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Public Opinion in Wyoming on Conserving Agricultural Lands and Open Space

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Over the past several years a number of surveys, focus groups, assessments, and polls have consistently determined that Wyoming residents believe it is important to conserve Wyoming's working farms and ranches, water and air quality, wildlife, and the unique western culture that these lands provide. This publication presents results from a poll conducted in 2004 and summarizes information from earlier surveys and studies.

2004 Poll

A statewide poll was sponsored by a partnership including the Wyoming Chapter of The Nature Conservancy and the University of Wyoming William D. Ruckelshaus Institute of Environment and Natural Resources, with collaboration from representatives of Wyoming land trusts and conservation organizations. An independent national polling organization, Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin & Associates, conducted the survey in February 2004 by calling randomly selected Wyoming telephone numbers until they had spoken with 500 registered voters in Wyoming who were likely to cast ballots in the November 2004 general election. The margin of sampling error for the overall sample is +/- 4.4 percent.

For some questions a "split-sample" approach was used in which half of the respondents were presented with one list of statements, and the other half were presented with a different list. This technique shortened the survey to reduce respondent fatigue and to examine differences in how the values were stated. The margin of error for split samples was +/- 6.2 percent.

This poll revealed that Wyoming voters view the preservation of working family farms and ranches; lakes, rivers, and streams; opportunities for outdoor recreation; and clean air and water as essential to the state's quality of life. Wyoming voters are willing to support a range of land conservation approaches – from requiring local governments to adopt master plans and zoning laws to the sale of development rights by willing landowners – to help preserve the state's land, water, wildlife, and working family farms and ranches.

The conservation issues of most concern include the loss of working family farms and ranches as well as the loss of habitat for fish and wildlife.

Survey participants were presented with a list of issues facing Wyoming and asked whether each issue was "extremely serious," "very serious," "somewhat

serious," or "not serious." Nearly half of those surveyed (45 percent) indicated that they viewed "loss of family farms and ranches" as at least a very serious problem in the state, and 36 percent said the same for the loss of habitat for fish and wildlife. Other conservation issues of concern included the rollback of federal laws protecting land, air, and water (36 percent); lack of access to public lands (32 percent); and unplanned growth and development (32 percent).

Enjoying outdoor recreation, having a strong economy to keep children in the state, and preserving family farms and ranches are among the values of particular importance to Wyoming.

Survey participants were read a list of values and were asked whether they thought each was more important or less important to Wyoming residents than to people elsewhere in the country. As shown in Figure 1, a majority of those surveyed thought each value listed was more important to people in Wyoming than to people elsewhere. In almost every case a majority thought it was "much more important" to Wyoming residents.

Figure 1. Assessment of the importance of various values to people in Wyoming compared to people elsewhere in the country (split sample)

Value	Much More Important to Wyoming Residents	Somewhat More Important to Wyoming Residents	Somewhat Less or Much Less Important to Wyoming Residents	Don't Know/ No Answer
Enjoying outdoor activities such as hiking, biking, hunting, fishing, and skiing	64%	24%	10%	2%
Having a strong economy so our kids stay in their home state	63%	26%	8%	3%
Preserving farm and ranchland	62%	28%	9%	1%
Protecting private property rights	61%	26%	12%	1%
Preserving the western lifestyle	61%	29%	9%	1%
Protecting the state's wild lands	57%	32%	9%	2%
Preserving a small-town agricultural atmosphere	54%	33%	12%	2%
Having clean air and water	54%	30%	15%	1%
Preserving working agricultural landscapes	52%	29%	15%	4%
Keeping open space undeveloped	42%	30%	24%	4%
Having the ability to attract higher-paying businesses from out of state	40%	25%	31%	3%
Maintaining our cultural heritage	37%	46%	14%	3%

Wyoming voters rank efforts to protect water quality as the most important conservation projects for state government to undertake.

Survey respondents were presented a list of conservation projects that the state of Wyoming currently funds or might undertake in the future. They were asked how important it was that each project be funded and were given the choices “extremely important,” “very important,” “somewhat important,” or “not important.” The ones voters ranked as most important (with more than three out of four labeling each item as at least “very important”) were protecting drinking-water quality and water quality in lakes, rivers, and streams (Figure 2). Among the other conservation projects voters saw as particularly important were protecting the Greater Yellowstone region, preserving historical

and cultural landmarks, protecting fish and wildlife habitat, and preserving family farms and ranches.

