



Rooted in Community: A Strategy for Our Farms, Forests, Freshwater, and Our Future

The Nature Conservancy's Vision for
Michigan's Rural Prosperity

Contents

Introduction	03	Section 6:	22
Background and Purpose	03	Public Sentiment	
Summary of Key Findings	03	A Bipartisan Issue with Broad Voter Support	22
Implementation Recommendations	04	Voters Connect Natural Resources to Economic Health	22
Section 1: Methodology	05	Rural Voters Feel the State Is Not Keeping Up	23
Section 2: Defining Characteristics and Trends in Michigan's Rural Areas	06	What Voters Want Protected and Why	23
Defining Rural	06	Section 7:	24
The Rural Economy	07	Implementation Recommendations	
Economic and Demographic Indicators of Rural Decline	08	Conclusion	25
Section 3: Barriers to Rural Prosperity and Healthy Natural Resources	09	References	26
Section 4: Investments in Michigan's Rural Prosperity	10	Appendix A: Interview Summary	29
Protecting Working Lands and Developing Public Recreation Facilities	10	Appendix B: Program & Policy Analysis	41
Bolstering Local Government Capacity and Providing Funding	11	Appendix C: DNR Funding Report	74
Training and Retaining Skilled Workforce	12	Appendix D: NRM State Funding Profiles	94
Section 5: Approaches to Rural Prosperity in Other States	14	Appendix E: MRG Polling Results	145
Rural-Specific State-Level Leadership and Coordinated Planning	14		
Economic Development and Business Support	17		
Flexible Funding and Financing Tools	17		
Investments in Infrastructure and Connectivity	18		
Quality of Life and Workforce Investments	20		
Place-Based Development	21		

Introduction

Background and Purpose

Michigan's impressive renewable natural resources—including extensive forests, fertile farmlands, and abundant fresh water—underpin the state's economy, create a sense of place and identity, and provide a wide range of recreational opportunities for its residents and visitors. Rural communities are often rich in natural resources and depend on their sustainable use and management, making the care and protection of the state's natural resources inextricably linked to Michigan's rural prosperity.

Despite Michigan's wealth of natural resources and the ingenuity and determination of its residents, many rural areas are struggling. The statistics on population loss and economic challenges are well documented. In many places, farms, forests, and waters are not cared for as well as they could and should be, often because decisions are made by owners or users living outside of those communities.

Residents in rural communities frequently express a sense of quiet despair, feeling forgotten and taken for granted. In the words of a county commissioner in rural Michigan,

"We just need some jobs so our children don't have to move away to have a decent life."

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) envisions a future in which Michigan's rural communities are thriving, and the lands and waters surrounding them are healthy, productive, and well cared for. With this vision in mind, TNC engaged Public Sector Consultants (PSC) to conduct research to understand the barriers to rural prosperity and identify policy solutions that will increase the resilience and productivity of rural Michigan while preserving community values and ensuring the sustainable use of our natural resources.

To develop these recommendations, PSC interviewed 16 subject matter experts (SMEs), analyzed programs and policies in Michigan and eight peer states, reviewed natural resource management funding mechanisms in Michigan and 14 other states, and examined the results of a statewide public opinion survey of 1,021 registered voters.

Summary of Key Findings

PSC's research revealed five key barriers to rural prosperity and healthy natural resources in Michigan, including insufficient investment in natural resource management; limited local government capacity and funding; aging water and sewer systems; an aging population and youth out-migration; and rural poverty and income inequality. Each of these key barriers is described in greater detail in section 3. These challenges are not unique to Michigan; other states included in PSC's analysis have encountered similar issues and created programs and policies to address them.

To understand what is being done in Michigan to address the identified barriers, PSC reviewed publicly available information and asked SMEs to identify programs and initiatives that have been particularly effective or impactful in advancing rural prosperity. Common themes emerged across the identified programs: protecting working lands and developing public recreation facilities; bolstering local government capacity and creating adequate, stable funding streams; and training and retaining a skilled workforce.

Taken together, the identified programs represent a meaningful but insufficient response to the scale of the challenges facing rural Michigan. The programs are discussed in more detail in section 4.

PSC also analyzed programs and policies in eight case study states to understand how they are addressing challenges to rural prosperity. Six common strategies emerged across state approaches to rural prosperity in the case study states: rural-specific state-level leadership and coordinated planning; economic development and business support; flexible funding and financing tools; investments in infrastructure and connectivity; quality-of-life and workforce investments; and place-based development. These strategies, along with examples of state initiatives related to them, are discussed in greater detail in section 5.

Although the economic stability of most rural areas is closely intertwined with and dependent on the use of natural resources, very few state initiatives directly prioritize the stewardship of those resources.

Finally, PSC reviewed and analyzed the results of a statewide survey of 1,021 registered Michigan voters conducted by Marketing Resource Group (MRG) in early 2026. The goal of the survey was to better understand how Michiganders perceive the challenges and opportunities facing rural areas. Survey findings revealed strong and consistent voter support for state-level prioritization of rural prosperity and a high value placed on natural resource stewardship. For example, 87 percent of voters report that they would be more likely to support a gubernatorial candidate who prioritizes these issues, a figure that holds across Republicans (86 percent), Democrats (90 percent), and independents (85 percent). A summary of the survey's key takeaways is in section 6, and the full survey results are in appendix E.

Together, these activities informed the development of four implementation recommendations for policy solutions that meaningfully address barriers to rural prosperity while prioritizing the sustainable, long-term management of Michigan's natural resources.

Implementation Recommendations

1. **Establish a gubernatorial or legislative commission** to identify long-term funding solutions for natural resource management and the growing demands on working lands, parks, and natural areas.
2. **Modify the Office of Rural Prosperity's structure and increase its funding** so it can build capacity to support local rural communities and their governments and serve as a data clearinghouse for accurate, timely information about Michigan's natural resources and rural communities.
3. **Build and fund new a financial toolbox that delivers long-term, sustainable funding for conservation and rural development projects.** The toolbox would include the following tools: a newly established Michigan conservation and rural development innovation fund offering flexible co-investment capital for innovative conservation and rural development projects; a new dedicated state funding source for natural resource management and maintenance; low-interest loans and low-barrier grants designed specifically to help underresourced communities upgrade and maintain natural resource assets; and tax incentives crafted to encourage greater philanthropic and private investment in rural areas and sustainable natural resource management.
4. **Adopt a unified, state-level rural development strategy that integrates land use planning, economic development, and natural resource management** to help the state become less reactive and more focused on addressing long-term challenges.

Section 1: Methodology

To inform the development of these recommendations, PSC completed the following key project activities:

- **Subject matter expert interviews:** PSC interviewed 16 SMEs from a variety of industries to gather their views on the most pressing issues and opportunities for rural communities in Michigan, barriers to achieving rural prosperity, and strategies for addressing those barriers. The full interview summary report is in appendix A.
- **Desktop research:** To further understand conditions in Michigan's rural communities—including demographic and economic trends—and programs and policies that have addressed barriers to rural prosperity in Michigan and other states, PSC reviewed agency websites, reports, articles, state statutes and legislative documents, and other relevant online sources. PSC also reviewed and analyzed the results of a statewide public opinion survey of 1,021 registered Michigan voters. Insights and findings from this research informed the selection of case study states for the program and policy analysis (described below) and framed the recommended policy solutions.
- **Program and policy analysis:** Based on findings from interviews with SMEs and desktop research, PSC selected eight case study states for a policy and program analysis focused on understanding state approaches to creating and sustaining rural prosperity. The analysis evaluated key rural prosperity programs and supporting policies—including their histories, goals, structures, and funding mechanisms—to understand how those programs could be replicated in Michigan. To conduct the analysis, PSC reviewed publicly available information (e.g., websites, reports, articles) and interviewed program representatives. The full policy and program analysis report is in appendix B of this report.
- **Natural resources management (NRM) funding mechanism review:** To better understand Michigan's approach to funding the management of its natural resources and how that approach could be modified to ensure more sustainable, long-term funding, PSC examined NRM and conservation funding mechanisms in Michigan and 14 other states. PSC produced a report that provides an overview of the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR) funding model and recommendations for actions the state could take to secure more sustainable NRM funding. The report also includes a profile for each case study state that summarizes key statistics related to natural resources and dedicated funding mechanisms that support natural resource management in those states. The full report and state profiles are in appendices C and D of this report, respectively.

Section 2: Defining Characteristics and Trends in Michigan's Rural Areas

Understanding the defining characteristics and trends shaping rural Michigan is essential for identifying the barriers to rural prosperity and the policy solutions most likely to address them. Michigan's rural areas, which cover more than 90 percent of the state's total land area, are characterized by vast expanses of undeveloped land, small towns, and open roads. The natural resources in these areas underpin the state's economy by providing the critical foundation for industries such as farming, forestry, energy production, and outdoor recreation. About one-quarter of the state's total population, or 2.6 million Michiganders, call rural Michigan home (U.S. Census Bureau 2023).

Defining Rural

"Rural" is defined in many ways. The variation in definitions both acknowledges diversity within and across communities and presents a challenge in classifying communities for data collection or determining eligibility for rural-targeted funding or other initiatives. Most definitions are based on population size, population density, location relative to urban or metropolitan areas, or some combination of these factors.

State and federal agencies most commonly rely on definitions from the U.S. Census Bureau and the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB). The U.S. Census Bureau categorizes all geographic areas that are not urban—areas with at least 5,000 people or 2,000 housing units—as rural (U.S. Census Bureau 2024). The OMB conceptualizes rural as "nonmetro," which refers to counties with fewer than 50,000 people or those not tied to metropolitan counties through labor force commuting (USDA ERS 2026). Like many states, Michigan typically uses either the U.S. Census Bureau or the OMB definition for policy and program development and administration.

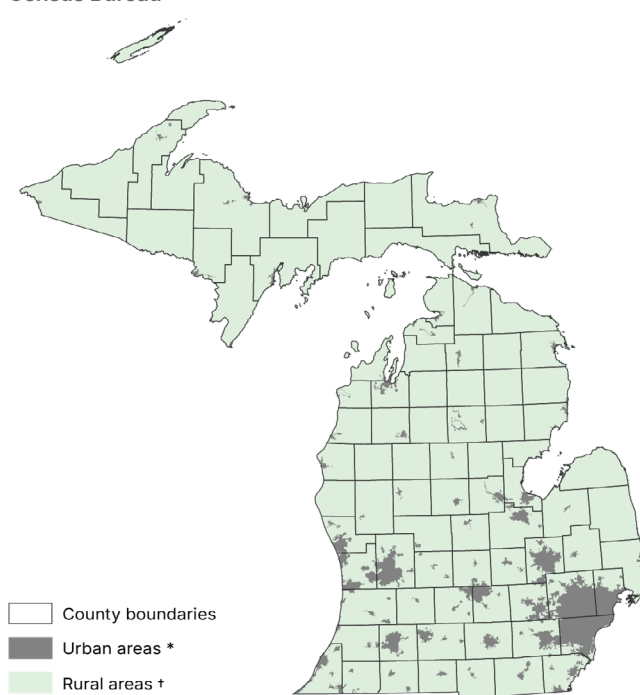
The U.S. Census Bureau and OMB definitions exclude several characteristics that many rural communities share (e.g., natural resource-based economies and proximity to natural assets). For this reason, Michigan's Office of Rural Prosperity (ORP) defines "rural Michigan" as including communities that share the following common realities (ORP 2024):

- A deep economic and community **connection to natural assets**
- **Remote geographies**, resulting in weaker connections and longer distances to essential services like healthcare, emergency services, and broadband infrastructure

- **Smaller populations**, resulting in narrow tax bases, fewer people to participate in the workforce and volunteer opportunities, and limited local government capacity

Though conceptually the most accurate definition of rural places in Michigan, the ORP's definition is difficult to quantify. For this reason, this report uses the U.S. Census Bureau's definition of rural unless otherwise noted (Exhibit 1).

Exhibit 1. Urban and Rural Areas of Michigan, as Defined by the U.S. Census Bureau



Source: U.S. Census Bureau 2023

* Urban areas are densely developed, contiguous groups of census blocks that encompass at least 2,000 housing units or have a population of at least 5,000.

† Rural areas encompass all territory not included within an urban area.

The Rural Economy

Michigan's rural economy depends on the availability of high-quality, well-managed natural resource assets. Agriculture, forestry, and mining are all cornerstones of Michigan's rural economy and have shaped both the historic trajectory and modern identity of many of the state's rural communities. Outdoor recreation is another key rural economic driver that continues to grow in popularity and economic contribution.

