



## PROTECTING THE VALLE VIDAL IS GOOD ECONOMICS

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***“One of the big challenges to the West is to create and protect a unique setting that encourages entrepreneurship, stimulates economic diversity and increased opportunities, while maintaining a just society where few get left behind, where workers understand how to compete in a changing labor market, and where the growth is directed in a way that protects the environment as an economic asset.”***  
**The Sonoran Institute (2004).**

Economic issues are often at the forefront of energy development debates in the Rocky Mountain West. The same is true of the Coalition for the Valle Vidal’s efforts to protect the Valle Vidal from coalbed methane drilling. The energy industry often presents the debate as a limited choice between jobs and the environment. The industry and its proponents argue that protecting public lands from oil and gas development “locks up” those lands and is thus an obstacle to the economic growth of nearby communities.

Sound economic studies of rural western communities show otherwise. Protecting public lands actually encourages economic growth and stability. Protected public lands support local economies in an impressive manner, and contribute strongly to long-term, sustainable economic growth.

Would energy development of the Valle Vidal provide Colfax and Taos Counties with revenue, and even some jobs? Yes, of course. But as is the case throughout the Rocky Mountain West, many of these jobs – such as those for exploration and constructing infrastructure – require specialized skills and equipment. These jobs are often awarded to current employees of out-of-state energy firms. Relatively few new jobs would actually be afforded to local New Mexicans.

A report by the nonprofit Sonoran Institute, “Public Lands Conservation and Economic Well-Being” ([www.sonoran.org/programs/prosperity.html](http://www.sonoran.org/programs/prosperity.html)), concludes that protecting public lands “play an important role in stimulating economic growth – and the more protected the better.” Several key findings include:

1. **Protecting – not exploiting – public lands is good for local economies:**  
“Protected public lands, such as Wilderness, National Parks, and National Monuments, are positively correlated with economic growth in the last three

decades ... The presence of protected public lands in the county is good for economic growth.”

2. **The West is changing – communities no longer depend primarily on resource extraction:** “In the non-metropolitan West, where dependence on public lands for resource development has been the highest, personal income from employment in mining, oil and gas development, logging and the lumber and wood products industries represented 8 percent of total income in 2000, down from 20 percent in 1970.”
3. **Resource extraction can cripple long-term economic growth and sustainability:** “Regardless of how public lands are managed, all counties studied showed a negative correlation with growth and dependency on resource extraction occupations ....”
4. **Protecting public lands, like the Valle Vidal, is one of several critical factors necessary to create a thriving and sustainable rural economy:** “In summary, throughout the West, the presence of public lands is a positive contribution to the economy. Is the protection and conservation of these lands bad for the economy? No. Is it good for the economy? It depends on what else the community has in place, and whether it has positioned itself to capitalize on protected lands as an economic asset.”

These findings strongly suggest that protecting the Valle Vidal for its core values -- healthy watersheds and clean water, wildlife, agriculture (ranching), and recreational opportunities (hunting, fishing, hiking, camping, etc.)-- benefit *all* people and can be far better for the future of the surrounding local economies than extracting the Valle Vidal's coalbed methane.

This is especially so when one considers that the Valle Vidal is one of the most valued places for wildlife recreationists not simply in New Mexico, but the entire nation. The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, in its 2001 National Survey, found hunters, anglers, and wildlife watchers expended considerable sums in New Mexico:

“In 2001, state residents and nonresidents spent \$1 billion on wildlife recreation in New Mexico. Of that total, trip-related expenditures were \$302 million and equipment purchases totaled \$583 million. The remaining \$138 million was spent on licenses, contributions, land ownership and leasing, and other items and services.”

A new report, “The Local Economic Impacts of Natural Gas Development in Valle Vidal, New Mexico,” by Thomas M. Power, states that:

“The importance of high quality natural landscapes and recreational opportunities is dramatically apparent in Colfax County's property tax base. Just two towns in western Colfax County, Angel Fire and Eagle Nest, are responsible for 42

percent of Colfax County's property tax base even though those two towns contain only 9 percent of the county population. Between 2001 and 2003 the residential and non-residential taxable values in Colfax County grew by \$170 million. Natural gas taxable value grew by \$12.8 million. 93 percent of the increase in the tax base was associated with the growth in the value of residential and commercial property. Clearly the mountain landscapes in western Colfax County, of which Valle Vidal is an important part, are already supporting the Colfax County economy and tax base in an impressive manner. Those natural landscapes will only become more important in the future."

Many of the expenditures that would flow to Colfax and Taos Counties from recreational uses of the Valle Vidal would therefore be lost if the 40,000 acres on its eastern side is turned into an industrial gas field. Moreover, after coalbed methane production ends, it would be decades before the Valle Vidal could recover to once again become a place frequented by hunters, anglers, and other wildlife recreationists – that is, if it ever does. In the meantime, considerable monies – including public taxpayer dollars – will be expended to restore the landscape, streams and groundwater destroyed by roads, pipelines, well pads, water removal, and other impacts of coalbed methane production.

The Coalition for the Valle Vidal believes that the most effective economic growth strategy – a strategy that aims to produce a sustainable economy – involves *protecting* the Valle Vidal for the long term for its healthy watersheds, clean water, wildlife, agricultural values, and recreational opportunities – not *harming* them for the very short term of gas development.