

Economists: Parks will bolster economy

By Jim Robbins, New York Times

Challenging the notion that protecting public land locks it up, more than 100 economists, including three Nobel laureates, are calling on the president and Congress to create more parks and other protected preserves in the West as a way to bolster state economies.

The economists also urge the creation of something similar to the Depression-era Civilian Conservation Corps, which built trails and maintained infrastructure in national parks.

"We urge you to create jobs and support business by investing in our public lands infrastructure and establishing new protected areas such as parks, wilderness and monuments," they wrote in a letter. Such areas "attract innovative companies and workers, and are an essential component of the region's competitive advantage," they added.

The drafting of the letter was organized by Headwaters Economics, a nonprofit organization that studies the economics of natural resources, with a tilt toward preservation. Ray Rasker, an economist with Headwaters, cited a study by his organization that found that Grand County, Utah, home to the tourist mecca of Moab, has been doing quite well: jobs there grew at a 7 percent annual rate in the 1990s and have been growing 2 percent annually during the current recession.

"In the last 40 years, the fastest growth in the West has been in communities adjacent to protected public lands," Rasker said. "This is what's creating jobs currently at a time of high unemployment – we need policy that creates jobs."

The idea of expanding preservation does not go over well among

everyone. Many people in Western states see the creation of new federally protected areas as putting land off limits to mining, logging and other uses and potentially harming the economy.

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