Strategic Ranchland in the Rocky Mountain West

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Mapping the Threats to Prime Ranchland in Seven Western States

Population growth is transforming the landscape of the Rocky Mountain West and threatening tomorrow's landscapes.

This study analyzes the threats to prime ranchland in Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, Utah, Colorado, Arizona and New Mexico in order to help state and local governments and private organizations target critical conservation areas.

American Farmland Trust

Sprawling residential developments are replacing large mountain ranches that provide:

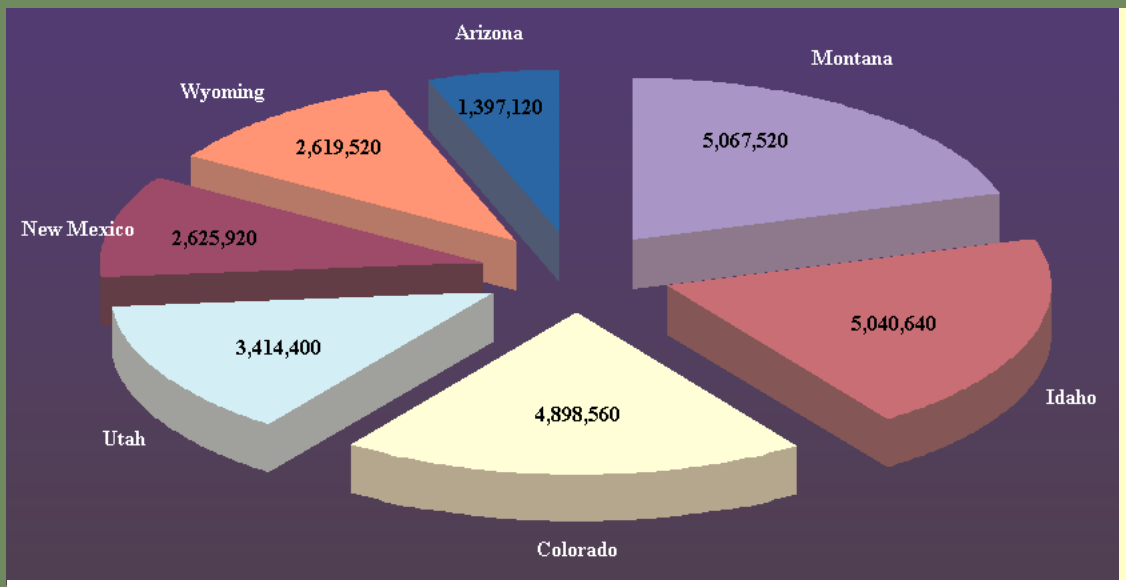
- **agricultural products, employment and income,**
- **important wildlife habitat and open space, and**
- **cultural heritage in western communities.**

To identify strategic ranchlands at risk in Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, Utah, Colorado, Arizona and New Mexico, we used a Geographic Information System to:

1. **Locate prime ranchlands** using land-cover and land-use variables to highlight areas with high quality agricultural land and desirable wildlife characteristics, including:
   - rural development densities;
   - proximity to publicly owned lands;
   - year-round water availability;
   - mixed grass and tree cover; and
   - high variety of vegetation classes.

2. **Target threatened ranchlands** by locating:
   - rural areas projected to grow to suburban density in the next 20 years;
   - major road corridors in counties with growth rates higher than 10 percent per decade.

3. **Identify strategic ranchlands at risk** as those found to be both ***prime*** and ***threatened.***



These strategic ranchlands at risk are the most vulnerable to low-density residential development by the year 2020. Keeping these lands in working agriculture is critical to maintaining local and regional agricultural economies, plant and wildlife habitat and open space.

Acres of Strategic Ranchland at Risk in the Rocky Mountain West, 2000-2020

Because mountain ranchland is relatively scarce and offers highly valued community and ecological services - its conservation is important.

Our study found that:

- Strategic ranchland at risk is concentrated in high mountain valleys and the mixed grassland areas surrounding major mountain ranges in the region.

- Prime ranchland is threatened in all seven Rocky Mountain states. Montana and Idaho contain the greatest amount of strategic ranchland at risk (over 5 million acres each), followed by Colorado (4.8 million acres).

- The Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE) hosts a significant portion of the Rocky Mountain region's strategic ranchland at risk. 10 of the top 25 counties fall within the GYE.

Strategic Ranchland at Risk in 25 Rocky Mountain Counties,[1] 2000-2020

Rank[2]	County, State	Strategic Ranchland at Risk		
		Acres in county	As % of county land area	As % of state's strategic ranchland
1	Gallatin, MT	544,640	32	11
2	Beaverhead, MT	512,000	14	10
3	Madison, MT	481,920	21	10
4	Colfax, NM	420,480	17	16
5	Lewis & Clark, MT	387,840	17	8
6	Park, MT	386,560	22	8
7	Sanpete, UT	376,320	37	11
8	Pinal, AZ	355,200	10	25
9	Missoula, MT	341,760	21	7
10	Millard, UT	341,760	8	10
11	Jefferson, MT	341,760	32	7
12	Saguache, CO	341,120	17	7
13	Sublette, WY	336,000	11	13
14	Bingham, ID	336,000	25	7
15	Park, WY	334,080	7	13
16	Rio Arriba, NM	334,080	9	13
17	Idaho, ID	325,120	6	6
18	Duchesne, UT	318,080	15	9
19	Uinta, WY	315,520	24	12
20	Big Horn, WY	308,480	15	12
21	Fremont, WY	296,960	5	11
22	Montrose, CO	295,040	21	6
23	Summit, UT	295,040	25	9
24	Iron, UT	277,760	13	8
25	Cassia, ID	275,840	17	5
	Total, top 25 counties	8,879,360	13	35

1 Top 25 of 263 counties in the seven-state area.
2 Ranking based on total prime ranchland area found to be threatened.

11 percent of all prime ranchland in the Rocky Mountain West is threatened by conversion to residential development by 2020.

Help Protect Our Western Heritage and Ranching Landscapes

- Support efforts to increase the profitability of ranching. Buy local beef, lamb and other agricultural products. There is no ranchland without ranchers.

- Ranches produce a wide range of ecological goods and services. Support conservation programs that compensate ranchers for growing wildlife habitat, controlling the spread of noxious weeds and other ecosystem services.

- The ranchlands on this map are a limited regional resource. Promote efforts to help reduce the loss of the most productive ranchlands in the Rockies at the state and local levels. This analysis is the first step.

- Promote stabilizing the land base. Encourage public finance efforts that keep ranchland in production. State and local purchase of development rights programs such as the Montana Agricultural Heritage Program and the Gallatin County Open Lands program are critical for maintaining working landscapes in the Rockies.

- To support ranchland protection efforts, contact American Farmland Trust (970-464-4963) or The Nature Conservancy, Rocky Mountain Division, (970-484-2886).

Black Canyon Regional Land Trust

Notes: Due to data limitations, this analysis does not include ground water information in evaluating prime ranchlands and, therefore, may not show high production values on ground water dependent ranchlands. Due to data limitations and financial con straints, this analysis may classify row crop lands as ranchlands in highly integrated agricultural ecosystems.

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For more information or to obtain a complete copy of this report, visit www.farmland.org, or contact the Rocky Mountain Regional Office of American Farmland Trust at 970-464-4963.