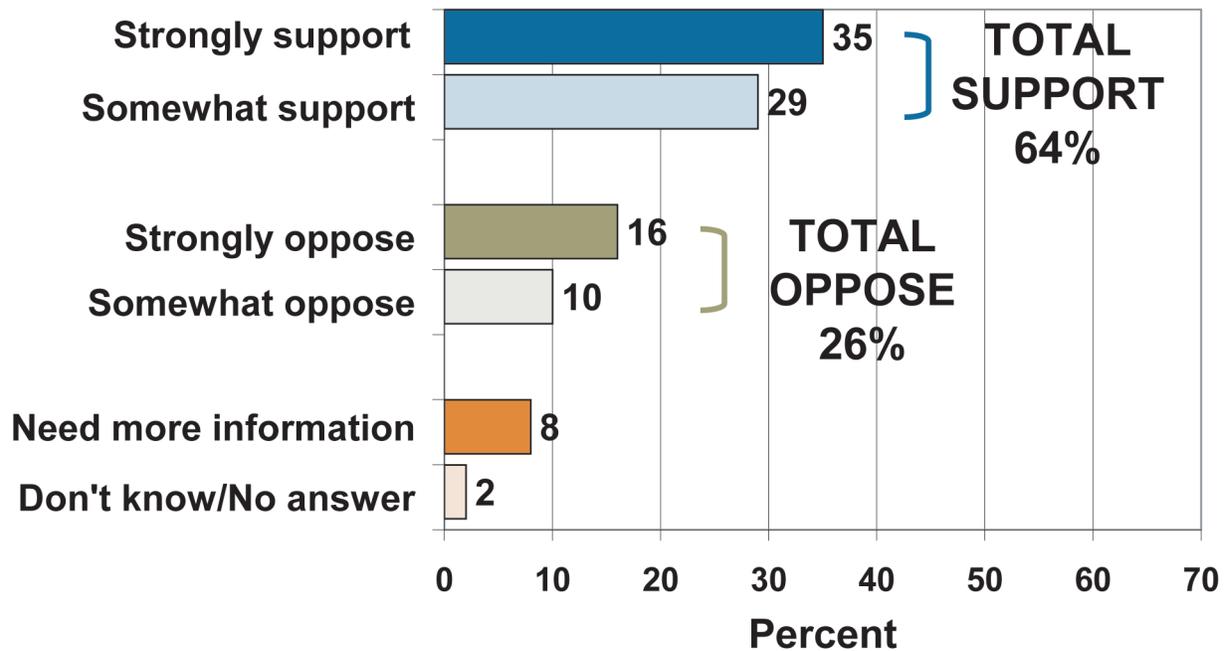
Two-thirds of Wyoming voters support requiring local governments to develop a master plan and zoning laws to guide growth and development.

As one potential approach to conserving land, Wyoming survey respondents were asked whether they would support or oppose requiring local governments to “develop a master plan and zoning laws to manage growth and development.” They were then asked whether they “strongly” or “somewhat” supported or opposed the idea. As illustrated in Figure 3, a total of 64 percent of Wyoming voters supported this idea.

Figure 2. Ranking of the importance of potential state-funded conservation projects (split sample)

Project	Extremely/ Very Important
Projecting and improving drinking water quality	77%
Protecting and restoring the water quality of lakes, rivers, and streams	77%
Protecting the Greater Yellowstone region	73%
Preserving historical and cultural landmarks	67%
Protecting fish and wildlife habitat	66%
Preserving family farms and ranches	66%
Funding projects to provide more water for agriculture and cities	65%
Preventing state parks from being closed	63%
Protecting open space to manage growth and development	56%
Protecting wetlands	55%
Protecting open space	53%

Figure 3. Support for requiring local governments in Wyoming to develop master plans and zoning laws (split sample)*



*Half the respondents were asked about master plans, and half were asked about master plans and zoning laws. The results were very similar.

