GUEST COLUMN: Region must continue natural asset advocacy
By: Walt Hecox and Brendan Boepple

The Trump administration's early indications of new spending and legislative priorities are sending shock waves through the nation and the Rockies region, to the delight of some and the dismay of others.

Colorado Springs and the three-county Pikes Peak region are not exempt from potential major changes in the role of the federal government and possible new responsibilities of state government. The implications for our region's abundant natural assets are one area, among many, where our community must remain engaged. Our region's economic dynamism, diversity, and quality of life will be vitally affected.

All who live here and visit agree: this state is blessed with stunning landscapes and abundant recreation opportunities that literally help define us as a region. Public lands, which our forefathers had the bold foresight to protect, are core not just to our state's identities and quality of life, but also to our economic competitive advantage.

We see this in Colorado Springs as tourists who flock to Garden of the Gods and Pikes Peak stay in our hotels, visit the region's cultural and natural attractions, and shop at small businesses. In 2015, the latest data available, 20.5 million visited the Pikes Peak region, of which 43 percent took overnight trips. Indeed the Colorado Springs outdoor recreation sector is a major driver to our local economy: putting $1.97 billion in the local economy, and making travel-oriented employment 16 percent of private employment.

This newly visible economic sector now strongly advocates for our natural backdrop and its recreation and tourism uses. The recent inaugural Colorado Springs State of the Outdoors Economy meeting, energetically organized by the Pikes Peak Outdoor Recreation Alliance, brings excitement, energy and innovation to the importance of outdoor recreation and tourism for our economy and quality of life.

Federal public lands are integral to our mountain backdrop and tourism-recreation offerings. They make up a total of 30 percent of the three-county region's acreage, of which 11 percent is Forest Service, 12 percent BLM and 4 percent military. Nurturing our relations with public lands managers is as important as what we do to foster our defense links in Washington D. C. and across Colorado!

Here in Colorado Springs, our city is often cited as one of the best places to live in the Mountain West, and the country. Among many accolades, two stand out: in 2016 US News and World Report awarded us the No. 5 Best Place to Live, and Outside Magazine recognized our community as among the top 10 big cities for active families.
Earlier this year, a report published by the Trust for Public Land calculated the benefits of Colorado Springs' city parks to our residents at $502 million in enhanced property value, $2.6 million in increased property tax revenues, storm water capture benefits of $3.1 million, and support for $32.4 million in spending on sports and recreation equipment.

And at the state level, we are fortunate to have a successful conservation program - GOCO - to enhance outdoor recreation and access to public lands. They report $52 million in support for El Paso County alone, and their recent $100,000 support for devising a strategy to finish the Ring the Peak trail will have huge leverage in decisions and funding.

Residents of the Rockies and especially Colorado recognize the great benefits of urban areas adjacent to ample public lands, from city parks to national forests. Public opinion data supports this appreciation for the quality of life as well. The seventh annual bipartisan 2017 Conservation in the West poll recently released by Colorado College's State of the Rockies Project reaffirms how deeply Coloradans, and folks across the West value public lands and the outdoor economy.

Based upon the survey, 95 percent of Colorado respondents rate the opportunities for outdoor recreation and spending time in nature as "good" or "great," with more than 2 out of 3 voters describing those opportunities as "great." But might such sentiment vary among political parties and philosophies?

Respondents in Colorado were split in political philosophy (35 percent conservative, 35 percent moderate, 24 percent liberal) and party affiliation (32 percent Republican, 32 percent Democratic, 35 percent Independent). Despite these differences, 90 percent of surveyed voters in Colorado believe that opportunities for outdoor recreation and spending time in nature surpass other states. Additionally, three quarters of voters in Colorado want to see the new president do more to promote the outdoor economy, by investing in national public lands and U.S. manufacturing of outdoor equipment.

Colorado's natural assets are clearly a driver to our economy and a cornerstone of our quality of life. The Pikes Peak region, with its great endowment of public lands and outdoor recreation opportunities, can become a leader in capitalizing on these unique assets, even as seismic shocks loom on the horizon for managing land and our environment. This is an imminent challenge, so can our city and region rise to the occasion?

We encourage readers to explore these issues and trends further. To learn more about the 2017 Conservation in the West survey and economic advantages that public lands and outdoor recreation generate, the public is welcome to "Our Natural Economy: Capitalizing on Colorado's Unique Place in the Rockies." on Wednesday, at 7 p.m. in the Cornerstone Arts Center at Colorado College.

This event is co-sponsored by Colorado College's State of the Rockies Project and El Pomar Foundation's Pikes Peak Heritage Series.

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