These industries are not just important to local rural economies; they are also key contributors to both regional economies and the statewide economy, a fact widely recognized and agreed upon by the vast majority (89 percent) of Michigan voters, according to recent statewide polling conducted by MRG (Exhibit 2) (MRG 2026).

Exhibit 2. Level of Agreement with the Statement "Michigan's Natural Resources Are Extremely Important to the State's Economy."



Source: MRG 2026

To illustrate the scale and importance of these industries, key statistics highlighting their economic benefits are summarized below.

Agriculture: Michigan's vast, fertile farmlands (over ten million acres) support a robust agricultural industry that ranks second in the nation for agricultural diversity. The state is home to approximately 47,000 farms, which support about 805,000 jobs and contribute \$125.8 billion annually to the state's economy (MDARD n.d.b; MEDC n.d.a).

Forestry: Michigan has about 20 million acres of public and private forest land, covering more than half of the state (Cook 2019). These forests support an active forest products industry that provides about 80,000 jobs and generates over \$26 billion in economic activity each year (DNR n.d.b).

Mining and minerals production: The mining industry has been an important contributor to Michigan's economy for over 125 years. Michigan was once a major producer of copper, iron, and silver. Today, the state's mining industry continues to produce essential raw materials (e.g., cobalt, magnesium, and potash) for manufacturing, construction, and agriculture (Michigan's Mining Future Committee 2021). Mining supports approximately 26,000 jobs in Michigan and contributes roughly \$1 billion annually to the state's gross domestic product (Seals 2023).

Outdoor recreation: Parks and recreation areas throughout the state host an active and growing outdoor recreation industry. Michigan's outdoor recreation economy supports nearly 125,000 jobs and contributes an estimated \$15.1 billion to the state's economy per year (BEA n.d.).

Economic and Demographic Indicators of Rural Decline

While every rural community in Michigan faces unique economic and demographic circumstances, it is possible to identify some common throughlines across communities. Individually, no single characteristic necessarily signals decline—but together, they characterize conditions that could, and in some cases already do, challenge rural communities and ultimately lead to rural decline. It is important to note that while many of these characteristics are common in Michigan's rural areas, they may not apply to all rural communities, and the degree to which they manifest varies by location.

- **Population shifts:** Over the past two decades, many rural counties have experienced population shifts. Some regions of the state (e.g., the Upper Peninsula [UP], northeastern Lower Peninsula, Thumb, and southern border regions) have experienced rural population declines, while other areas (e.g., the western and northwestern Lower Peninsula) have seen significant rural population growth (ORP 2024). Both circumstances are associated with their own sets of challenges; declining population can lead to issues like narrower tax bases and workforce shortages while growing populations can result in considerable and undue pressures on underresourced local rural governments and natural and working lands.
- **Age representation:** Rural populations are, on average, older than their nonrural counterparts. Rural areas are more likely to have a higher percentage of residents over 49 years of age, while urban areas are more likely to have a higher percentage of residents under 35 years of age (Lupher 2018). This imbalance in age representation can lead to workforce challenges and strain local economies.
- **Median household income:** Michigan's rural counties have a median household income of about \$55,400, which is \$17,400 less than the state's overall median household income of \$72,800 (USDA ERS 2025; U.S. Census Bureau n.d.). Low-income households may struggle to afford basic necessities such as food, housing, and essential services.

Taken together, these characteristics help explain both the challenges rural communities face and the types of interventions most likely to make a meaningful difference, which are explored in the sections that follow.



Section 3:

Barriers to Rural Prosperity and Healthy Natural Resources

PSC's research revealed five major challenges hindering rural prosperity and the health of natural resources in Michigan. **The wealth of rural communities is often tied to the productive value of local natural resources—yet communities frequently struggle to capture enough of that value to reinvest in the care of those resources and in essential community services.** These barriers are not unique to Michigan; other states have encountered similar issues and have created programs and policies to address them. The barriers described below informed the development of the policy solutions presented later in this report.

Barrier 1—Insufficient investment in natural resource management: Longstanding underinvestment in NRM has, in some cases, resulted in the degradation of the productive capacity of the resource and a broad need for catch-up investment caused by deferred maintenance of resources and facilities.

Barrier 2—Limited government capacity and funding: The limited capacity of local governments and the remote nature of some rural communities can hinder access to information and resources, such as technical assistance and funding. Our current system for funding local governments significantly disadvantages areas with declining populations and property values, leaving many rural governments disproportionately fiscally constrained and limiting their ability to pursue funding and technical assistance opportunities that require up-front capital.

Barrier 3—Aging water and sewer systems: Well-maintained water and sewer systems are among the primary strategies for preventing the degradation of our freshwater resources. Many of Michigan's rural communities lack the resources and financial capacity to make necessary investments in their aging water and sewer systems. Additionally, many rural residents use wells and septic systems but do not have the means to properly maintain them.

Barrier 4—Aging population and youth out-migration: Aging populations contribute to labor force shortages and increased healthcare demands, both of which strain rural economies. As noted in section 2, rural populations are, on average, older than their nonrural counterparts, with rural areas more likely to have a higher percentage of residents over 49 years of age. Younger generations are increasingly moving from rural to urban or suburban areas to pursue better educational, employment, or quality-of-life opportunities. This contributes to waning tax bases, labor force shortages, and declining school enrollments.

Barrier 5—Rural poverty and income inequality: In general, rural areas have higher poverty rates than their nonrural counterparts. Additionally, as noted in section 2, Michigan's rural counties have a median household income of about \$55,400, which is \$17,400 less than the state's overall median household income of \$72,800. This income gap, combined with limited access to services and economic opportunity, creates compounding challenges for rural residents and communities.

Together, these barriers paint a picture of rural communities that are resourceful and resilient but, in many cases, caught in a downward economic spiral they cannot overcome on their own, let alone focus on proactive investment in the natural resources, infrastructure, and human capital needed to address these challenges and become prosperous. The programs and investments described in sections 4 and 5 represent promising approaches to addressing these barriers, and the recommendations in section 7 build on those approaches to chart a path forward for rural Michigan.

Section 4:

Investments in Michigan's Rural Prosperity

PSC reviewed publicly available information (e.g., state agency websites, reports, legislative documents, articles, and other relevant sources) to identify programs and initiatives that address barriers to rural prosperity in Michigan. PSC also asked SMEs to identify programs and initiatives that have been particularly effective and/or impactful in advancing rural prosperity. **SMEs generally agreed that the challenges Michigan faces are not due to a lack of efforts to address them, and while many programs have been helpful, more investment is needed to achieve sustainable, long-term prosperity for the state's rural communities.** The identified programs and initiatives are summarized below, grouped by common themes. PSC did not analyze the programs for effectiveness or impact. This list is not intended to be a comprehensive inventory of all programs that have addressed rural issues in Michigan, but rather a summary of the most salient and impactful programs currently in place.

Protecting Working Lands and Developing Public Recreation Facilities

- Michigan's **Commercial Forest Program (CFP)** provides private landowners with tax benefits if they commit to retaining and managing their forestland for long-term timber production and providing access for foot-based public recreation. Landowners enrolled in the CFP pay reduced property taxes, and the State of Michigan makes an annual payment to the counties where the land is located to help compensate for lost local tax revenue (DNR n.d.a). The CFP was highlighted as an important resource for rural areas because of its significant role in ensuring the sustainability of the state's forest products industry and providing public recreation access. While the program successfully prevents forest fragmentation, it can unintentionally favor large-scale investors who benefit from significant tax breaks and timber profits at the expense of local tax revenue and the long-term economic independence of rural communities.
- The **Farmland and Open Space Preservation Program** provides a mechanism by which private landowners can enter into an agreement with the State of Michigan to protect farmland and open space for a minimum of ten years and, in return, become eligible for certain income tax benefits (MDARD n.d.a). In calendar year 2025, approximately \$75 million in farmland preservation tax credits were issued to participating landowners. The program currently protects more than 3.1 million acres of farmland (MDARD 2025).
- The **Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund (MNRTF)** funds the acquisition and development of public land and recreation facilities using revenues derived from state-owned oil, gas, and mineral resources. Eligible grant recipients include state and local governments, school districts, and recreation authorities (DNR n.d.c). The MNRTF is widely recognized as a cornerstone of Michigan's conservation funding system. Over its 48-year history, it has awarded nearly \$1.4 billion to state and local units of government for more than 3,000 projects in all 83 counties of the state (DNR 2026).

- The **Recreation Passport** is an annual pass that allows motorized vehicles access to state parks and recreation areas, state-managed boating access sites, and state forest campgrounds. Michigan drivers can voluntarily choose to purchase the passport when renewing their vehicle registration. Revenue from the sales of Recreation Passports is used to fund, among other things, grants to local governments for the development and renovation of public recreation facilities. Eligible grant recipients include local units of government and recreation authorities (DNR n.d.e). Since its inception in 2010, the Recreation Passport program has awarded \$22.3 million in grants (Foster 2025).
- The **Michigan Spark Grants** program has helped underresourced rural communities develop new parks and recreation areas. Over \$61 million in grant awards, ranging from \$100,000 to \$1 million, have been distributed to communities across the state. This program was created in 2022 using federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) dollars and will expire in 2026 (DNR n.d.d).

Bolstering Local Government Capacity and Providing Funding

- Michigan's **Office of Rural Prosperity**, housed within the Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity (LEO), provides rural communities with technical assistance, funding, and advocacy (LEO n.d.b). The ORP is widely regarded by SMEs as an important and effective resource for local rural governments.
- The ORP administers the **Rural Readiness Grant Program**, which provides rural communities with grants of up to \$50,000 to support collaborative planning and capacity building (LEO n.d.d). While some experts noted the benefits of \$50,000 grants for rural areas, others suggested that \$50,000 is insufficient to fund major improvements, such as replacing aging water, sewer, or road infrastructure.
- The **Redevelopment Ready Communities (RRC)** certification is a technical assistance initiative available at no cost to all Michigan communities. RRC helps participating communities plan and prepare for development, attract and retain new businesses and investors, and implement economic development best practices. To date, more than 290 communities across the state have participated in the program (MEDC n.d.b).
- **Revitalization and Placemaking Program (RAP)** grants use state income tax revenue to support revitalization projects in local communities. The RAP program was launched in 2022 using federal ARPA dollars and extended in 2023 with a state appropriation (MEDC n.d.c). To date, the RAP program has deployed more than \$183 million in grant funding for projects across the state (MEDC 2023).
- Michigan Economic Development Corporation's **Small Business Support Hubs (SBSH)** initiative was launched in 2023 using one-time federal ARPA dollars. Phase One of the initiative funded the development and operation of 27 Support Hubs across the state that support small businesses through services such as training, one-on-one coaching, consultations, workshops, and seminars (MEDC n.d.d). In the first two years of the program, the SBSH initiative served more than 8,800 businesses, supported the creation or retention of over 5,000 jobs, and was responsible for more than 2,000 new business starts. The SBSH initiative was originally set to expire at the end of 2026, but in response to the program's success, the Michigan legislature appropriated nearly \$11.3 million for the second phase of the initiative in early 2026 (Executive Office of the Governor 2026).

- **Michigan State University (MSU) Extension** programming was highlighted by SMEs as an effective support that has meaningfully advanced rural prosperity through programs such as Leading Rural Michigan, the First Impressions Tourism Assessment, Understanding Tourism for Michigan Communities, and the annual Connecting Entrepreneurial Communities Conference, which brings together small town leaders and decision makers from across the state to share ideas and learn best practices for growing small communities (LEO n.d.a; MSU Extension n.d.a, n.d.b, and n.d.c).
- **Rural Development Fund** grants utilize nonferrous metallic mineral extraction severance tax revenue to support economic and community development projects in all rural areas of the state, with preference given to mining-affected rural areas. To date, \$11.7 million in Rural Development Fund grants have been awarded to communities around the state (LEO n.d.c).
- The **Rural Leadership Fellowship Program** is a public-private partnership between InvestUP, Northern Michigan University (NMU), and the Michigan Economic

Development Corporation that connects NMU students with local leaders to plan and implement economic or community development projects in rural UP communities. Student fellows receive a 100 percent tuition and fee scholarship, in addition to a \$15,000 stipend for the duration of the fellowship, which is equivalent to one academic year. So far, the program has funded three student cohorts who have supported a total of eight projects (NMU n.d.).

