

A Community-Driven Vision for Wyoming’s New Natural Resource Economy

An interdisciplinary research and outreach initiative to explore the following question:

Given Wyoming’s wealth of natural resources, how might our communities build stable, sustainable, and prosperous economic futures?

Wyoming faces an energy, economic, and even cultural transition. For much of the last century, and certainly the early 2000s, mining of oil, coal, uranium, trona, and natural gas fueled the state’s economy, employed thousands of workers at family-sustaining wages, and funneled taxes and royalties to state coffers, offsetting the need for other forms of revenue. We are currently in a bust. Over the last decade, oil and gas prices have dipped to extreme lows, Wyoming coal production fell to well under half of what it had been in 2008, several companies that operate coal mines in Wyoming have filed for bankruptcy, and the coronavirus pandemic has further reduced demand for trona and energy resources. At the same time, Wyoming citizens are facing the effects of climate change including reduced winter snowpacks, earlier spring runoff, drier summers, pest outbreaks, and destructive wildfires. Wyoming now faces a serious budget shortfall with severe cuts already made to many state agencies, threatening highway maintenance, public schools, wildlife management, and other services and infrastructure statewide. Communities that recently thrived around coal mines and the employment they provided now face unemployment and outmigration.

Still, Wyoming is a natural-resource-rich state, with unparalleled scenery, wildlife, waterways, forests, rangelands, wind resources, outdoor recreation opportunities, and more. A recent Ruckelshaus Institute study found that Wyomingites value scenery, wildlife, and outdoor recreation opportunities above all else, closely followed by economic and community values.¹ As stakeholders throughout Wyoming seek to respond to the changes in our state’s economy, we at the Ruckelshaus Institute see an opportunity to explore forward-looking ideas for how our resource-rich state can build a stable, sustainable, prosperous future with more consistent revenue streams for the people of Wyoming while protecting the biodiversity and natural wonders we value so much.

Ruckelshaus Institute Initiative: Wyoming’s New Natural Resource Economy

The Ruckelshaus Institute is launching a 3-year interdisciplinary research and outreach initiative, to explore a new natural resource economy for the state. The initiative will have four phases:

- 1) Scoping: Learn from communities about their plights and hopes for the future
- 2) Information gathering/sharing: Facilitate and coordinate collaborative, interdisciplinary applied research, synthesis, and policy analysis to explore information gaps identified in scoping phase; share findings in clear, compelling digital, print, and other formats targeting citizens and decision makers who can activate these ideas
- 3) Forum: Convene an event to share findings, hear from experts, and engage in discussion
- 4) Implementation: Share forum proceedings, conduct additional outreach, and continue research and analysis to move ideas forward

¹ Jessica Western and Selena Gerace. “Social License for Wyoming’s Energy Future: What Do Residents Want?” UW Ruckelshaus Institute and School of Energy Resources. November 2020. <https://bit.ly/2LSC0jP>

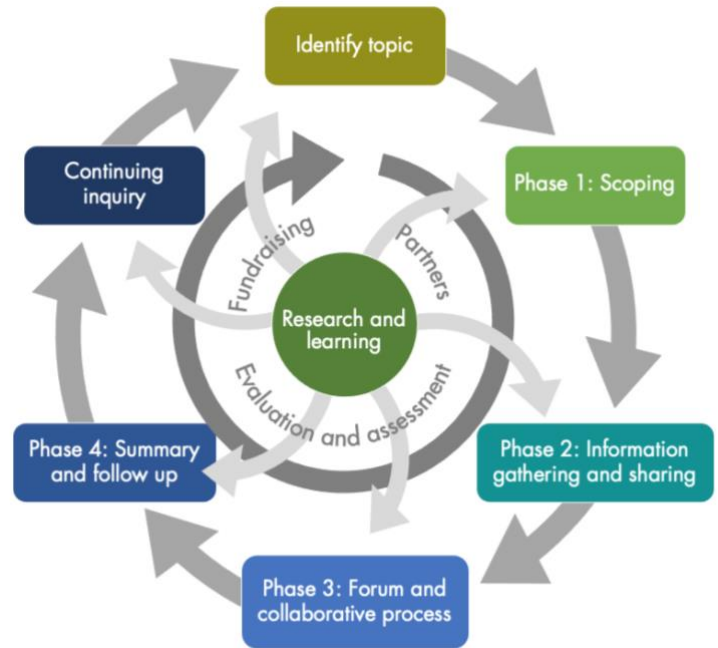
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Timeline of Activities:

Phase 1: Scoping (March-November 2021)

Goal: Elevate voices of community members to learn about their perspectives, needs, and vision relative to a new natural resource economy; begin building partnerships to carry throughout initiative

