



# Living in the Rocky Mountain West, 2025

Series Preview

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# **Living in the Rocky Mountain West, 2025**

## **Series Preview**





## Summary

This paper introduces a series of six white papers forthcoming from the Colorado Institute of Public Policy (CIPP). A preview of each paper topic is incorporated. Paper topics include:

- Water
- Demographics
- Energy
- Governance
- Public health
- Development

The goal of these papers is to present a synthesis of the best available research data with an analysis of stakeholder beliefs and values, in order to promote effective, evidence-based policy dialog and decisionmaking.

The Colorado Institute of Public Policy at Colorado State University was created to provide information for effective public problem solving. It brings together local practitioners and academic researchers to contribute to public policy discourse about issues involving interactions among the environment, agriculture, and people in the Rocky Mountain West.

# Introduction

The Rocky Mountain West is an area of unique resources and opportunities. Nowhere else do residents talk so animatedly about “quality of life”—a quality that comes from civic, environmental, and economic excellence. The West is also home to increasing pressures on civic, environmental, and economic resources. According to a recent U.S. census report, three of the top five fastest-growing states are in the West: Nevada, Arizona, and Utah (2005). The report projects that by 2030, 65% of the U.S. population will live in the South and West.

What will life look like for the region’s residents in 2025? Community stakeholders and legislators are searching for answers as they try to create effective public policy that will meet current and future needs.

## The Rocky Mountain West: A region of contrasts

The states typically understood as part of the Rocky Mountain West—Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, Nevada, Arizona, and New Mexico—face unique challenges. They contend with the legacy of boom-and-bust cycles of natural resource extraction and sporadic community development (Holmes, 2005a). They have semi-arid to arid climates, with less than 15 inches of rainfall per year (World Almanac, 2005). They have large, sparsely populated rural areas and densely populated urban areas. Nearly half of the region’s total land, 46%, belongs to the federal government (Whitney, Hurlbutt, & Holmes, 2005).

But it is for these very reasons that people are flocking to the West. The area is rich in natural resources and biodiversity. Residents love its varied topography, its dry air and blue skies, its vast reserves of public lands. As Holmes Rolston, III, writes: “Those who live in the Rockies find that nature becomes a defining part of our existence, palpably affecting our sense of presence. . . . The beauty of this landscape is that the human residents thereon are daily set in a world not entirely developed by human artifice for human interests” (Rolston, 2005, p. 1).

Historians have long chronicled the myths of the West and the frontier. Some have portrayed the West as a region that “promoted individualism, self-reliance, practicality, optimism, and a democratic spirit that rejected external constraints” (Dippie, in Anderson & Hill, 2004, p. 3). Other scholars, however, have chronicled how “miners established rules in camp meetings, and cattlemen used their associations to carve up the range, round up their cattle, and enforce brand registration. Though not all attempts at dispute resolution were successful, institutional entrepreneurs found ways to define and enforce property rights that created rather than destroyed wealth” (Anderson & Hill, 2004, p. 203).

The West, therefore, has a long history of successful social and economic cooperation in addition to its legacy of individual entrepreneurship. The region must leverage this heritage as it accommodates shifting populations and new stakeholders.

## The Colorado Institute of Public Policy: A decisionmaking resource

The Colorado Institute of Public Policy (CIPP) at Colorado State University was created to provide information for effective public problem solving. It brings together local and regional practitioners, stakeholders, and academic researchers to contribute to public policy discourse about issues involving interactions

*“Those who live in the Rockies find that nature becomes a defining part of our existence, palpably affecting our sense of presence” —Holmes Rolston, III*

*The West must leverage its cooperative heritage as it accommodates shifting populations and new stakeholders.*

*The CIPP white papers will*

- *Explore values and decision frameworks*
- *Provide research data*
- *Identify missing information*
- *Involve stakeholders*

among the environment, agriculture, and people in the Rocky Mountain West.

These groups are sometimes portrayed as having conflicting interests: what is good for the environment is bad for urban development. But interests can overlap, as when both environmentalists and urban residents vote to buy undeveloped land and set it aside for wildlife habitat and human recreation.