- The **United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA's)** rural development programs provide low- or no-interest loans and grants to rural communities and utilities to support business programs, community facilities, single- and multifamily housing, and water and environmental projects. Examples of USDA rural development programs include the Community Facilities Direct Loan and Grant Program, the Rural Economic Development Loan and Grant Program, the Rural Business Development Grant Program, and the Rural Energy Savings Program (USDA n.d.a, n.d.b, n.d.c, and n.d.d). In 2025 alone, the USDA invested \$535.1 million in Michigan's rural communities across its various rural development programs (USDA 2026).

Training and Retaining Skilled Workforce

- The **Michigan Rural Enhanced Access to Careers in Healthcare (MiREACH)** program is a collaboration between LEO, the Michigan Center for Rural Health, Michigan Works! Northeast Consortium, Southeast Michigan Community Alliance Michigan Works!, UP Michigan Works!, and West Michigan Works!. MiREACH provides grant funds (about \$4,000 per participant, on average) to job seekers interested in pursuing careers in healthcare and behavioral health, such as nurses, medical assistants, social workers, behavioral health counselors, community health workers, and other occupations that provide patient-facing healthcare services to underrepresented groups and people in rural communities. The program also includes employment services, tuition assistance, and support in obtaining credentials. MiREACH is funded through the U.S. Department of Labor's H-1B Rural Healthcare Grant Program (Northwest Michigan Works! n.d.).
- The Michigan Department of Education (MDE) administers the **Michigan Consortium for Addressing Rural Education Expansion and Retention (MiCAREER)** program, which is intended to help prospective rural educators obtain teaching credentials and gain experience at little or no cost. Eligible participants include those who have either completed or nearly completed educator coursework and are living in rural communities; those who have successfully worked in rural communities under temporary credentials; and veterans seeking to expand their credentials. Five Michigan universities (Central Michigan University, Eastern Michigan University, MSU, NMU, and Saginaw Valley State University) participate in the program and deliver training to grant program participants. The program is funded through the MDE by a legislative appropriation (MiCAREER n.d.).

These programs represent a meaningful but insufficient response to the scale of challenges facing rural Michigan. They represent a number of tactical actions the state has taken over the years to address facets of the problem, but they do not constitute a coordinated approach to creating rural prosperity. While SMEs consistently acknowledged the value of these initiatives, they broadly agreed that current investments fall short of what is needed to achieve sustainable, long-term rural prosperity. Several themes emerged from those conversations:

- **Existing programs are often too small in scale** to address the magnitude of the infrastructure, housing, and natural resource management challenges facing rural communities.
- **Many programs are constrained by eligibility requirements** that exclude the smallest and most remote communities—those that often need support the most.
- **Several programs rely on temporary federal funding that is scheduled to expire**, creating uncertainty about the continuity of support for the communities that have come to depend on them. The Michigan Spark Grants program is an example of such a program.

These gaps in the current investment landscape informed the recommendations presented in section 7, which are designed to build on what is working while addressing what is not.



Section 5:

Approaches to Rural Prosperity in Other States

To understand how other states are approaching rural issues and working to create and sustain rural prosperity, PSC examined policies and programs in eight case study states: Colorado, Georgia, Indiana, Iowa, Minnesota, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. Each state was selected for inclusion in the analysis based on its identification—either through desktop research or by SMEs across multiple sectors—as a state that has taken actions to prioritize rural prosperity.¹

While each state has taken a distinct approach to advancing rural prosperity, six common strategies emerged across the case studies. **Although the economic stability of most rural areas is closely intertwined with and dependent on the use of natural resources, very few state initiatives directly focus on or prioritize the stewardship of those resources.** The key strategies, along with examples of state initiatives related to those strategies, are presented below.

Rural-Specific State-Level Leadership and Coordinated Planning

To address barriers related to limited local government capacity, several states are establishing dedicated leadership structures to elevate rural priorities, coordinate across agencies, and drive long-term strategies. These structures include state offices, gubernatorial commissions, and legislative task forces that identify barriers to and opportunities for rural prosperity and make policy and program recommendations that benefit rural communities. They typically engage a wide range of stakeholders across a range of interests and have been instrumental in shaping rural prosperity strategies in their states.

Beyond coordination, these entities play a central role in institutionalizing data collection, research, and long-range planning to inform decision-making and ensure that strategies are evidence-based. These efforts help states prioritize investments, measure outcomes, and adapt to changing rural conditions. Collectively, these entities provide a range of services for rural communities—including technical assistance, grant administration, rural data collection and dissemination, research, and policy development—and are crucial for advancing statewide rural strategies. The Empower Rural Iowa Initiative and the Wisconsin Governor’s Blue Ribbon Commission on Rural Prosperity are examples of task forces that have shaped statewide rural strategies. The Minnesota office of Long-Range Planning and the Center for Rural Pennsylvania are examples of state-coordinated rural data and research initiatives.

¹Profiles that detail key statistics, programs, and policies for each of the eight case study states are in appendix B.

Success Story: Wisconsin Governor's Blue Ribbon Commission on Rural Prosperity

Created in 2020 by Executive Order Number 65, Democratic Gov. Tony Evers's Blue Ribbon Commission on Rural Prosperity was established to gather public input on strategies for addressing challenges faced by residents of rural Wisconsin. When appointing members to the 12-member commission, the governor chose individuals who reflect Wisconsin's rural communities, including those who live and work in different regions of rural Wisconsin. In 2020, the commission hosted three virtual public engagement sessions that engaged more than 500 individuals, collected 45 written submissions from interested parties, and collectively attended 25 meetings with stakeholders (Aspen Institute 2020). The commission distilled stakeholder input into ten recommendations that serve as a roadmap for the Wisconsin Office of Rural Prosperity (Wisconsin ORP) and Wisconsin's rural areas (Aspen Institute 2020; Wisconsin ORP n.d.):

1. Create a place within the state government to support rural communities and Native Nations
2. Maintain the governor's commitment to rural prosperity and to making rural voices heard
3. Make the existing Wisconsin ORP programs more rural friendly through collaboration across different existing state departments
4. Distribute state and federal resources equitably to ensure rural and tribal communities have the same opportunities
5. Learn from other states
6. Update state laws that restrict communities' ability to innovate
7. Invest in University of Wisconsin Extension to serve as partners for rural and tribal communities
8. Adjust state business incentives to be inclusive of economic development in rural and tribal communities
9. Invest in broadband, childcare, housing, healthcare, career development, transportation, and other elements deemed critical to economic development strategy
10. Continue the work of the Blue Ribbon Commission to ensure rural voices are heard and identify more solutions for rural prosperity

Success Story: Center for Rural Pennsylvania

Created by the bipartisan 1987 Rural Pennsylvania Revitalization Act, the Center for Rural Pennsylvania was designed to support the prosperity of rural Pennsylvania communities. The center is a bipartisan legislative agency within the Pennsylvania General Assembly. It sponsors policy research, collects and tracks data, disseminates research results to the public, and hosts forums on rural issues (Center for Rural Pennsylvania n.d.a). The center is led by a director who reports to an 11-member board that includes legislators, leadership from the higher education system, the director of the Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development, and the governor's appointees from rural-based organizations. The center currently has six staff members supporting the director (Center for Rural Pennsylvania n.d.e).

Since 2024, the center has received \$1.25 million in annual general fund appropriations (Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Office of the Governor 2026). Each year, the center issues grants to faculty members at Pennsylvania State University, the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education universities, and the University of Pittsburgh's regional campuses for targeted research on topics set each year by the board of directors.

The center also maintains a database called the Center for Rural Pennsylvania Data Hub, which houses demographic data on rural Pennsylvania. The center's enabling legislation requires that this platform serve as a knowledge base on the status of rural communities. The database includes profiles at the county, municipal, and school district levels related to the following demographics (Center for Rural Pennsylvania n.d.b):

- Agriculture
- Economic development
- Local government capacity and fiscal stress indicators
- Transportation
- Sociodemographic data
- Healthcare and human services
- Environment and natural resources
- Education
- Local infrastructure conditions

Economic Development and Business Support

Strengthening local economies is a central pillar of strategies for rural prosperity. States are supporting business growth, entrepreneurship, and industry diversification through targeted financial incentives, technical assistance, and sector-specific programs. These efforts aim to create jobs, expand economic opportunities, and reduce reliance on a narrow range of industries. State programs leading this work include Minnesota's Department of Iron Range Resources and Rehabilitation, Indiana's Small Business Development Center, and Pennsylvania's Agricultural Innovation Grant Program.

Success Story: Minnesota's Department of Iron Range Resources and Rehabilitation

The Minnesota Department of Iron Range Resources and Rehabilitation (Minnesota IRRR) uses revenues from Minnesota's mining production tax to fund economic development and community infrastructure projects in the Taconite Assistance Area, a predominantly rural region in the northeastern part of the state that encompasses 13,000 square miles. The agency is funded primarily by a portion of the local taconite production tax paid by mining companies on each ton of iron ore pellets produced. Mining companies within the IRRR's service area pay the tax in lieu of property taxes (Minnesota Office of the Revisor of Statutes 2021). The agency provides loans, grants, and loan guarantees for businesses looking to relocate or expand in the region and also administers grants to local units of government and organizations working to promote workforce development and sustainable communities (e.g., nonprofits and educational institutions) (Minnesota IRRR 2026). The agency is led by a commissioner and is supported by about 40 full-time staff members (Minnesota IRRR n.d.). In FY 2025, the IRRR invested more than \$163 million in the region; however, it is worth noting that about half of that investment was financed by revenue bonds issued in 2024 (Minnesota IRRR 2025).

Flexible Funding and Financing Tools

States are using tax credits, grants, and innovative financing mechanisms to catalyze investment in rural communities. These tools are often designed to be flexible and responsive to local needs, enabling communities to obtain the up-front capital required to pursue a wide range of economic and infrastructure projects. For example, Georgia's HEART Hospital Program allows taxpayers to redirect their state income taxes to support rural hospitals and receive a tax credit for the amount they contribute. While this mechanism is used to support hospitals, a similar approach could be used to support natural resources. The Endow Iowa Tax Credit is a similar program that enables community foundation donors to receive a tax credit for a portion of their donations. The Wisconsin Investment Fund partners with venture capital funders to provide seed money to startup organizations in rural areas.

Success Story: Georgia HEART Hospital Program

In 2016, Republican Gov. Nathan Deal signed Senate Bill 258 into law, establishing the Georgia HEART Hospital Program. Since then, several bills have been enacted that have expanded and extended the program (Georgia HEART Hospital Program n.d.b). Most recently, in 2025, Republican Gov. Brian P. Kemp signed a bill that increased the program's cap to \$100 million annually and extended the program through December 31, 2029 (Georgia HEART Hospital Program n.d.a).

The program allows Georgia corporate and individual taxpayers to redirect their state income tax obligations to fund rural hospital organizations. In return, they receive a tax credit for 100 percent of the amount they contribute to the program. To date, the program has partnered with 51 rural hospital organizations (RHOs) around the state to distribute roughly \$500 million in funding (Georgia HEART Hospital Program n.d.a, n.d.c). Each participating RHO may receive up to \$2 million from corporate contributions and up to \$2 million from individual contributors. Contributors can select which RHO they would like to fund unless the RHO has reached its annual cap of \$4 million. Contribution limits vary depending on factors such as taxpayer classification, date, and available credits. In 2025, the Georgia HEART Hospital Program received approximately \$79.2 million in contributions from over 1,300 corporate and 3,689 individual contributors (Georgia HEART Hospital Program n.d.b).

Investments in Infrastructure and Connectivity

States are prioritizing investments in foundational infrastructure—including broadband, water systems, transportation, and development-ready sites—to enable economic growth and improve quality of life. These investments directly address barriers to rural prosperity associated with aging or inadequate infrastructure.

Because rural communities are more likely to lack internet access, especially in remote areas, states are working to expand broadband internet access to these places, as internet access is essential in today's society for connecting to employment, schools, services, and information. Minnesota's Border-to-Border Broadband Program is an example of a statewide program created to expand broadband access to communities lacking adequate service.

Reliable, up-to-date infrastructure, such as roads and water systems, is a crucial part of daily life; it is essential for meeting basic needs and supporting healthy, prosperous communities. Because many rural communities have aging infrastructure in need of updates but lack the financial capacity to make the necessary improvements, states are working to modernize infrastructure in rural communities by providing financial support through grants, loans, and loan guarantees. For example, North Carolina is supporting rural public infrastructure development and maintenance through two key grant programs: Utility Account grants and Rural Infrastructure Authority grants.

