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Forests' Recreational Value Is Scaled Back

U.S. Lowers Estimate of GDP Contribution

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Forest Service officials have scaled back their assessment of how much recreation on national forest land contributes to the American economy, concluding that these activities generate just a tenth of what the Clinton administration estimated.

Under President Clinton, the Forest Service projected that by 2000, recreation in U.S. forests would contribute nearly \$111 billion to the nation's annual gross domestic product, or GDP. Bush administration officials, by contrast, have determined that in 2002 these activities generated about \$11 billion.

Joel Holtrop, deputy chief of the National Forest System, said the revised numbers may spur the administration to shift some of its recreation dollars within the system but will not prompt it to downgrade activities such as hunting, fishing and wildlife-watching.

"It's just as valuable to us today as it was 10 years ago; we just have a better way of calculating it," Holtrop said in an interview. "We recognize recreation activity is an important program to the American people."

But critics of the administration said they fear that the new numbers, which were obtained from the nonprofit Natural Resources News Service, will be used to justify more logging and mining on national forests. Under the old estimates, recreation accounted for 85 percent of the system's contribution to the GDP, compared with extraction's 11 percent; under the new formula, recreation represents 59 percent.

"Would I expect anything different from the Bush administration? No," said Michael Francis, who directs the national forest program at the Wilderness Society, an advocacy group. "They will cook the books for whatever they want."

According to Forest Service strategic planner Ross Arnold, who developed the most recent estimates, earlier studies inflated the number of people visiting national forests and how much money they spent while they toured the area. In 1995, Clinton administration officials assumed there would be 800 million visits each year to national forests by 2000; current officials have determined that there were just over 200 million visits in 2002.

The Forest Service obtained the lower visitor numbers through its National Visitor Use Monitoring Program, which surveyed tourists in every national forest between 2000 and 2004, Arnold said. The agency also decided to peg spending associated with such visits at \$46 a person, by basing it on how much visitors spent within 50 miles of a forest on a single day.

Greg Alward, another Forest Service planning staffer, said officials did not purposely inflate the earlier recreation numbers but were simply relying on rougher estimates. "They were the best available data at

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the time," he said.

American Forest Resource Council Vice President Christopher West, who represents Western sawmill operators and forest landowners, hailed the new estimates as a better assessment of the national forests' true economic worth.

"The bottom line for us is: There's value to all these resource uses," West said. "And as long as we compare them apples to apples, we can have responsible discussions about the national treasures."

The revised numbers come as an array of groups, including outdoor equipment and clothing suppliers and wildlife advocates, are touting the financial benefits that come from preserving recreation areas within the forest system.

Watchable Wildlife President James Mallman, whose nonprofit represents state and federal wildlife agencies, noted that in 2001 the Fish and Wildlife Service estimated that birders and wildlife watchers spend \$38 billion a year on equipment and travel. Last year, Fish and Wildlife officials concluded that wildlife and nature viewing had surpassed hunting and fishing in terms of the nation's top recreation activity.

"Often not developing an area is where the best economic gain can be, because that is what people want," Mallman said. He added that he was surprised by the Forest Service's new numbers, because "more people are going to national forests than ever before."

Holtrop said he did not question that forests are seeing an upsurge in visitors. "Empirically, we know that recreation use on national forests continues to rise," he said.

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