Effective public policy results from a process wherein all stakeholders are involved, and each group has information about the needs and interests of others. While informed dialog can highlight conflicts, it can also bring about creative, widely accepted solutions. The CIPP is committed to providing information for such dialog.

## **Living in the Rocky Mountain West, 2025: A white paper series from the CIPP**

“Living in the Rocky Mountain West, 2025” is the theme for a series of white papers forthcoming from the CIPP. A group of faculty from Colorado State University and the University of Colorado at Boulder, along with other regional experts, identified six initial policy challenges facing the Rocky Mountain West:

- Water allocation among competing interests;
- Demographic projections that include 100% population increases and a growing proportion of residents over age 65;
- National energy production and supply limits and strategies;
- Governance structures that can successfully address regional issues;
- Health disparities among western populations;
- Development strategies that balance local and regional concerns.

By synthesizing available research with an analysis of issue-related beliefs and values, this paper series will help stakeholders identify overlapping interests and explore policy alternatives.

### **Exploring values and decision frameworks**

Communication research demonstrates that people typically perceive and interpret new information according to existing attitudes (Severin & Tankard, 2001). When faced with policy choices, many people either defer to inherited beliefs and values, or defer to someone they perceive as more knowledgeable (Browne, Skees, Swanson, Thompson, & Unnevehr, 1992, p. 6). Since these patterns tend to reinforce the status quo, they limit the number of new alternatives considered. And when the status quo positions are at odds with one another, parties often turn to the courts, leading to a cycle of winner-take-all litigation (Jamison, 2005).

Public policy debates are often framed around basic values. Arguments over land use, for example, may be framed in terms of private rights vs. public goods. If a rancher uses private land to run cattle, the thinking goes, this private gain comes at the expense of the larger public good of the natural environment. But studies suggest that ranch lands sometimes protect more native plant and animal species than do public lands, owing to less frequent human intervention (Knight, 2002, p. 134). In this case, private rights and public goods are not mutually exclusive.

Identifying common values helps stakeholders and policymakers to communicate more effectively. And as the growing use of conservation easements to prevent future non-agricultural land use has demonstrated, people who communicate find innovative and viable solutions to shared concerns.

## Providing available research data

The series papers will provide an essential synthesis of available research data. Sometimes, new information challenges historical beliefs. More than a half-century ago, Bernard DeVoto wrote of Nevada that “Not much more can happen; there are plenty of square miles but there are no more water sources. . . . The population density cannot increase more than microscopically. Nevada will remain the least populous state and the one with the widest open spaces” (DeVoto, 2004). The idea that population resettlement will naturally occur in the most water-rich locations, while still popular, has not been borne out in the last 100 years of western settlement. Some might argue that DeVoto’s argument is what “should be.” Planners and policymakers, however, must contend with “what is”—including a projected 114% increase in Nevada’s population by 2030 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005).

Data also means paying attention to definitions: how something has been defined in the past, and how different definitions lead to discrete conclusions. Almost everyone supports the concept of sustainability in the abstract. Policy, however, forces us to be specific about what to sustain, whether it is ways of life or historical water flows.

Finally, long-term trend predictions help people plan for the future. But trends are open to interpretation, and analysts frequently disagree. Where possible, the papers will present a range of predictions.

*The series papers link stakeholder beliefs with policy strategies.*

## Identifying missing information

Research results help decisionmakers understand economic and environmental policy implications. But it is equally important to note areas that lack scientific research, or areas where science cannot make adequate assessments. The white papers will identify missing information about each topic. Defining missing information may illuminate the need for additional research or for clarification of stakeholder values.

## Involving stakeholders

Each paper in the series will acknowledge the various communities likely to be affected by policy decisions. Analyzing the basic needs and positions of each group often reveals overlapping interests where policy could accommodate multiple perspectives. Policy alternatives are presented with an assessment of the pros and cons for each stakeholder. Finally, the papers will present results from other communities that have found unique solutions to similar problems.

No policy paper can be complete without a reflection of stakeholder values. Each paper will be an iterative process in which stakeholders influence the direction and content of the discussion so that the outcome serves their needs and interests.