Finally, many rural communities have vacant land and buildings available for development; however, work is required to ensure these sites are ready for development. States are developing programs—such as Georgia’s Rural Site Development Initiative and North Carolina’s Rural ReadySites program—that provide grants to rural communities to help cover costs for site improvement, preparation, and due diligence.

Success Story: Georgia’s Rural Site Development Initiative

Established in 2024, the Georgia Rural Site Development Initiative is a grant program funded through the Georgia Department of Economic Development (GDEcD) and the Georgia Department of Community Affairs using state appropriations (\$20 million in 2024 and \$20 million in 2025) (GDEcD n.d.a). The program was created in response to feedback from the economic development community that Georgia was successfully attracting companies to locate in the state, but there were not enough physical sites ready for development (Wylly Harrison, pers. comm.). The Rural Site Development Initiative helps rural communities create development-ready sites by covering some of the costs associated with developing vacant land (GDEcD n.d.a).

Since 2025, over \$21 million has been committed to Rural Site Development Initiative grants (GDEcD 2026). The program is divided into two grant opportunities: site improvement grants and survey and due diligence grants (GDEcD n.d.a).

- **Site improvement grants** award up to \$2 million to cover land acquisition, site preparation, engineering, infrastructure development or relocation, and roadway specifications (GDEcD n.d.a).
- **Survey and due diligence grants** award up to \$250,000 for site surveys, studies, and easements in pursuit of Georgia Ready for Accelerated Development (GRAD) Program certification (GDEcD n.d.a). The GRAD certification vets industrial sites as prequalified for fast-tracked development by completing the due diligence phase early, before development is initiated (GDEcD n.d.b).

Quality of Life and Workforce Investments

Many rural areas are experiencing net out-migration, which poses a threat to local economies. Younger generations are increasingly moving from rural to suburban areas to pursue better educational, employment, and quality-of-life opportunities. This migration has resulted in declining tax bases, labor force shortages, and decreasing K–12 school enrollments in rural areas. To address these problems, states are investing in the conditions necessary to retain and attract residents, including access to healthcare, childcare, housing, and workforce opportunities. These investments address core barriers to rural prosperity—particularly youth out-migration and an aging population—and support long-term economic stability. For example, states are working to attract and retain residents by incentivizing people in certain professions to move to rural areas, assisting rural residents in gaining professional credentials, or simply making rural communities more desirable places to live by ensuring residents have access to essential services like healthcare. Growing Rural Opportunities for Well-Being (GROW), which will distribute \$600 million to support regional rural health initiatives, is an example of a program designed to improve quality of life by stabilizing healthcare access in rural communities across Indiana.

Success Story: GROW Rural Indiana

Funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Rural Health Transformation Program (RHTP), the GROW initiative is a collaborative framework that distributes funding to improve rural health throughout the state. The program is a new initiative administered by the Indiana Family and Social Services Administration and the Indiana Department of Health, with the first request for proposals having opened in March 2026. Funding will support regional rural health initiatives aimed at reducing the demand for Medicaid funds. Over the next five years, GROW Rural Indiana will distribute \$600 million in grant funding to rural-serving entities (e.g., rural hospitals, rural health clinics, local health departments, emergency services, etc.) for projects aligned with the federal RHTP funding categories, which include (State of Indiana 2026):

- Improving efficiency and sustainability to ensure access to rural providers is sustained
- Attracting and retaining a skilled rural health professional workforce
- Incentivizing innovative care
- Using innovative technologies to promote efficiency
- Supporting interventions that address prevention and the root cause of disease

Place-Based Development

States are leveraging rural communities' unique assets, including outdoor recreation, downtown districts, and cultural resources, to drive economic growth. To do this, states are working with rural communities to develop and implement marketing strategies that build sustainable tourism programs centered around natural resource assets. Colorado's Rural Technical Assistance Program and North Carolina's Creating Outdoor Recreation Economies program are examples of place-based development initiatives.

Success Story: Colorado's Rural Technical Assistance Program

The Rural Technical Assistance Program (RTAP), established in 2023, is a partnership involving the Colorado Outdoor Recreation Industry Office (OREC), the Colorado Rural Opportunity Office, Colorado State University (CSU) Extension, and the University of Colorado Boulder (CU Boulder). RTAP is led by OREC, which provides administrative support and coordinates program enrollment and guidance. The goal of RTAP is to "revitalize Colorado's rural economies by leveraging their local outdoor recreation opportunities." Participating communities receive free consulting services and technical assistance to facilitate the creation and implementation of a community action plan (CAP) centered on boosting outdoor recreation.

RTAP pairs graduate students from CU Boulder's Masters of the Environment graduate program with rural communities. The graduate students serve as consultants and work with their communities to develop a comprehensive CAP. Once the plan is finalized, CSU Extension works with communities over the next two years to implement the CAP's action items. To date, nine communities have participated in the program (OREC n.d.). Some tangible program results include the creation of the Trails and Open Space Advisory Board and a website update in the town of Keystone, the establishment of a network of outdoor gear libraries in Huerfano County, and the launch of a series of tours in the town of Beulah that showcase the community's unique history and outdoor recreation assets. Communities have also secured grant funding to support the implementation of CAP action items, many of which are currently in progress (Nunez 2026).

The strategies used by peer states offer both inspiration and a practical roadmap for Michigan. Several states have made meaningful progress on rural prosperity by doing what Michigan has not yet done at scale: establishing dedicated, well-funded leadership structures with the authority and resources to coordinate across agencies, deploying flexible financing tools that meet communities where they are, and treating natural resource stewardship as an economic strategy rather than a regulatory burden. Notably, even among states that have made the most progress, direct investment in natural resource management as a driver of rural prosperity remains rare. **This gap represents both a missed opportunity for peer states and a meaningful opening for Michigan to differentiate its approach.** The recommendations in section 7 draw directly on the most transferable lessons from these case studies, adapted to Michigan's unique assets, challenges, and policy environment.

Section 6: Public Sentiment

To better understand how Michiganders perceive the challenges and opportunities facing rural areas, MRG conducted a statewide survey of 1,021 registered voters in early 2026. **The findings reveal strong and consistent voter support for state-level prioritization of rural prosperity and a high value placed on natural resource stewardship.** For example, 87 percent of voters report they would be more likely to support a gubernatorial candidate who prioritizes these issues, a figure that holds across Republicans (86 percent), Democrats (90 percent), and independents (85 percent). The findings are summarized below (see appendix E for the full survey results).

A Bipartisan Issue with Broad Voter Support

Support for rural prosperity is strong and consistent across political affiliations and geographic regions.

- Nearly all voters (97 percent) believe protecting Michigan's natural resources should be a priority for state leaders, including 36 percent who say it should be a top priority.
- The vast majority of voters (84 percent) support increased state investment to protect natural resources and clean water, with opposition at just 1 percent.
- Nearly eight in ten voters (77 percent) support creating a new, dedicated state funding source for natural resources that contribute to rural prosperity, with 31 percent expressing a great deal of support. Only 15 percent oppose the idea, with independents most likely to be opposed (21 percent). This finding directly supports recommendation 5, which calls for the creation of a dedicated state funding source for natural resource management.

Voters Connect Natural Resources to Economic Health

Michiganders do not view natural resource protection and economic growth as competing priorities but as complementary and mutually reinforcing priorities.

- Nearly nine in ten voters (89 percent) agree that Michigan's natural resources are extremely important to the state's economy and are one of the state's greatest assets. Only 2 percent disagree. (See slide 22 in appendix E for how agreement breaks down across demographic and political views.)
- Nearly eight in ten voters (78 percent) believe that protecting natural resources strengthens the economy and keeps communities strong for future generations, rather than coming at the expense of economic growth. This view is consistent across party lines, with particularly strong agreement among rural voters (87 percent).
- More than three-quarters of voters (77 percent) agree that the prosperity of rural communities is closely connected to how well Michigan manages its natural resources.

Rural Voters Feel the State Is Not Keeping Up

Despite strong agreement on the value of natural resources, voters express significant concern about the direction of rural communities and whether the State is paying attention. These findings echo the barriers identified in section 2, particularly the limited capacity of state and local governments to meet the needs of rural communities.

- Only 14 percent of voters believe rural economic conditions are improving, while 36 percent believe they are worsening. Among rural residents, that figure rises to 40 percent.

- More than three-quarters of Michiganders (77 percent) agree that improving economic and long-term prosperity in rural communities is personally important to them, rising to 86 percent among rural residents.
- Only 42 percent of voters agree that the State understands the needs of rural communities, with 36 percent disagreeing and 21 percent neutral. Taken together, 57 percent of voters either do not believe that the State understands rural needs or are unsure. This finding points directly to the need for stronger state leadership and coordination, as outlined in recommendations 1 and 2.

What Voters Want Protected and Why

Voters see broad needs for greater state investment and protection across an array of natural resources, with distinct priorities emerging between urban and rural populations. These priorities are consistent with the investment gaps identified in sections 2 and 3 and inform the targeted recommendations in section 7.

- Voters identify the greatest need for protection in the Great Lakes (55 percent) and rivers, streams, and inland lakes (49 percent). Farmland (33 percent), parks and public lands (29 percent), wildlife (28 percent), and forests (26 percent) follow, each identified by at least one in four respondents.
- Rural voters are more likely than urban voters to prioritize protection for the Great Lakes (58 percent versus 52 percent), rivers, streams, and inland lakes (56 percent versus 44 percent), and farmland (38 percent versus 30 percent). Older voters (ages 55 and older) are more likely to prioritize the Great Lakes and inland waterways.

- When it comes to managing natural resources, urban and rural voters differ significantly. Rural voters place significantly greater importance on managing farmland (52 percent versus 36 percent among urban residents) and forests (52 percent versus 37 percent among urban residents), while urban residents place more importance on parks and trails (49 percent versus 37 percent among rural residents).
- Democrats place slightly more emphasis on protecting rivers, streams, and inland lakes, while Republicans place greater emphasis on protecting farmland.
- Voters primarily associate natural resources with outdoor recreation and tourism (61 percent), farming (58 percent), and fishing or hunting (58 percent). Younger voters (ages 18–34) are uniquely likely to associate resource use with energy production (61 percent), while rural residents are more likely to cite forestry, outdoor recreation, and fishing or hunting, and less likely to cite energy production.

The public sentiment survey results make it clear that the challenges documented in this report are not just abstract policy concerns but are felt acutely by Michigan voters across party lines, geographies, and demographics. **Voters recognize the value of natural resources, understand their connection to rural prosperity, and believe the State has not yet risen to meet the moment.** That assessment is consistent with PSC’s research findings, SME perspectives, and peer states’ experiences. It also points unambiguously to the need for the sustained, coordinated, and adequately funded state action that the recommendations in the following section are designed to provide.

Section 7:

Implementation Recommendations

Based on the findings presented in the previous sections and the research summaries provided in the appendices of this report, PSC offers four recommendations for actions the State of Michigan can take to boost rural prosperity while prioritizing the sustainable, long-term management of its natural resources.

1. **Establish a gubernatorial or legislative commission** to identify long-term funding solutions for natural resource management and the growing demands on working lands, parks, and natural areas.
2. **Modify the Office of Rural Prosperity's structure and increase its funding** so it can build capacity to support local rural communities and their governments and serve as a data clearinghouse for accurate, timely information about Michigan's natural resources and rural communities.
3. **Build and fund new a financial toolbox that delivers long-term, sustainable funding for conservation and rural development projects.** The toolbox would include the following tools: a newly established Michigan conservation and rural development innovation fund offering flexible co-investment capital for innovative conservation and rural development projects; a new dedicated state funding source for natural resource management and maintenance; low-interest loans and low-barrier grants designed specifically to help underresourced communities upgrade and maintain natural resource assets; and tax incentives crafted to encourage greater philanthropic and private investment in rural areas and sustainable natural resource management.
4. **Adopt a unified, state-level rural development strategy that integrates land use planning, economic development, and natural resource management** to help the state become less reactive and more focused on addressing long-term challenges.

Together, these recommendations chart a path to a future in which Michigan's rural communities thrive and the lands and waters that surround them are healthy and productive.



Conclusion

To make this future a reality, Michigan must take strategic actions to dismantle the barriers to rural prosperity and healthy natural resources identified in this report. These barriers are complex, but they are not insurmountable. Michigan has a long tradition of people working together to solve tough problems—and this one is no different. Time is of the essence to take action to ensure that no more rural residents feel further left behind and that Michigan’s natural resources are sustainably managed to continue powering its economy. As evidenced by MRG’s polling, Michigan voters clearly want greater state support and investment in rural issues and natural resources. With term limits guaranteeing a new governor in 2026, gubernatorial candidates have a timely opportunity to secure the support of Michigan’s rural communities by championing rural prosperity and natural resource issues, ultimately forging a path toward a more sustainable and prosperous future for all Michiganders and the lands, waters, and communities they love.

