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State Parks Are Rural Economic Engines

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Over 8 million Texans, on average, have visited state parks each year since 2014. Last year, that number shot up to 10 million, and could continue to increase as the state population grows by nearly 10 million more people between now and Texas' bicentennial in 2036.

Data from Texas and other states indicate that every \$1 in public money spent on parks can generate between \$4 and \$12 in economic return. Investing in state parks through maintaining and improving existing facilities and expanding the number of state parks available to meet Texans' growing demand for outdoor recreation will generate meaningful and measurable economic benefits for the state as a whole, but especially for local and rural economies.

State Parks Generate Significant Economic Growth

The Big Picture: Texas rural counties with state parks have higher GDP growth, higher population growth, and higher employment growth compared to rural counties without state parks.

Period: 2009-2019		Economic Indicator			% of Counties with Growth		
# of Counties	Metro/Park Status	GDP Growth	Population Growth	Employment Growth	GDP Growth	Population Growth	Employment Growth
78	Metro	60%	18%	28%	92%	86%	92%
46	Rural with State Park	51%	5%	10%	80%	70%	72%
122	Rural without State Park	45%	1%	8%	71%	40%	69%
8	Mixed with Park	86%	32%	43%	100%	88%	100%
254	Total State	59%	17%	26%	80%	61%	78%

Table 1: Key Economic Indicators by State Park Locations across Metropolitan and Rural Counties

Data sources: Calculation of BEA county level GDP, employment, and population data by Dr. Joyce Beebe, fellow at the Baker Institute

Only 40% of rural counties in Texas without state parks experienced population growth during the last decade. By contrast, rural counties with state parks saw significant growth in population, GDP, and

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employment. And outdoor recreational activities also provide a significant contribution to the state and local economies. In 2020, this translated to about \$32 billion. Texas state parks also support roughly 300,000 jobs, or about 2.4% of total state employment.

Increased Usage by Visitors Boosts Local Economies

The Big Picture: Non-local visitors spend more money during their rural park visits than they do visiting metro parks.

During the COVID pandemic, Texans have visited Texas state parks and other outdoor facilities in historic numbers. Over 8 million Texans, on average, have visited state parks each year since 2014, but by the end of fiscal year 2021, state parks usage skyrocketed to a total of 10 million visits, a 37% increase from the previous fiscal year.

According to data analyzed by the Baker Institute, state parks in metropolitan and rural areas are more likely to attract day visitors than overnight visitors. Among day visitors, more non-local visitors visit rural parks than metro ones.

# of State Parks	County Type	% of Local Visitors	% of Non-Local Visitors
39	Metro Counties	34%	66%
44	Rural Counties	15%	85%

Table 2: Summary of all park visitors by local status

Data sources: Dr. Beebe's calculation of Texas Parks and Wildlife Department's report

And non-local visitors spend significant amounts of money in local communities when they visit state parks, buying groceries, meals at local restaurants, recreational equipment at local shops, and gas, as well as paying for rental cars and hotel stays.

Additional Investment Will Boost Utilization

In 2018, the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) [estimated](#) state parks faced \$781 million in deferred maintenance and would need \$50 million–\$80 million in repairs every two years. In their most recent [strategic plan](#), the agency highlighted the need to reallocate approximately \$100 million to recover from natural disasters such as droughts, fires, floods, hurricanes, and hail storms.

In addition to maintaining existing facilities, new state parks would unleash pent-up demand. In 2019, TPWD unveiled a new reservation system to make it easier for visitors to purchase day-use permits in advance, helping reduce the number of visitors turned away. But reservations are still recommended months ahead of time, suggesting that additional parks are needed to meet existing and future demand.

In 2019, the Texas Legislature dedicated all state sales taxes derived from the sale of sporting goods to Texas parks. This change increased Texas parks funding by \$150 million each year, which was a good start.

State Parks Are a Sound Investment

The data is clear – investing in existing and new state parks will generate more jobs and more economic growth while strengthening all areas of the state – especially rural communities.

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