*The CIPP white paper series is a resource that allows affected parties to find common ground within the basic beliefs and values of other groups, profit from available research, and explore alternative solutions.*

## Shaping the future of the Rocky Mountain West

The Institute’s white paper series is intended as a resource that will allow affected parties to understand the basic beliefs and values of other groups, profit from available research, and explore possible solutions. We hope these papers will foster more effective and inclusive policy discussions.

All of the topics defined in this series overlap, but each is substantial enough to merit individual focus. Rather than identifying as-yet-undiscussed issues, this series contributes to issues already defined in public forums.

# Series paper previews

## Water in the West

Sooner or later, conversations about life in the Rocky Mountain West come down to water: who has it, how it should be used, and how to preserve it. While recurring drought cycles have resulted in regional water shortages for centuries, a growing population has increased the need for a constant, reliable water supply. Together, these trends make the region more vulnerable to drought.

Water in the West is generally public property, but the right to “use” water is dedicated to private interests such as irrigation and domestic water supplies. The Colorado State Constitution says that “The water of every natural stream, not heretofore appropriated, within the state of Colorado, is hereby declared to be the property of the public, and the same is dedicated to the use of the people of the state.”

Growing populations have increased states’ competition for water. Over time, the right of headwater states to use water that originates within their borders has had to balance with the needs of downstream states. The Rocky Mountain states have negotiated interstate compacts about the amount of water that must flow downstream (Trout, Witwer & Freeman, 2004).

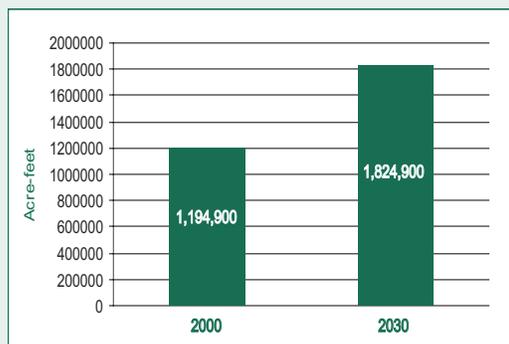
As western states have grown and industries changed, new stakeholders—recreational and environmental concerns—have joined the traditional municipal, industrial, and agricultural users at the water table. All of these stakeholder groups have different primary needs with regard to water; yet, their concerns often overlap. Everyone wants to have enough water to weather drought cycles and meet future water needs. This paper will examine how the Rocky Mountain West can begin to use these similarities constructively.

The paper will encompass data from a CIPP-sponsored survey project that links stakeholder beliefs with policy strategies. The results articulate how the needs and beliefs of different water stakeholders correspond to possible policy alternatives. With this information in hand, decisionmakers can see which strategies are most likely to succeed across stakeholder groups.

In addition to exploring the values and policies associated with water, this paper also discusses the fundamental frameworks needed for effective dialog. It examines areas of conflict that hinder constructive conversations, and notes information gaps that limit our understanding of water strategies.

Western communities have created a wealth of creative and effective water management solutions over the last 150 years. Understanding the adaptability and evolution of these strategies will help urban, agricultural, recreational, and environmental stakeholders move toward water policies that encompass the greatest variety of needs.

*States in the West receive average rainfall of less than 15 inches per year.*



Projected Colorado municipal & industrial and self-supplied industrial water demand (adapted from Colorado Water Conservation Board, 2004).

## Demographics at the margins

The West stands to gain more people—particularly older people—as the U.S. population shifts West and South (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). Colorado’s elderly population is predicted to more than double (Olinger, 2005). And by 2030, Wyoming is projected to have more residents over age 65 than under 18 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005).