References

- Aspen Institute. 2021. *Rural Voices for Prosperity: A Report of the Governor's Blue Ribbon Commission on Rural Prosperity*. Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation.
<https://ruralwi.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Governors-Blue-Ribbon-Commission-Report.pdf>
- BEA (U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis). n.d. *Outdoor Recreation Economic Statistics: 2024—Michigan*. BEA. Accessed May 13, 2026.
<https://apps.bea.gov/regional/outdoor-recreation/pdf/Michigan2024.pdf>
- Center for Rural Pennsylvania. n.d.a. "About." Center for Rural Pennsylvania. Accessed May 6, 2026.
<https://www.rural.pa.gov/about>
- . n.d.b. "Center for Rural Pennsylvania Data Hub." Center for Rural Pennsylvania. Accessed May 6, 2026.
<https://center-for-rural-pennsylvania-data-hub-ruralpa.hub.arcgis.com/>
- . n.d.c. "Staff." Center for Rural Pennsylvania. Accessed May 6, 2026.
<https://www.rural.pa.gov/about-center/staff>
- Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Office of the Governor. 2026. *Governor Josh Shapiro Executive Budget 2026–2027*. Pennsylvania Office of the Budget.
<https://www.pa.gov/content/dam/copapwp-pagov/en/budget/documents/publications-and-reports/commonwealthbudget/2026-27-budget-documents/2026-27%20budget%20document.web.v.3.pdf>
- Cook, Bill. 2019. "Facing the Facts." Michigan State University Extension.
<https://www.canr.msu.edu/news/facing-the-facts>
- DNR (Michigan Department of Natural Resources). 2026. "50 Years and Counting: Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund's Golden Record of Elevating Outdoor Recreation, Conservation." DNR.
<https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/about/newsroom/releases/2026/03/03/50-years-and-counting-michigan-natural-resources-trust-fund>
- . n.d.a. "Commercial Forest Program." DNR. Accessed April 13, 2026.
<https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/managing-resources/forestry/private/cf>
- . n.d.b. "Forest Products Economy." DNR. Accessed April 23, 2026.
<https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/managing-resources/forestry/products/econ>
- . n.d.c. "Michigan Spark Grants." DNR. Accessed April 13, 2026.
<https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/buy-and-apply/grants/rec/sparkgrants>
- . n.d.d. "Natural Resources Trust Fund." DNR. Accessed April 13, 2026.
<https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/buy-and-apply/grants/rec/mnrft>
- . n.d.e. "Recreation Passport Grants." DNR. Accessed April 13, 2026.
<https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/buy-and-apply/grants/rec/rec-pp>
- Executive Office of the Governor. 2026. "Gov. Whitmer Announces Funding for Small Business Support Hubs." State of Michigan Office of the Governor.
<https://www.michigan.gov/whitmer/news/press-releases/2026/02/24/whitmer-announces-funding-for-small-business-support-hubs>
- Foster, Wells. 2025. "Michigan DNR Approves \$1.9 Million Grant for Local Parks." WILX, December 9.
<https://www.wilx.com/2025/12/09/michigan-dnr-approves-19-million-grant-local-parks/>
- GDEcD (Georgia Department of Economic Development). 2026. "Gov. Kemp Announces Third Round of Rural Site Development Grants." GDEcD.
<https://georgia.org/press-release/gov-kemp-announces-third-round-rural-site-development-grants>
- . n.d.a. "Georgia Ready for Accelerated Development (GRAD)." GDEcD. Accessed May 6, 2026.
<https://georgia.org/grad-certified-sites/application>
- . n.d.b. "Georgia Rural Site Development Program." GDEcD. Accessed May 6, 2026.
<https://georgia.org/georgia-rural-site-development-program>

- Georgia HEART Hospital Program. n.d.a. "About Georgia HEART." Georgia HEART Hospital Program. Accessed May 6, 2026.
<https://www.georgiaheart.org/about>
- . n.d.b. "Legislation." Georgia HEART Hospital Program. Accessed May 6, 2026.
<https://www.georgiaheart.org/about/page/legislation>
- . n.d.c. "Results." Georgia HEART Hospital Program. Accessed May 6, 2026.
<https://www.georgiaheart.org/results>
- LEO (Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity). n.d.a. "Leading Rural Michigan: Building Strong Rural Leaders to Strengthen Michigan's Future." LEO. Accessed April 13, 2026.
<https://www.michigan.gov/leo/bureaus-agencies/office-of-rural-development/rural-readiness-program/leading-rural-michigan>
- . n.d.b. "Office of Rural Prosperity." LEO. Accessed April 13, 2026.
<https://www.michigan.gov/leo/bureaus-agencies/office-of-rural-development>
- . n.d.c. "Rural Development Fund Grants." LEO. Accessed April 27, 2026.
<https://www.michigan.gov/leo/boards-comms-councils/rural-development-fund-board/rural-development-fund-grants>
- . n.d.d. "Rural Readiness Grant Program." LEO. Accessed April 13, 2026.
<https://www.michigan.gov/leo/bureaus-agencies/office-of-rural-development/rural-readiness-grant-program>
- MDARD (Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development). 2025. *Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development 2025 Annual Report*. MDARD.
<https://www.michigan.gov/mdard/-/media/Project/Websites/mdard/documents/annual-reports/2025/2025-MDARD-Annual-Report.pdf?rev=cac2f3c3f47e43bbb8b7bc808e6dcd7b&hash=4CF609439CB32CF91142CAE7BCCFFC9>
- Lupher, Eric W. 2018. Exploring Michigan's Urban/Rural Divide. Citizen's Research Council of Michigan. https://ippsr.msu.edu/sites/default/files/llp/presentations/lupher_12_3_18.pdf
- . n.d.a. "Farmland Preservation." MDARD. Accessed May 6, 2026.
<https://www.michigan.gov/mdard/environment/farmland>
- . n.d.b. "Michigan Agriculture Resources." MDARD. Accessed April 23, 2026.
<https://www.michigan.gov/mdard/about/michigan-agriculture-resources>
- MEDC (Michigan Economic Development Corporation). 2023. "99.2 Million in Statewide Placemaking Grants Support Vibrant Communities." MEDC.
<https://www.michiganbusiness.org/press-releases/2023/10/placemaking/>
- . n.d.a. "Agribusiness." MEDC. Accessed April 23, 2026.
<https://www.michiganbusiness.org/industries/agribusiness/>
- . n.d.b. "Redevelopment Ready Communities." MEDC. Accessed April 13, 2026.
<https://www.miplace.org/programs/redevelopment-ready-communities/>
- . n.d.c. "Revitalization and Placemaking (RAP) Program." MEDC. Accessed April 13, 2026.
<https://www.michiganbusiness.org/rap/>
- . n.d.d. "Small Business Support Hubs 1.0: Compliance." MEDC. Accessed April 27, 2026.
<https://www.michiganbusiness.org/services/small-business-support-hub/compliance/>
- MiCAREER. n.d. "Welcome to the Michigan Consortium for Addressing Rural Education Expansion and Retention (MiCAREER) Resource Hub!" MiCAREER. Accessed April 24, 2026.
<https://www.micareer.net/>
- Michigan's Mining Future Committee. 2021. *Michigan's Mining Future Committee Final Report*. Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy.
<https://www.michigan.gov/egle/-/media/Project/Websites/egle/Documents/Groups/MMFC/Report-2021-MMFC.pdf>
- Minnesota IRRR (Minnesota Department of Iron Range Resources and Rehabilitation). 2025. *Minnesota Department of Iron Range Resources and Rehabilitation Annual Report Fiscal Year 2025*. Minnesota IRRR.
https://mn.gov/irrrb/assets/2025%20Annual%20Report%20tagged_tcm1047-739094.pdf
- . 2026. *Taconite Assistance Area Resource Guide*. Minnesota IRRR.
https://mn.gov/irrrb/assets/2026%20Resource%20Guide%20tagged_tcm1047-739095.pdf

- . n.d. "Staff Directory." Minnesota IRRR. Accessed May 6, 2026.
<https://mn.gov/irrrb/about-us/who-we-are/staff-directory.jsp>
- Minnesota Office of the Revisor of Statutes. 2021. "2025 Minnesota Statutes: 298.24 Tax on Taconite and Iron Sulphides." Minnesota Legislature.
<https://www.revisor.mn.gov/statutes/2025/cite/298.24>
- MRG (Marketing Resource Group). 2026. *Nature Conservancy Survey Final Report: March 2026*. MRG.
- MSU Extension. n.d.a. "Connecting Entrepreneurial Communities." Michigan State University. Accessed April 13, 2026.
<https://www.canr.msu.edu/cec/index>
- . n.d.b. "First Impressions Tourism Assessment." Michigan State University. Accessed April 13, 2026.
https://www.canr.msu.edu/tourism_first_impressions/
- . n.d.c. "Understanding Tourism for Michigan Communities." Michigan State University. Accessed April 13, 2026.
<https://www.canr.msu.edu/tourism/programs/understanding-tourism-for-michigan-communities>
- NMU (Northern Michigan University). n.d. "Rural Leadership Fellowship Program." NMU. Accessed April 13, 2026.
<https://nmu.edu/business-engagement/rural-fellowship>
- Northwest Michigan Works! n.d. "MiREACH." Northwest Michigan Works! Accessed April 24, 2026.
<https://www.nwmiworks.org/additional/mireach.html>
- Nunez, Matt. 2026. "RTAP Implementation Background Research Spreadsheet." OREC. Unpublished Data.
- OREC (Colorado Outdoor Recreation Industry Office). n.d. "OREC Rural Technical Assistance Program." OREC. Accessed May 6, 2026.
<https://oedit.colorado.gov/about/oedit-divisions/colorado-outdoor-recreation-industry-office/orrec-rural-technical-assistance>
- ORP (Michigan Office of Rural Prosperity). 2024. *Michigan's Roadmap to Rural Prosperity*. ORP.
https://www.michigan.gov/leo/-/media/Project/Websites/leo/Documents/ord/Michigan-Roadmap-to-Rural-Prosperity_Report-FINAL.pdf?rev=6b56495a03584368ba09bb6e9ad0497d
- Seals, Colin. 2023. "Unearthing Michigan's Critical Minerals Potential." Public Sector Consultants.
<https://www.michiganenergyproviders.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Fri-1030-AM-CSeals-Unearthing-Michigans-Critical-Minerals-Potential-Final.pdf>
- State of Indiana. 2026. "Regional Grants." State of Indiana.
<https://www.in.gov/grow-rural-health/regional-grants/>
- U.S. Census Bureau. 2023. "2020 TIGER/Line Shapefiles." U.S. Census Bureau.
<https://www.census.gov/geographies/mapping-files/2020/geo/tiger-line-file.html>
- . 2024. "Urban and Rural." U.S. Census Bureau.
<https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/geography/guidance/geo-areas/urban-rural.html>
- . n.d. "QuickFacts: Michigan." U.S. Census Bureau. Accessed April 24, 2026.
<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/MI/INC110224>
- USDA (United States Department of Agriculture). 2026. "Rural Investments by State/County." USDA.
<https://www.rd.usda.gov/rural-data-gateway/rural-investments/by-county>
- . n.d.a. "Community Facilities Direct Loan and Grant Program." USDA. Accessed April 13, 2026.
<https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/community-facilities/community-facilities-direct-loan-grant-program>
- . n.d.b. "Rural Business Development Grants." USDA. Accessed April 13, 2026.
<https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/business-programs/rural-business-development-grants>
- . n.d.c. "Rural Economic Development Loan and Grant Program in Michigan." USDA. Accessed April 13, 2026.
<https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/business-programs/rural-economic-development-loan-grant-programs-7>
- . n.d.d. "Rural Energy Savings Program." USDA. Accessed April 13, 2026.
<https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/electric-programs/rural-energy-savings-program>
- USDA ERS (Economic Research Service). 2025. "Atlas of Rural and Small-Town America—Download the Data." USDA ERS.
<https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/atlas-of-rural-and-small-town-america/download-the-data>
- . 2026. "Rural Classifications—What is Rural?" USDA ERS.
<https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/rural-economy-population/rural-classifications/what-is-rural>

Appendix A

TNC's Vision for Michigan's Rural Prosperity

Subject Matter Experts Interview Summary

Introduction

On behalf of The Nature Conservancy, Public Sector Consultants engaged subject matter experts from a variety of industries to gather their views on the most pressing issues and opportunities for rural communities in Michigan, the barriers to achieving rural prosperity, and strategies for addressing those barriers. Engagement took place from December 2025 to February 2026 through 30-minute virtual interviews with 16 participants. Thirty percent of respondents represented economic and community development organizations, 19 percent represented the agricultural and forestry industries, 19 percent represented regional planning organizations (RPOs) or local governments, 13 percent represented academic and research backgrounds, 13 percent represented funding organizations, and the remaining 6 percent represented the tourism industry. The list of organizations that participated in interviews is in Appendix A of this report, and the interview questions are in Appendix B.