Two out of three voters support allowing the negotiation of conservation easements to conserve land in Wyoming.

Survey respondents were offered the following description of conservation easements and then asked whether they supported or opposed allowing the negotiation of such easements with Wyoming landowners:

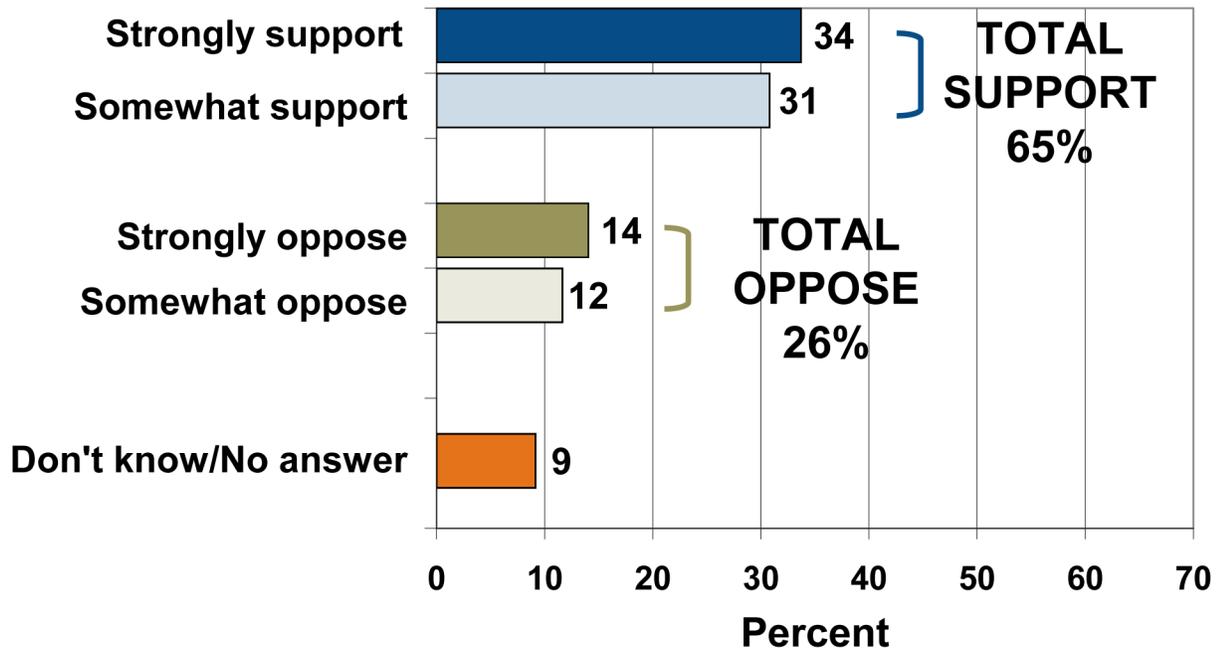
"Conservation easements are voluntary agreements between a landowner and a government agency or charitable organization. They are made to protect natural, scenic, and/or agricultural features of land by limiting the type and amount of development permitted on the property. The landowner keeps title and use of the land, but gives up some right to develop it. As compensation, the landowner gets a tax break and may or may not also receive a monetary payment. The terms of the easement are made with agreement from both the landowner and the easement holder."

They were then asked whether they "strongly" or "somewhat" supported or opposed the idea. As shown in Figure 4, nearly two-thirds of Wyoming voters (65 percent) supported allowing the negotiation of conservation easements. Only one voter in four (26 percent) opposed the idea.

This broad support for allowing the negotiation of conservation easements cut across all major subsets of the Wyoming electorate. Specifically, the idea was backed by:

- 72 percent of Democrats, 64 percent of independents, and 62 percent of Republicans;
- 75 percent of college-educated voters and 60 percent of those without a college education;
- 69 percent of voters under age 50 and 63 percent of voters age 50 and over; and
- 72 percent of men and 59 percent of women.

Figure 4: Support for allowing the negotiation of conservation easements in Wyoming



A majority of Wyoming voters support using state or local public money to purchase development rights from willing sellers to protect land and water from development.