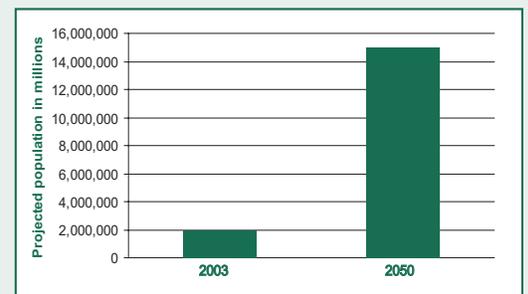
A growing elderly population means a rise in population variability. As a group, older individuals exhibit greater variance than the young (Hoyer & Roodin, 2003). Some older adults are financially secure and politically active; others are in poor health and socially isolated. Should communities provide resources to keep healthy seniors active and engaged? Or should they supply services to those with physical or mental incapacitation? Decisionmakers will have to prioritize as they allocate money to services for the elderly.

The trend toward variability is enhanced by an increasing ethnic plurality among older Americans. In 2003, there were 2 million older Hispanic Americans. By 2050, there will be 15 million. Asian Americans, once 3% of the elderly population, will comprise 8% (Federal Interagency Forum on Aging-Related Statistics, 2004). Services for older residents will need to take into account different cultural backgrounds, languages, and communication styles to meet the needs of a diverse older population.

Increased numbers of elderly residents in the West will affect taxation revenues, health services, and available jobs. It will also affect the young. When money is tight in state and local budgets, allocating more money to community-based services for older adults can mean reducing money for school programs. Yet both populations are equally vulnerable to the effects of poverty and lack of access to health care (Koff & Park, 1999, p. 325). This “generational inequity” goes to the heart of basic values about the priorities of different populations and has dramatic community consequences.

This paper assesses the beliefs and values around older adults and children, and identifies some of the outcomes associated with changes in population shifts within western communities. It looks at the most pressing issues for older Americans, including prescription drug coverage, access to services, employment opportunities, and the need for suitable housing and transportation.

*By 2030, Wyoming will have more residents over age 65 than under 18.*



Projected population of American Hispanics age 65 and older (data from the Federal Interagency Forum on Aging-Related Statistics, 2004).

## Energy: Western resources for the future

The western half of the United States holds the majority of untapped extractive resources, including crude oil, natural gas, and coal (Rosenbaum, 1993). In New Mexico and Colorado, oil and natural gas production have boomed since 2001 (Chakrabarty, 2005; Associated Press, 2005). While these booms increase local jobs and state tax revenues, they are extremely sensitive to international market pressures (Davis, 2001). A drop in oil prices can cause busts like that of oil shale development in the 1980s, leaving behind defaulted loans and empty towns (Gehrke, 2005). As pressures to develop western energy resources increase, residents must weigh the costs and benefits of regional energy development.

Natural resource extraction, such as coal mining and natural gas drilling, affect the environment far beyond the immediate site. Water quality is diminished, land is unusable for farming or human habitation, and air quality is lowered. For these reasons, “energy policy is environmental policy by a different name” (Rosenbaum, 1993, p. 188). Like environmental policy, energy policy in the West involves a patchwork of federal, tribal, state, and private land regulations. Energy extraction can also result in unsaleable residential properties (Garner, 2005). As more people buy high-priced property in the West, pressures are mounting for greater accommodation of private property owners in the energy development process.

In addition to hosting some of the largest U.S. extractive energy reserves, the Rocky Mountain West holds great potential for renewable energy development, including solar, wind, and biomass technologies (National Renewable Energy Labs, 2005). Wind and solar resources have the potential to cast shorter environmental shadows as energy is collected and fed into the energy system. Colorado, Arizona, Nevada, and New Mexico require companies that provide electricity to obtain some portion of it from clean sources (Petersik, 2003). The question is how western states can profit from the development and management of alternative energies, reversing the historical cost-benefit equation. As with traditional energy development, local economies must diversify to protect themselves from boom-and-bust economic cycles.

This paper will assess the historical legacy of energy development in the West as a starting point for understanding the long-term consequences. It will examine national and regional energy use and supply trends. Finally, it will explore possible scenarios for positive local energy development and consumption outcomes.

*The West holds great potential for alternative energy development, including solar, wind, and biomass technologies.*

*Like environmental policy, energy policy in the West involves a patchwork of federal, tribal, state, and private land regulation.*

## Representative governance

“Who is going to pay for that?”