Key Findings

- **Natural resources underpin rural economies across many sectors** (e.g., agriculture, energy production, forestry, outdoor recreation, manufacturing, and tourism) and serve as both an economic driver and a recruitment asset for rural communities, though for some sectors they are seen as a value-add rather than a primary driver.
- **Interviewees characterized rural prosperity as location-specific and multidimensional**, encompassing a healthy and sustainably managed natural resource base, economic opportunity, social connection, cultural identity, and community agency to influence decision making. Together, these factors result in communities where people can choose to live, work, and play.
- **State programs that provide rural communities with grant funding and technical assistance are viewed as valuable and impactful.** However, interviewees noted that current funding levels, reimbursement structures, and match requirements often fall short of addressing the large-scale infrastructure and development needs of rural communities.
- **Infrastructure development and maintenance in rural communities (e.g., bridges, broadband, recreational facilities, and roads) are fragmented** and often depend on local clubs and their volunteers, local investment, and the ability to access resources.
- **An aging population, youth out-migration, income inequality, rural poverty, a lack of affordable housing, and limited local government funding and capacity emerged as some of the most significant barriers to rural prosperity.** States and regions recognized for their success in prioritizing rural prosperity have implemented programs that attempt to address these issues.
- **Michigan lacks a unified, state-level resource management strategy;** as a result, land use planning, economic development, and natural resource management are often reactive and piecemeal, depending on factors such as region, community involvement, and access to resources.
- **Innovative programs and funding approaches in states such as Colorado, Georgia, Indiana, Iowa, Minnesota, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin have successfully aligned natural resources management, long-term planning, and tourism with rural development.** Summaries of rural prosperity initiatives implemented in these states are included elsewhere in this report, and there may be opportunities to replicate them in Michigan with similar results.

Summary by Interview Question

Rural Economic Drivers and Dependency on Natural Resources

While there was nuanced debate regarding whether natural resources act as a primary economic engine or a secondary value-add, there was broad agreement that they constitute a foundational asset essential to rural Michigan's identity and quality of life. Participants across all sectors characterized the state's land and water as the nonnegotiable base upon which residents build their livelihoods, attract talent, and maintain a sense of community agency. In particular, access to freshwater was cited as a significant tourism and recruitment asset,

with some respondents noting that Michigan's abundant freshwater resources are comparable to coastal assets on the oceans and represent an underutilized opportunity to better market rural destinations.

Interviewees also identified human capital and talent, businesses, and physical infrastructure (e.g., bridges, broadband, parks, roads, trails, and utilities) as essential components for prosperous rural economies. The presence of a skilled workforce to provide labor; a diverse array of businesses to provide jobs, produce goods and services, and generate tax revenue; and well-maintained physical infrastructure all support a healthy rural economy.

“Natural resources give people the room to breathe. There is space to live.”

– Leader in Regional Economic Development

Outdoor Recreation Activities and Recreational Infrastructure

Interviewees highlighted a variety of outdoor recreation activities that are popular in Michigan's rural areas, including boating, hunting, fishing, using trails (both nonmotorized and motorized), and visiting historical sites (e.g., copper mines). Across the state, the use of parks and trails has increased tremendously since the COVID-19 pandemic, and land managers are struggling to keep up with routine maintenance and necessary upgrades. Recreational activities support rural economies both directly and indirectly. Even if businesses are not dependent on outdoor recreation, many businesses operating in rural areas are affected by seasonality related to outdoor recreation.

Respondents suggested that the development and maintenance of outdoor recreation infrastructure are piecemeal and often depend on local clubs and their volunteers, local investment, and access to resources.

Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR) capacity is limited, so many state-managed parks and trails depend on local volunteers and private funding for ongoing maintenance and improvements. Recreational activities that collect user fees (e.g., snowmobiling and off-road vehicle riding) tend to have better-maintained facilities because there are dedicated funding mechanisms to support those uses.

Local government capacity and public safety emerged as two of the most significant challenges related to maintaining and providing outdoor recreation infrastructure in rural areas. During peak summer months, increased visitor usage places additional strain on land managers and local governments responsible for trail and park maintenance, emergency response, and public safety, often without sufficient staffing or resources. Limited cell phone service in remote areas is also a significant safety concern, especially for visitors requiring emergency assistance.

Finally, respondents noted that in rural areas, the recovery and maintenance of public lands following natural disasters can be slow or incomplete due to capacity constraints. For example, the 2018 Father's Day flood in Houghton County was a natural disaster that caused significant damage, and trail systems have yet to

be fully restored (Jackson 2023). An additional concern articulated by interviewees is the continuity of public access, particularly where trails cross or abut private land; loss of access could negatively impact the local outdoor recreation economy.

“There isn’t enough appreciation for how important public spaces and four-season outdoor recreation [activities] are to local economies. People seem to take them for granted.”

– Outdoor Recreation Professional

Characterizations of Rural Prosperity

Across subject matter expert groups, prosperous rural communities were described as places where people can choose to successfully live, work, and play. Economic stability and economic opportunity emerged as the most essential components of rural prosperity. Rural areas are prosperous when they offer a diverse and sustainable economy that provides family-sustaining wages and foundational infrastructure such as housing, transportation, and broadband. Interviewees were also clear that while necessary, economic opportunity and foundational infrastructure alone do not create a desirable quality of life. They highlighted a healthy and sustainably managed natural resource base, outdoor recreation infrastructure (e.g., parks and trails), social capital (e.g., community-led initiatives, formal and informal support networks, and the presence of third places¹), and community culture (e.g., vibrant and historic downtowns and community events) as important components of rural prosperity.

Successful rural places have an “identity,” an established sense of place throughout the community. Respondents noted the importance of placemaking in maintaining that identity and advancing rural prosperity. When done correctly, placemaking efforts engage local residents who understand the unique characteristics of their community and provide a path for those community members to exercise collective agency over decisions shaping their community's future. Interviewees also articulated the importance of an asset-based approach to community development—one that builds upon the community's identity, strengths, and natural amenities. A common theme shared across respondents is that prosperity-building efforts are most successful when communities have both healthy physical and social infrastructure and the willingness to change. Interviewees also asserted that community members who participate in local government and volunteer are hallmarks of a prosperous community.

“When I think of the term rural prosperity, I think of places with strong entrepreneurial ecosystems [and] vibrant and historical downtowns—places where people want to live, work, play, and return to.”

– Tourism Professional

¹ See Butler and Diaz 2016 for commentary on third places.

Representative Communities

When asked to share examples of Michigan communities that embody rural prosperity, respondents described areas with good-paying jobs, economic opportunities, and essential infrastructure such as housing, transportation, and broadband. They also talked about places with ready access to community spaces and resources (e.g., parks and trails, bars and restaurants, child care providers, grocery stores, healthcare facilities, libraries, schools, and community recreation centers). It is important to note that these communities are not just small cities but are economic and social hubs within larger regions of farms and forests and that it is the regional context, the environment, that makes them “rural.”

When asked to identify specific places in Michigan that embody aspects of rural prosperity, interviewees mentioned the following:

- Alpena
- Baraga
- Benton Harbor
- Boyne City
- Cheboygan
- Gaylord
- Grayling
- Harrisville
- Houghton
- Ionia
- Ironwood
- Lapeer
- Lexington
- Marquette
- Millington
- Onaway
- Port Austin
- Reed City
- Roger City
- South Haven
- Tawas
- Thompsonville
- Wayland
- West Branch

Pressing Issues or Challenges Hindering Rural Prosperity

Participants identified several major barriers or challenges hindering rural prosperity, including an aging population; aging water and sewer systems; housing shortages; insufficient investment in natural resource management; lack of affordable, high-quality broadband; lack of funding for local rural governments; limited local government capacity; rural poverty and income inequality; underinvestment in transit and air service; and youth out-migration.

- **Aging population.** Michigan’s rural populations are, on average, older than the state’s nonrural populations, a trend expected to persist. An aging population contributes to labor force shortages and increased healthcare demands, both of which strain rural economies.
- **Aging water and sewer systems.** Reliable, up-to-date water infrastructure is a crucial part of daily life; it is essential for meeting basic needs and supporting healthy, prosperous communities. Many of Michigan’s

rural communities have aging water and sewer systems in need of updates but lack the financial capacity to make the necessary investments. In addition, many rural residents use wells and septic systems and lack the resources to properly maintain them.

- **Housing shortages.** Long-standing underinvestment in housing, particularly in rural areas, and the perception of housing as an individual asset have contributed to an aging and deteriorated rural housing stock that is no longer financially feasible to rehabilitate or invest in. Additionally, interest rates and property taxes have made it difficult for older people to move from their homes and downsize, leading to limited turnover in the market for incoming families, especially in the Upper Peninsula (UP).
- **Insufficient investment in natural resource management.** Michigan’s current natural resources funding model, which depends heavily on user fees, is insufficient to meet growing demands in state parks and recreation facilities, many of which are in rural areas. State underinvestment in natural resource management has also resulted in a decades-long maintenance backlog in state-managed lands and

the drastic reduction or elimination of systems and staff to share that management expertise with private landowners. Additional investment is needed to ensure that state agencies are able to conduct routine maintenance and make necessary upgrades to state parks and recreation facilities, and to assist residents and communities in caring for all of Michigan's natural resources.

- **Lack of affordable, high-quality broadband.**

Despite wide recognition that broadband is critical infrastructure and state efforts to expand high-speed internet accessibility, many of Michigan's rural residents still lack access to affordable high-speed internet. This has resulted in a "digital divide" between rural and urban areas, and many rural residents are limited in their ability to use the internet for work, school, services, and connecting with friends and family (Junod and Scally 2025). Interviewees noted that while broadband funding has increased at both the state and federal levels in recent years, and current programs are helping, more investment is needed.

- **Lack of funding for local rural governments.** Many rural governments are fiscally constrained, which limits their ability to pursue funding and technical assistance opportunities that require up-front capital. This issue is compounded by the fact that funding approaches are commonly based on population density, which disadvantages sparsely populated areas and results in more funding being distributed to urban areas than to rural areas. Philanthropic investment in rural communities is also limited compared to urban areas.

- **Local government capacity.** The limited capacities of local governments and the remote nature of some rural communities can hinder their access to information and resources, such as technical assistance and funding. Many local governments are understaffed, with one person handling the majority of community responsibilities. This creates a vicious cycle in which the lack of professional staff, such as city managers

or controllers, prevents communities from having the capacity to even apply for the technical assistance and funding they desperately need. Remote locations can also affect the ability of local government officials to network and access state officials, and the small populations of these areas often limit state officials' willingness to spend time there.

- **Rural poverty and income inequality.** In general, rural areas have higher rates of poverty and income inequality than nonrural areas. Limited opportunities for good-paying jobs and inadequate access to transportation, reliable internet, healthcare, and high-quality education are key factors highlighted by subject matter experts as contributing to these issues.
- **Underinvestment in transit and air services.** Transportation is an essential component of community prosperity. Public transportation, specifically, can help create low-barrier access to employment opportunities and necessities such as food and medical care. As a result of historic and persistent underinvestment in public transit in Michigan's rural areas, rural communities have limited—and in many cases, nonexistent—public transportation networks. Additionally, small rural airports are associated with fewer destination options, higher costs, and less frequent flights than larger urban airports.
- **Youth out-migration.** Younger generations are increasingly moving from rural areas to urban or suburban areas to pursue better educational, employment, or quality-of-life opportunities. This migration has resulted in waning tax bases, labor force shortages, and decreasing K-12 school enrollments in rural areas. In-migration to rural areas is essential to combat this trend and advance rural prosperity, and it depends on increased support and investment. Young adults are more likely to stay in a rural area if they have positive experiences in the community, as well as opportunities for jobs and career growth.

“The environment is the reason people move to rural areas.”