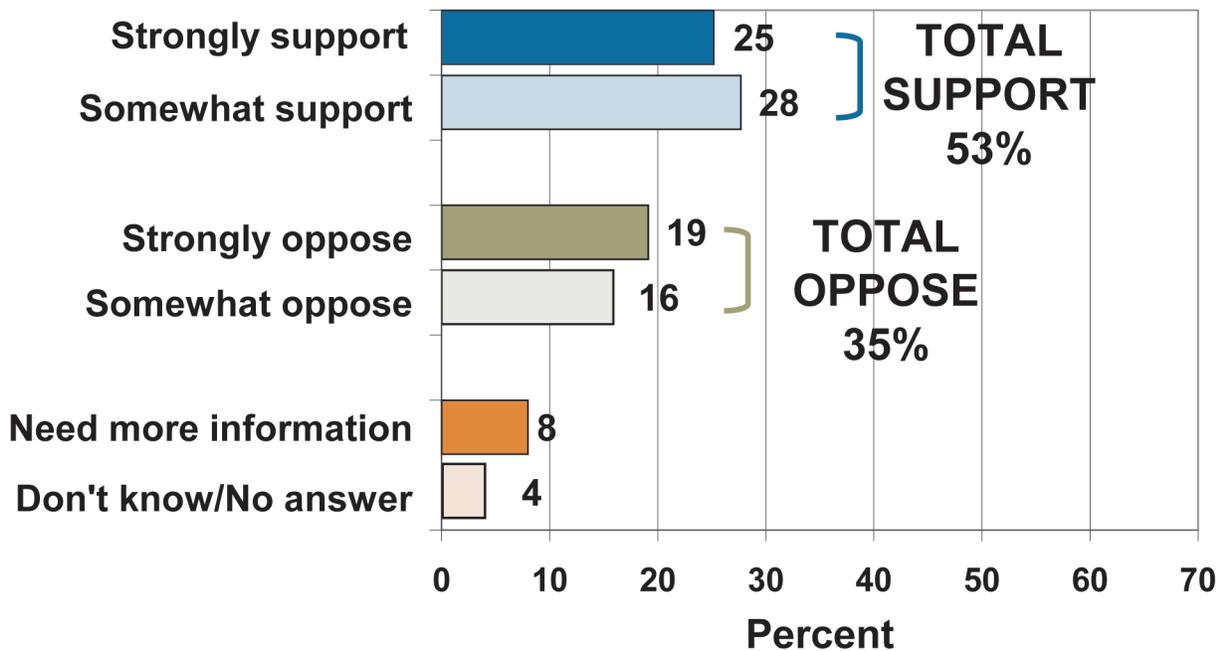
Survey respondents were also offered the following description of a proposal to use state or local public money to purchase development rights to protect land, air, water, wildlife, and scenic vistas in Wyoming:

"Some programs use a similar, but slightly different, tool for conserving open space called the purchase of development rights. In these cases, a government agency or charitable organization pays a property owner who agrees not to develop some or all of their property. The landowner keeps title and use of the land, but gives up the right to develop it. Some people have said that state or local public money should be set aside to protect land, air, water, wildlife and scenic vistas in Wyoming by purchasing development rights from willing landowners."

Again, they were then asked whether they "strongly" or "somewhat" supported or opposed the idea. As shown in Figure 5, voters supported this approach by a margin of 18 points—53 percent to 35 percent.

To provide these funds, 45 percent supported increasing taxes on oil, gas, and coal production, and 33 percent supported charging a real estate transfer tax whenever property is sold. There was less support for raising taxes that come closer to people's own pocketbook such as sales taxes (23 percent) or property taxes (17 percent). It is important to note that the poll did not consider the effects of Wyoming's significant state budget surplus and did not include questions on reallocating existing resources to provide funds such as Montana did in 1999 with the Montana Agricultural Heritage Program. Other possible public funding mechanisms that were not explored in the poll include lotteries, bonds, and federal programs such as the Land and Water Conservation Fund and the Farmland Protection Program (Lummis 1997, Iversen and Perrigo 2002).

Figure 5. Support for state or local government purchase of development rights



Surveys and Studies, 1996 to 2003

Questions in the 2004 poll have been explored in earlier studies and surveys with results that support the 2004 findings. The following section summarizes these efforts.

