System (see sidebar) has been engaged in research, education, and outreach to support communities' tourism and outdoor recreation efforts for more than 50 years, with the [National Extension Tourism Network \(NET\)](#) at the forefront of this work.

Outdoor recreation, inherently transdisciplinary, intersects and elevates all core Extension program areas. For example:

- Agriculture, natural resources and climate: OR [fosters](#) natural resource stewardship, is [impacted by](#) climate change but also [presents](#) strong rationale for climate actions. Visitors to farms often participate in OR activities while supporting viability of farms.
- Family and consumer sciences: OR contributes to both [physical](#) and [mental well-being](#), which were both heavily impacted [during the COVID-19 pandemic](#).
- Community economic development: Increasingly, OR is used as a community economic development engine. In fact, the Outdoor Recreation Roundtable, a sector leader, debuted the second edition of its [toolkit](#) on leveraging OR for community economic development.



How is Extension Responding?

Extension programs in multiple states have recognized a growing need to serve OR economies and [issues facing rural communities](#) that serve as gateways to OR destinations. *Several examples compiled at bit.ly/3xjGIpt reflect a variety of ways in which Extension can support communities.*

However, only a handful of Extension staff around the country have a primary focus on OR. Most OR programming is developed and delivered in response to a community need by Extension staff who work in a program area that intersects with OR. In early 2023, more than 65 of these individuals came together to form the [National Extension Outdoor Recreation Working Group](#) (NEORWG) within NET. Led by [Doug Arbogast](#) from West Virginia University Extension and [Jake Powell](#) from Utah State University Extension, participants have identified ways in which Extension could address the growing need for OR programming, by:



A map of Working Group members who have shared information about their outdoor recreation programming via an online inventory maintained by NEORWG. Visit the interactive map at: bit.ly/3PJH7RG

- (1) [building new programs and scaling existing ones](#), and
- (2) developing toolkits, case studies, community partnerships, strategic planning, and data and research.

The NEORWG has continued building momentum, adding new participants and a steering committee which has met regularly throughout 2023 and 2024.

What can Extension do with additional resources and partnerships?

Several states have already committed resources for staff development and expansion to address opportunities in OR. With additional widespread investments and partnerships in this program area, the Cooperative Extension System could:

- Provide technical assistance and a comprehensive community development approach to planning in gateway communities to OR destinations.
- Convene regional partnerships across public agencies, industry, conservation and outdoor-focused non-profits to leverage shared amenities and improve outcomes across domains.
- Adapt existing Extension programming for the OR sector (e.g., workforce development, youth development, natural resources curricula)
- Conduct research to identify best practices, policy impacts, and funding priorities in the OR sector.

These opportunities coincide with Extension’s mission and reflect how Extension can adapt to better serve communities’ needs. *How can Extension better serve the communities in your state that are seeking to engage with this growing sector?* The NEORWG has compiled resources to help:

- [See examples of Extension job descriptions that prioritize Outdoor Recreation.](#)
- [See examples of state-level outdoor recreation work being carried across the country.](#) There are more localized Extension projects in counties or regions that include OR programming, but much greater opportunities exist for this integration moving forward.

Learn more at:
bit.ly/3xjGIpt



This document was written by: Xinyi Qian, University of Minnesota Tourism Center; Ann Savage, North Carolina State University; Gwynn Stewart, The Ohio State University Extension; Aaron Wilcher, University of California Cooperative Extension; and, Kristen Devlin, Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development. It draws on an earlier version written by Doug Arbogast, West Virginia University, and Jake Powell, Utah State University.⁴

References:

1. State Outdoor Business Alliance Network and Headwaters Economics. (2021). Inspiring the Future Outdoor Recreation Economy. <https://bit.ly/3vrCVPL>

2. Outdoor Recreation Satellite Account, U.S. and States, 2022.U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA). <https://bit.ly/43PZ9rd>

3. Outdoor Industry Association. (2023). 2023 Outdoor Participation Trends Report. <https://bit.ly/3U1WIOY>

4. Arbogast, D., & Powell, J. (2023). Engaging the Outdoor Sector’s Growth. National Extension Tourism. <https://bit.ly/4aFukHQ>