Local, state, and regional decisionmakers ask and answer this question repeatedly as they consider adding or changing services. While increasing taxes is one solution to funding problems, higher income, sales and property tax rates have generally proven unpopular with voters.

Ballot initiatives and referendums, however, have proven increasingly popular. Ballot initiative, referendum, and recall procedures were instituted in many states at the beginning of the 20th century to correct the power of special interest groups that effectively controlled federal and state policies (Initiative and Referendum Institute, n.d.).

Today, 27 states—including every western state—have some form of initiative or popular referendum. Of the western states, Arizona, Colorado, Montana, and Nevada allow constitutional amendments via ballot initiatives. Nevada has proposed education funding, minimum wage increases, and penalties for frivolous lawsuits on its election ballots (Nevada Secretary of State, 2004), while Montana has limited mining operations and voted to restrict corporate spending on ballot measures (Klass, 1999). In some states, ballot measures have been used to affect tax rates or stipulate how taxes are spent. In 1982, Colorado adopted the “Gallagher” amendment, a referendum concerning property taxes. The “TABOR” (Taxpayers’ Bill of Rights) initiative followed in 1992, and in 2000 the state adopted “Amendment 23,” which sets requirements for K-12 education funding.

The ballot initiative and referendum process remains controversial. Supporters argue that it enables citizens to influence elected officials, while critics charge that it restricts the ability of legislators to budget effectively, and has itself become another tool for special interests (Lupia & Matsunaka, 2004). Regardless of its origins, any measure’s impact on policy depends on how representative government structures, in the form of state legislatures and other elected officials, implement the initiative or referendum.

This paper will examine the relationship between state ballot initiatives and referendums and representative governance in the West. How does the process affect state legislatures? What are the policy consequences of state-wide initiative and referendum processes? Finally, the paper explores whether the initiative and referendum process leads to state governance that is more responsive to public opinion.

*Every western state has some form of initiative or popular referendum.*

*Any measure’s impact on policy depends on how representative government structures implement the initiative or referendum.*

## Unknown risks: Health disparities in the West

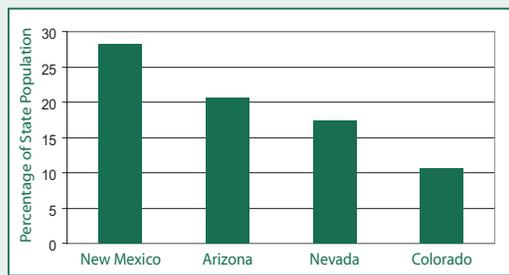
Health disparities—differences in access to health care and health care outcomes—exist throughout the United States. These differences in health quality are most widely associated with different racial and ethnic group status, different socioeconomic status, and access to health insurance (Shi & Stevens, 2005). As western demographics change, so do the populations at risk for poor health outcomes. Populations that speak another language at home, such as Spanish, are of particular concern.

Four of the ten U.S. states with the highest percentage of home Spanish-speakers are in the Rocky Mountain West: New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, and Colorado (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). Use of another language at home correlates with the factors mentioned above to indicate a population at risk for poor health (Torres, 2004). While Hispanics are one of the most urbanized ethnic groups in the U.S. (Kandel & Cromartie, 2004), the West contains both urban and rural Hispanic populations: in Colorado, 17.4% of the rural population identified themselves as Hispanic in the 2000 U.S. Census, while 16.1% of the urban population identified themselves as Hispanic (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003).

As a group, foreign-born Latinos in the U.S. have better health outcomes than their income and access to health insurance would predict. Their traditional diet and health habits, including low levels of smoking and alcohol consumption, improve their health even without health care. As Latino immigrants acculturate, however, they lose their protective health behaviors (Pew Hispanic Center, 2005) and have poorer health outcomes. This creates generational differences in health among Latino families.

Poor health outcomes affect the entire community, not just the groups with the greatest health disparities. Poor health detracts from national economic productivity and prosperity (Shi & Stevens, 2005). Employers lose labor and family members spend time and resources caring for the individual. Vulnerable populations often do not or cannot seek medical attention for initial care. By the time they receive clinical care, the condition may be severe. The cost of ambulances and emergency room treatment is ultimately borne either by insurance companies or, for those who lack insurance, by other patients who pay more for their care as hospitals attempt to balance budgets in the wake of reduced public funding.