- Virtual Listening Tour
 - o Five interactive webinars each focused on a natural resource theme such as agriculture, carbon sequestration, outdoor recreation, wildlife conservation, or renewable energy
 - o Wyoming community member panelists speak to challenges and opportunities, concepts of prosperity/what people value most and want for the future in the state
 - o Open platform to audience community members to share their own perspectives on challenges, opportunities, values, and prosperity
 - o Expert moderators guide the conversations around the natural resource themes
 - o Make webinar recordings freely available online and publish follow up report summarizing key ideas
 - o **Partners:** Wyoming Institute for Humanities Research, Wyoming County Commissioners Association, Wyoming Public Media, Center for Energy Regulation and Policy Analysis
- Statewide Narrative/Writing Contest
 - o Open to all Wyoming citizens, with focus on youth
 - o Solicit submissions in various media formats exploring individuals' or classrooms' vision for the state's future
 - o Hire UW student intern or employee to coordinate and do marketing/outreach
 - o Market widely to high schools, community colleges, libraries, and general public
 - o Bring on a panel of judges to review submissions and award prizes
 - o Offer cash rewards and publish an anthology of winning submissions
 - o **Partners:** Wyoming2030/Afterschool Alliance, MFA Program in Creative Writing, Wyoming Public Media, Center for Energy Regulation and Policy Analysis, Wyoming Institute for Humanities Research



Phase 2: Information Gathering and Sharing (September 2021-September 2022)

Goal: Investigate and respond to topics raised in the scoping phase

- Applied Research, Policy Analysis, and Synthesis
 - Conduct surveys, data analysis, or other applied research as well as policy analysis to address questions raised in scoping phase
 - Create/sponsor Environment, Natural Resource, and Society graduate program team project to conduct a research project specific to initiative, generate science communication pieces, and present at forum
 - Synthesize relevant studies from throughout UW and other western institutions and publish synopses of these online, with links to original material
 - **Partners:** CERPA, CBEA, other cross-campus scholars and centers
- Special Collaboratory Issue of *Western Confluence* Magazine
 - Create one or more issues to serve as central science communication pieces of initiative, synthesis of key applied research and policy analysis findings, groundwork for forum, and a handbook for Wyoming communities wrestling with ideas for building prosperous futures
 - Invite perspectives from Wyoming researchers, citizens, and leaders to explore questions of the state’s past and future centered on natural resources and how those define our culture and support our communities
 - Create multimedia storytelling pieces for website along with print magazine
 - Disseminate widely to communities throughout Wyoming and rural West
 - **Partners:** Provost’s Strategic Investment Fund, UW MFA in Creative Writing, Wyoming Public Media, cross-campus scholars, statewide leaders, community members

Phase 3: Forum (October 2022)

Goal: Amplify findings and voices to assist communities in building prosperous futures

- Two-Day Conference
 - Convene statewide gathering or conversation with presentations, panels, and interactive engagement
 - Share learning from earlier phases in initiative and hear from community members, stakeholders, and leaders
 - Facilitate dialog responding to ideas presented with focus on answering the initiative’s driving question
 - Target audience is engaged community members, municipalities, community groups who are working to build prosperous Wyoming communities around natural resources
 - **Partners:** Leadership Wyoming?, State Office of Outdoor Recreation?, Wyoming Business Council? Wyoming County Commissioners Association?

Phase 4: Continuing Inquiry (October 2022 onward)

Goal: Continue discussion and move ideas to entities that can implement them

- Conference Proceedings
 - Broadcast information, learning, and ideas from forum to relevant audiences throughout the state and region
- Continuing Research and Analysis
 - Use ideas from forum to trigger new applied research, analysis, and science/policy communication efforts to continue to answer initiative questions

Objectives, Measures of Success, and Sustainability of Effort:

The Ruckelshaus Institute of Environment and Natural Resources mission is to support effective environment and natural resource decision making through compelling communication, applied research, and collaborative decision-making approaches. We will apply these approaches to address the question: Given Wyoming's wealth of natural resources, how might our communities build stable, sustainable, and prosperous economic futures?

The objective of this initiative is to provide research, policy analysis, science communication, and convening of stakeholders to directly address community needs around ways to tap our rich natural resources in Wyoming and support a prosperous future. Central to this effort is direct engagement with communities to learn about their needs, questions, and desires for the future. In this case a community might be a town like Rawlins or Worland, an interest group like hunters or rock climbers, or a profession like ranchers or teachers.

We will measure our success through the level of community engagement we achieve. This can be measured in attendance to interactive listening tour stops, requests for science communication publications and outreach materials, visits to webpages sharing resources, and attendance at the forum. At the same time, number of participants is less important than engaging the right people who are truly motivated to enact new ideas and opportunities in their communities. Throughout the initiative we will be adjusting to respond to what we learn from Wyoming communities about their needs. We'll also be watching for opportunities to provide extra research, policy analysis, science communication, and collaborative process support to advance a new stable, sustainable, and prosperous natural resource economy in Wyoming.

As far as sustainability of effort, we imagine this as a 3-year initiative, meaning that we will take a deep dive into the central questions of this effort in the immediate future without expecting them to sustain our work indefinitely. We do expect the learning and research that happens throughout this initiative to lead to new driving questions for the next initiative to follow. The work certainly won't stop after that 3-year timeline. Rather, we'll use this model to launch the next interdisciplinary research and outreach initiative that will either build off new questions raised throughout this process or turn to another urgent environment and natural resource question of statewide relevance.