– Rural Sociologist

Michigan Programs and Initiatives Addressing Barriers

State-Led Initiatives

When asked if there are examples of state programs or initiatives in Michigan that have helped address barriers to rural prosperity, respondents noted the following:

- **Michigan's Office of Rural Prosperity (ORP)**, housed within the Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity (LEO), provides rural communities with technical assistance, funding, and advocacy (LEO n.d.b). The ORP administers the **Rural Readiness Grant Program**, which provides rural communities with grants of up to \$50,000 to support collaborative planning and capacity building (LEO n.d.c). While some experts noted the benefits of \$50,000 grants for rural areas, others suggested that \$50,000 is insufficient to fund major improvements, such as replacing aging water, sewer, or road infrastructure.
- The Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (MDARD) administers two programs that interviewees praised as beneficial for advancing rural prosperity.
 - **The Farmland and Open Space Preservation Program** provides a mechanism by which private landowners can enter into an agreement with the State of Michigan to protect farmland and open space for a minimum of ten years, and in return, become eligible for certain income tax benefits (MDARD n.d.a).
 - **Rural Development Fund grants** utilize nonferrous metallic mineral extraction severance tax revenue to support economic and community development projects in mining-affected rural areas (MDARD n.d.b). One respondent suggested that the Rural Development Fund could be expanded or leveraged more broadly to support increased infrastructure, community development, and capacity-building efforts in rural communities statewide
- The DNR administers several programs that interviewees highlighted as important funding sources benefiting Michigan's rural communities by helping preserve, acquire, and develop public recreation facilities.
 - **Michigan's Commercial Forest Program (CFP)** provides private landowners with tax benefits if they commit to retaining and managing their forestland for long-term timber production and providing access for foot-based public recreation. Landowners enrolled in the CFP pay reduced property taxes, and the State of Michigan makes an annual payment to the counties where the land is located to help compensate for lost local tax revenue (DNR n.d.a). The CFP was highlighted as an important resource for rural areas because of its significant role in ensuring the sustainability of the state's forest products industry and providing public recreation access.
 - **Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund (MNRTF) grants** fund the acquisition and development of public land and recreation facilities using revenues derived from state-owned oil, gas, and minerals. Eligible grant recipients include state and local governments, school districts, and recreation authorities (DNR n.d.b).
 - **Michigan Recreation Passport grants** provide funding to local governments for the development and renovation of public recreation facilities using a portion of the proceeds from Recreation Passport sales. Eligible grant recipients include local units of government and recreation authorities (DNR n.d.d).
 - The **Michigan Spark Grants** program was highlighted by interviewees as an especially effective DNR-administered grant program for helping underresourced rural communities develop new parks and recreation areas. Of note, this program was created in 2022 using federal American Rescue Plan Act dollars and will expire in 2026 (DNR n.d.c).

- The **Michigan Economic Development Corporation (MEDC)** was consistently cited by interviewees as an important resource for rural communities seeking to pursue economic development opportunities. However, participants also noted that a major limitation of MEDC programs is that they are often constrained by population size or the presence of a downtown, thereby excluding many small, remote rural communities without downtowns. Despite these limitations, several programs administered or supported by the MEDC were noted as transformative for rural communities.
- The **Rural Leadership Fellowship Program** is a public-private partnership between InvestUP, Northern Michigan University (NMU), and the MEDC that connects NMU students with local leaders to plan and implement an economic or community development project in a rural UP community (Northern Michigan University n.d.).
- The **Redevelopment Ready Communities (RRC) Certification** is a technical assistance initiative available at no cost to Michigan communities. RRC helps participating communities plan and prepare for development, attract and retain new businesses and investors, and implement economic development best practices (MEDC n.d.a).
- **Revitalization and Placemaking Program** grants use state income tax revenue to support revitalization projects in local communities (MEDC n.d.b).
- The Michigan State Housing Development Authority (MSHDA) works with local, regional, and statewide partners to expand access to safe and affordable housing for Michigan residents. Interviewees highlighted **MSHDA's Statewide Housing Plan**, developed in 2022, because the plan's regional focus has enabled areas to implement it based on the unique needs and priorities of local communities (MSHDA n.d.).

Non-State-Led Initiatives

Interviewees also noted several other initiatives that are not state led but have benefited Michigan's rural areas.

- **Build U.P.** is a long-term revolving loan fund launched by InvestUP in 2023 to address the lack of housing in the UP by providing low-interest loans to housing developers. In 2022, the Michigan Legislature appropriated \$15 million to establish the fund (InvestUP 2023).
- **Michigan State University (MSU) Extension** programming was highlighted as an effective support that has meaningfully advanced rural prosperity through programs such as Leading Rural Michigan, the First Impressions Tourism Assessment, Understanding Tourism for Michigan Communities, and the annual Connecting Entrepreneurial Communities Conference, which brings together small town leaders and decision makers from across the state to share ideas and learn best practices for growing small communities (LEO n.d.a; MSU Extension n.d.a, n.d.b, and n.d.c).
- The **United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)** provides low- or no-interest loans and grants to rural communities and utilities to support infrastructure and business development through programs such as the Community Facilities Direct Loan and Grant Program, the Rural Economic Development Loan and Grant Program, the Rural Business Development Grant Program, and the Rural Energy Savings Program (USDA n.d.a, n.d.b, n.d.c, and n.d.d).

State of Michigan Partnerships with Rural Local Governments

A common observation among subject matter experts interviewed is that communication channels and collaboration between state government agencies and local governments (particularly in the UP) could be strengthened. UP residents often feel excluded from conversations because state officials are either unwilling or unable to travel to the UP. Similarly, UP residents are often unable to travel to the Lower Peninsula for training opportunities and other convenings, as limited local capacity makes it difficult for them to be away from the office for extended periods. This challenge is compounded by a lack of travel budgets and the reality that many rural leaders occupy multiple roles, and their absence can stall essential community operations.

Some respondents suggested that the State of Michigan could better support rural prosperity by providing more boots-on-the-ground, in-person support from state officials and designated representatives. This could also be accomplished by moving to a more decentralized model that entrusts increased responsibilities and resources to RPOs and nongovernmental organizations such as MSU Extension. These entities have professional capabilities and resources and, in some cases, may be better equipped to support emerging needs and opportunities in rural areas than state agencies.

Other respondents recommended further state investment in entrepreneurship and innovation in rural areas. This could be done by supporting and scaling innovation at higher education institutions in rural areas, as well as by better supporting work-based learning and postgraduation incentives.

“If you create jobs, you reduce rural poverty.”

– Leader in Economic Development

Funding

Participants highlighted several programs that currently provide financial support to rural areas, as described above, though many noted their limitations. Concerns surfaced about structural barriers within existing funding models. Several interviewees asserted that approaches based primarily on population density disadvantage sparsely populated regions (e.g., many areas in the UP), despite high levels of seasonal tourism, recreational use, and service demand. Others highlighted challenges posed by the high proportion of state and federal land in rural Michigan, which limits local property tax revenue and, in turn, constrains local investment capacity. Participants further noted that philanthropic investment in rural communities remains limited compared to urban areas, leaving few alternative sources of flexible capital to fill funding gaps.

Interviewees also noted that while grants can be extremely impactful for rural communities, grants also have limitations. Grants are often difficult for rural governments to obtain because they lack the up-front capital, technical expertise, or staff capacity needed

to successfully apply for and comply with funding requirements. In particular, match requirements and reimbursement structures make it difficult for fiscally constrained rural communities to access grant funds. Enabling communities to access low- or no-interest loans that provide the initial capital needed to secure grants is one potential solution to the barriers mentioned by an interviewee.

Respondents provided several suggestions to increase funding to support rural prosperity, including:

- Add or increase recreational user fees (e.g., create a nonmotorized trail pass or forage tag or increase hunting and fishing license fees) to support natural resources management and conservation
- Charge businesses a fee when they require rezoning for development reasons
- Divert a portion of state sales taxes to fund natural resources management and/or support local governments
- Implement and/or increase park entry fees

- Leverage sports betting fee revenue to develop a new funding mechanism to support rural areas
- Modify the MNRTF allocation formula so the fund can be used to provide increased funding to rural governments
- Modify the Recreation Passport program so it can capture more dollars (e.g., by switching to an opt-out model or increasing fee amounts), and use the additional revenue to fund projects in rural areas
- Replicate the Endow Iowa Tax Credit, which provides tax credits to encourage residents to donate to community foundations
- Replicate Minnesota's mining production tax, which, among other things, funds economic development and community infrastructure projects in rural areas of the state (Johnson and Kaldahl 2025)
- Replicate the Texas Event Trust Funds program, which helps Texas communities pay for costs related to preparing for or conducting large special events, like the Super Bowl (Texas Economic Development and Tourism Office n.d.)
- Use short-term rental taxes (e.g., for Airbnbs) to generate additional revenue for the local community that is being visited

“If we reframe how we fund communities, we would see a lot more progress and faster.”

– Economic Development Professional

State Examples

Participants pointed to several states that have implemented successful initiatives and funding approaches to support rural areas.

- **Colorado** has implemented a model in which rural development is managed at the state level, with funding then directed to small rural communities to support economic development and asset management.
- **Ohio** has a strong focus on innovation and entrepreneurship, as evidenced by its provision of early-stage grants for startups. Ohio also provides incentives for small businesses to operate and grow in rural areas.
- **Georgia** has been praised for its successes in funding rural economic development and essential services, in addition to having a strong regional focus.
- **Minnesota** created the Long-Range Planning Team, which has been praised for its focus on addressing long-term structural challenges rather than relying on ad hoc investments. Minnesota's mining tax, mentioned above, has also provided a significant source of funding for rural economic and community development.
- **Indiana** is well known for its business-friendly environment. Indiana also has an Office of Community and Rural Affairs.
- **Iowa** is a predominantly rural state known for recognizing and embracing its rural identity. Iowa has implemented policies focused on increasing rural communities' access to resources and support, such as the Endow Iowa Tax Credit.
- **North Carolina** has made strategic investments in rural areas linked to natural resource assets and outdoor recreation.
- **Pennsylvania** has effectively linked trail use and outdoor recreation investments to broader economic development outcomes in rural areas.
- **Wisconsin** began making significant investments in rural communities roughly two decades ago, particularly through its Department of Natural Resources and its robust university extension system. The state continues to focus on rural prosperity and is also known for providing strong support to small businesses. Several respondents noted visible differences in rural conditions when crossing from Michigan into Wisconsin.

Final Thoughts

In the final question, interviewees were asked if there was anything else they would like to share. Respondents primarily shared final thoughts on how to effect change to overcome barriers to rural prosperity and what might be required to achieve it. For example, several respondents suggested that securing a new funding mechanism to support rural areas would require an educational campaign in addition to broad collaboration and support across a variety of interests. Others reiterated the need for better communication and outreach between state and local officials so the state has a better understanding of current issues and opportunities in rural areas.