At the request of local government officials, researchers from the University of Wyoming Department of Agricultural and Applied Economics assisted in gathering information relevant to updating county master land-use plans for Sublette, Sheridan, and Uinta counties beginning in 1996 (McLeod et al. 2003). Focus groups and surveys in these counties revealed strong public support for maintaining open space, rangeland agriculture, and the accompanying environmental amenities. Respondents identified western livestock culture, solitude, scenery, water quality and quantity, wildlife, and recreation as important characteristics of private open space. The surveys also revealed support for two types of rural land conservation tools: voluntary (conservation easements) and regulatory (land-use districts and subdivision regulations).

In 2001 Wyoming Senator Craig Thomas launched “Wyoming 2020” by conducting 30 meetings in 15 Wyoming communities and listening as residents discussed their vision for the future. The four general categories most frequently identified as important were public lands, economic growth and diversity, education, and tax structure. Participants expressed their desire to maintain and protect rural areas and valuable open spaces while still providing the stimulus that can sustain economic growth (thomas.sentate.gov/htm/2020_08-10-01.htm).

In 2002 the Wyoming Department of Agriculture contracted with the Survey Research Center at the University of Wyoming to conduct an opinion survey on public attitudes in Wyoming toward agriculture (Anatchkova and Grandjean 2002). Results from the 501 adults surveyed revealed the following:

- 97 percent indicated that the presence of ranches, farms, and agriculture is important to the quality of life in Wyoming (76 percent “very important” plus 21 percent “moderately important”).

- 96 percent said it is important to maintain land and water in agricultural production (81 percent “very” plus 15 percent “moderately”) for reasons including:
 - food and fiber production, 94 percent (67 percent “very” plus 27 percent “moderately”);
 - open space, 90 percent (55 percent “very” plus 35 percent “moderately”);
 - wildlife habitat, 93 percent (68 percent “very” plus 25 percent “moderately”);
 - keeping jobs and businesses, 95 percent (71 percent “very” plus 24 percent “moderately”); and
 - preserving Wyoming’s western heritage, 86 percent (53 percent “very” plus 33 percent “moderately”).
- 76 percent support using public funds to help farmers and ranchers improve wildlife habitat and protect soil and water resources (41 percent “strongly” plus 35 percent “moderately”).
- 70 percent support using public funds to buy the development rights or provide financial incentives to farmers and ranchers to maintain agriculture, open spaces, and wildlife habitat (41 percent “strongly” plus 29 percent “moderately”).

The dean of the College of Agriculture at the University of Wyoming assembled focus groups in 2002 to visualize Wyoming’s rural landscapes in 10 years. Groups in eight diverse communities considered issues related to agriculture, natural resources, and rural communities. Clear, common visions emerged with emphasis on land use, open space, and a need for a new way of thinking about land use. The College of Agriculture will use this information when developing future research and education programs (Frank Galey, Dean of the College of Agriculture, personal communication, 2002).

The Wyoming Rural Development Council is conducting community assessments throughout the state to assist communities with local development strategies. While development pressures are not uniform throughout the state and each community is unique in its response to land-use changes and its approach to planning, Wyoming rural communities do have several views in common (Mary Randolph, Executive Director of the Wyoming Rural Development Council, personal communication, 2004):

- Amenity values such as wildlife, fishing and hunting, scenic views, small-town rural character, greenbelts, bike paths, and outdoor recreation are frequently cited as community assets.
- Community pride in a rural heritage and a sense of place in the West is evident throughout Wyoming.
- A number of rural towns that are poised for imminent development strongly support land-use planning and zoning tools that will be needed to protect the town’s physical environment, recreational assets, historic treasures, and scenic resources.

Conclusion

In summary, the 2004 poll results show that Wyoming voters believe that the state’s land and water are critically important to their quality of life. The state’s citizens support a variety of approaches, including using different types of voluntary land-preservation agreements, to conserve that land and water for Wyoming’s future. Voters further place a high value on the protection of family farms and ranches and the Wyoming western lifestyle that includes camping, hiking, hunting, and fishing. These poll results are consistent with information gained in several previous surveys and studies throughout the state.

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