This paper will explore the intersection of western Hispanic health disparities, generational health differences, and asset-based or “inoculative” approaches to social marketing. It will synthesize current research and explore possible strategies to reinforce existing positive health behaviors via small, economically feasible “inoculations” that can be implemented at the family, school, and community levels. Finally, the paper seeks to identify the social and economic costs of continued health disparities.



Percentage of home Spanish-speakers in four western states (data from U.S. Census Bureau, 2003).

*Poor health outcomes affect the entire community, not just the groups with the greatest health disparities.*

## Development, development, development

“No one is making any more land.” Everyone agrees on this statement. But the agreement ends when people discuss how land should be used. Land use is at the heart of most development issues: where people should live and recreate, where they get their water, how far they travel to work and school, and where their food is grown.

Resources such as hospitals, farmland, and watersheds are used by more than one community. Local governments can make expensive mistakes when they fail to plan adequately for regional resources. One community may suffer the negative impacts that allow another area to grow. Other communities may build competing facilities that cost taxpayers and business financiers more than they generate in revenues, because the region cannot support both enterprises. As the West grows, so does the cost of such mistakes.

The West also grapples with its role as the nation’s playground. It is the host of some 80% of total U.S. public lands (Riebsame & Robb, 1997, p. 58). The result is land with multiple managers, including local, state, and federal agencies. In some cases, public lands have worked to private advantage: ranchers have traditionally profited from grazing cattle on public lands. But the reintroduction of wolves has led to conflict over which animals on public lands should be protected, and at what cost (Urbigkit, 2005). Recent administrations have sought to reduce funding for land management agencies and create more private sector involvement. As the government reduces its role, the West must use examples of successful collaborative land use solutions and self-governance to inform more responsible land stewardship (Ring, 2005; Holmes, 2005b).

Current regulation and revenue structures cause smaller communities to favor annexation as a local growth strategy. As towns expand, so do their abilities to tax new residents and provide services. But some data questions whether counties ultimately spend more providing services to residential properties than they receive in income (Sonoran Institute, n.d.). As residents live further from city centers, they may experience negative side effects including traffic congestion, loss of open space, and degradation of overall environmental quality (Lone Mountain Coalition, 2000). Some communities are discussing alternatives to annexation as they realize that their uniqueness is threatened by corridor sprawl.

This paper will explore the fundamental conditions necessary for successful local dialog and governance. It draws upon data analysis and expert commentary to illustrate the pros and cons of proposed solutions—such as impact fees, user fees, regional revenue sharing, councils of governance, and community-based transfers of development rights (TDRs)—with attention to the different “burden shifting” effects of these strategies (Lone Mountain Coalition, 2000). The conditions that foster local entrepreneurship and civic engagement are also addressed. Finally, the paper discusses the growing use of market-based solutions, such as conservation easements and land transfers, as policymakers incorporate private property rights into public land management.

Percentages of public land in the Rocky Mountain West

|            |        |
|------------|--------|
| Nevada     | 82.9 % |
| Utah       | 63.9 % |
| Idaho      | 61.6 % |
| Wyoming    | 48.9 % |
| Arizona    | 47.2 % |
| Colorado   | 36.3 % |
| New Mexico | 32.4 % |
| Montana    | 28 %   |

(data from Riebsame & Robb, 1997)

*As residents live further from city centers, negative side effects including traffic congestion and loss of open space may occur.*



## Conclusion

The policy issues presented in the Institute’s white paper series reflect the diversity of changes underway in the West: changes in populations, in industries and economies, and in the use of natural resources. As the issues change, so must policy, which means that discussions about water allocation and land use will persist. The ongoing debate reflects the continuous need for evolving policy.

This paper series provides a synthesis of scientifically derived data and stakeholder values to foster informed discussions of policy alternatives. By presenting relevant issues in terms of risks and benefits, it offers a framework to guide regional decisionmaking in the changing western landscape.

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