References

- Butler, Stuart M. and Carmen Diaz. 2016. "'Third places' as community builders." The Brookings Institution, September 14. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/third-places-as-community-builders/>
- DNR (Michigan Department of Natural Resources). n.d.a. "Commercial Forest Program." Michigan Department of Natural Resources. Accessed March 20, 2026. <https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/managing-resources/forestry/private/cf>
- . n.d.b. "Michigan Spark Grants." Michigan Department of Natural Resources. Accessed March 11, 2026. <https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/buy-and-apply/grants/rec/sparkgrants>
- . n.d.c. "Natural Resources Trust Fund." Michigan Department of Natural Resources. Accessed March 20, 2026. <https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/buy-and-apply/grants/rec/mnrtrf>
- . n.d.d. "Recreation Passport Grants." Michigan Department of Natural Resources. Accessed March 20, 2026. <https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/buy-and-apply/grants/rec/rec-pp>
- InvestUP. 2023. "InvestUP Announces Build U.P., a Housing Fund to Help Fast-Track High Impact Shovel-Ready Housing Projects." InvestUP. <https://www.investupmi.com/index.php/building-the-u-p/>
- Jackson, Colin. 2023. "'A Thousand-Year Storm': Houghton County, Meteorologists Look Back on Father's Day Flood 5 Years Later." TV6, June 21. <https://www.uppermichiganssource.com/2023/06/21/thousand-year-storm-houghton-county-meteorologists-look-back-fathers-day-flood-5-years-later/>
- Johnson, Kyre and T. Kaldahl. 2025. "IRRR Turns Mining Taxes into Grants." Northern News Now, July 11. <https://www.northernnewsnow.com/2025/07/11/irrr-turns-mining-taxes-into-grants/>
- Junod, Anne. N. and Corianne Payton Scally. 2025. Expanding Digital Opportunity in Rural Communities. Urban Institute. https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/additional-materials/Expanding_Digital_Opportunity_in_Rural_Communities_.pdf
- LEO (Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity). n.d.a. "Leading Rural Michigan: Building Strong Rural Leaders to Strengthen Michigan's Future." Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity. Accessed March 11, 2026. <https://www.michigan.gov/leo/bureaus-agencies/office-of-rural-development/rural-readiness-program/leading-rural-michigan>
- . n.d.b. "Office of Rural Prosperity." Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity. Accessed March 11, 2026. <https://www.michigan.gov/leo/bureaus-agencies/office-of-rural-development>
- . n.d.c. "Rural Readiness Grant Program." Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity. Accessed March 11, 2026. <https://www.michigan.gov/leo/bureaus-agencies/office-of-rural-development/>

rural-readiness-grant-program

MDARD (Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development). n.d.a. Farmland and Open Space Preservation Program: Enrollment, Eligibility and Benefits of Farmland Agreements. Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. Accessed March 11, 2026. https://www.michigan.gov/mdard/-/media/Project/Websites/mdard/documents/environment/farmland/pa_116_benefits.pdf?rev=8fa5d34dd10a4fc1960fd5555670fb5b&hash=EA83095C482B95551819A9B2B33F9A45

———. n.d.b. "Rural Development Fund Grants." Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. Accessed March 11, 2026. <https://www.michigan.gov/mdard/business-development/grantfund/rural-development-fund-grants>

MEDC (Michigan Economic Development Corporation). n.d.a. "Redevelopment Ready Communities." Michigan Economic Development Corporation. Accessed March 11, 2026. <https://www.miplace.org/programs/redevelopment-ready-communities/>

———. n.d.b. "Revitalization and Placemaking (RAP) Program." Michigan Economic Development Corporation. Accessed March 11, 2026. <https://www.michiganbusiness.org/rap/>

MSHDA (Michigan State Housing Development Authority). n.d. "Statewide Housing Plan." Michigan State Housing Development Authority. Accessed March 11, 2026. <https://www.michigan.gov/mshda/developers/statewide-housing-plan>

MSU Extension. n.d.a. "Connecting Entrepreneurial Communities." Michigan State University. Accessed March 11, 2026. <https://www.canr.msu.edu/cec/index>

———. n.d.b. "First Impressions Tourism Assessment." Michigan State University. Accessed March 11, 2026. https://www.canr.msu.edu/tourism_first_impressions/

———. n.d.c. "Understanding Tourism for Michigan Communities." Michigan State University. Accessed March 11, 2026. <https://www.canr.msu.edu/tourism/programs/understanding-tourism-for-michigan-communities>

Northern Michigan University. n.d. "Rural Leadership Fellowship Program." Northern Michigan University. Accessed March 11, 2026. <https://nmu.edu/business-engagement/rural-fellowship>

Texas Economic Development and Tourism Office. n.d. "Event Trust Funds Program." Office of the Texas Governor. Accessed March 19, 2026. <https://gov.texas.gov/business/page/event-trust-funds-program>

USDA (United States Department of Agriculture). n.d.a. "Community Facilities Direct Loan & Grant Program." United States Department of Agriculture. Accessed March 24, 2026. <https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/community-facilities/community-facilities-direct-loan-grant-program>

———. n.d.b. "Rural Business Development Grants." United States Department of Agriculture. Accessed March 24, 2026. <https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/business-programs/rural-business-development-grants>

———. n.d.c. "Rural Economic Development Loan and Grant Program in Michigan," United States Department of Agriculture. Accessed March 20, 2026. <https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/business-programs/rural-economic-development-loan-grant-programs-7>

———. n.d.d. "Rural Energy Savings Program." United States Department of Agriculture. Accessed March 24, 2026. <https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/electric-programs/rural-energy-savings-program>

Appendix B

State Approaches for Creating and Sustaining Rural Prosperity

A Program and Policy Analysis

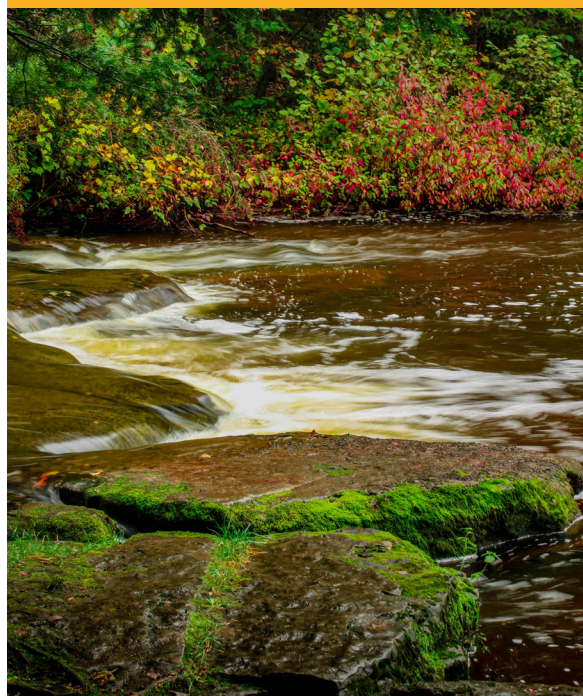
The Nature Conservancy (TNC) hired Public Sector Consultants (PSC) to analyze state policies and programs for creating and sustaining rural prosperity. The analysis focuses on eight states: Colorado, Georgia, Indiana, Iowa, Minnesota, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. Each state was selected for inclusion in the analysis based on its identification—either through desktop research or by subject matter experts (SMEs)—as a state that has taken actions to prioritize rural prosperity.

Findings from this analysis and additional PSC research informed the development of recommendations for the State of Michigan. These recommendations aim to boost rural prosperity while protecting and sustainably managing the state's natural resources, as detailed in [TNC's Vision for Michigan's Rural Prosperity](#) report.

Research Approach

In November 2025, PSC conducted a preliminary scan to find state approaches to rural prosperity. This scan reviewed publicly available sources like reports, articles, and agency and organization websites. After the preliminary scan, PSC interviewed SMEs from various sectors to better understand the barriers to rural prosperity and the strategies states use to address them. Interviewees also discussed specific state initiatives that have successfully addressed rural challenges and boosted rural prosperity. Based on initial research and SME input, PSC identified eight states for further analysis. After TNC's approval, PSC researched each state's methods to boost rural prosperity by doing more desktop research and interviewing program representatives.

The rest of this report summarizes key strategies used in the eight case study states, followed by profiles of each state with important statistics, programs, and policies. These state profiles do not cover every program and policy benefiting rural areas but instead focus on the most important ones currently in place that address barriers and promote rural prosperity.



Each state has a unique approach to advancing rural prosperity, but several common strategies emerged in the case studies. Although the economic sustainability of most rural areas depends on natural resources, few state initiatives directly prioritize their stewardship. The key strategies and examples of related state initiatives are discussed below.

STRATEGY 1: RURAL-SPECIFIC, STATE-LEVEL LEADERSHIP AND COORDINATED PLANNING

Several states are creating leadership teams to highlight rural priorities, coordinate agencies, and guide long-term plans. These structures include state offices, gubernatorial commissions, and legislative task forces that identify barriers and opportunities to rural prosperity and recommend policies and programs to benefit rural communities. They usually involve many stakeholders with different interests and have helped shape rural prosperity strategies in their states.

STRATEGY 2: ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND BUSINESS SUPPORT

Building strong local economies is key to rural prosperity. States are supporting new startups, growing businesses, and industry diversification with financial incentives, technical help, and sector-specific programs. These efforts aim to create jobs, grow economic opportunities, and reduce dependence on a few industries.

STRATEGY 3: FLEXIBLE FUNDING AND FINANCING TOOLS

States are using tax credits, grants, and new financing methods to encourage investment in rural communities. These tools are often made flexible and responsive to local needs, allowing communities to carry out various economic and infrastructure projects.

STRATEGY 4: INVESTMENTS IN INFRASTRUCTURE AND CONNECTIVITY

States are focusing on investing in basic infrastructure—such as broadband, water systems, transportation, and development-ready sites—to promote economic growth and enhance quality of life. These investments directly tackle barriers to rural prosperity caused by aging infrastructure and lack of affordable, high-quality broadband.

Rural communities, especially remote ones, often lack internet access, so states are working to expand broadband because it is essential for jobs, school, services, and information.

Reliable and current infrastructure like roads and water systems is vital for daily life, fulfilling basic needs and supporting thriving communities. Many rural communities have aging infrastructure but lack funds for improvements, so states are helping by providing financial support through grants, loans, and loan guarantees to modernize these areas.

Finally, many rural communities have vacant land and buildings available for development, but work is needed to prepare these sites. States are creating programs that give grants to rural communities to help cover site improvement, preparation, and due diligence costs.

STRATEGY 5: QUALITY OF LIFE AND WORKFORCE INVESTMENTS

Many rural areas are losing people, which threatens the local economy. Younger generations are increasingly moving from rural to suburban areas for better education, jobs, or quality of life. This migration has led to shrinking tax bases, labor shortages, and lower K–12 school enrollments in rural areas. To address this, states are investing in conditions needed to retain and attract residents, such as healthcare, child care, housing, and job opportunities. These investments remove key obstacles to rural prosperity and promote lasting economic stability. For example, states are attracting and keeping residents by encouraging certain professionals to move to rural areas, helping rural residents earn credentials, and making rural communities more appealing by ensuring access to essential services like healthcare.

STRATEGY 6: PLACE-BASED DEVELOPMENT

States are using rural communities' unique assets—like outdoor recreation, downtown areas, and cultural resources—to boost economic growth by developing and implementing marketing strategies for sustainable tourism based on natural resources.

Colorado

Colorado is known for its diverse geographic landscape, from plains and grasslands in the east to mountain ranges in the west. Like its geography, the state’s rural communities vary greatly. For example, northwest Colorado is an outdoor recreation hub, while the eastern plains region is known for its fertile soils and open lands, which support many large-scale farming and ranching operations. Regardless of the region, nearly all rural communities in Colorado have one thing in common: an economy rooted in the utilization of natural resources.

While Colorado’s vast rural landscape covers more than three-quarters of the state’s total land area, these areas face unique economic headwinds. With a median household income nearly \$27,000 lower than in urban centers, these communities require targeted support to ensure long-term prosperity (Exhibit 1). Gov. Jared Polis has made rural prosperity a key priority for his administration, evidenced by the 2019 Governor Polis Rural Economic Blueprint. The following initiatives represent the state’s strategic response to these disparities and focus on economic diversification and infrastructure.

Exhibit 1

Colorado by the Numbers

	RURAL*	URBAN*	TOTAL
Land area	50.9 million acres (76.8 percent)	15.4 million acres (23.2 percent)	66.3 million acres
Population (2023)	717,500	5.1 million	5.9 million
Median household income (2021)	\$58,155	\$85,310	\$80,184

*The terms “rural” and “urban” refer to counties that are not part of a metropolitan area and those that are part of a metropolitan area, respectively, as defined by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (U.S. Department of Agriculture [USDA] Economic Research Service 2026).

Sources: USDA Economic Research Service March 2025 and September 2025



Initiatives

RURAL OPPORTUNITY OFFICE

In 2019, the Rural Opportunity Office (ROO) began as a subdivision of the Colorado Office of Economic Development and International Trade (OEDIT). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the ROO received a \$2.3 million federal grant to fund the Rural Resiliency and Recovery Roadmaps Program (Roadmap Program), which brought together 16 regional teams made up of 169 communities and nongovernmental partners to develop long-term strategies and goals to help the state's rural communities recover from the pandemic and be more resilient (Colorado Department of Local Affairs [DOLA] n.d.a). In 2023, in response to the success of the Roadmap Program and to ensure the office could continue its work, the ROO was formally codified in state law as a free-standing division of the OEDIT (Colorado General Assembly 2023; Ross and Chuang 2024). The office consists of a director and three regional representatives who reside in the rural region they support (Colorado OEDIT n.d.c). The main duties and responsibilities of the ROO include:

- Coordinating rural economic development programs and initiatives
- Working with coal-transitioning communities to explore new economic opportunities
- Making policy recommendations to the governor
- Collecting and analyzing data to track the success of the office's efforts

In addition to working with nonprofit and state partners to connect rural communities to relevant programs and funding opportunities, the ROO also hosts quarterly Rural Exchange meetings, which facilitate consistent, focused, and open communication with rural economic developers throughout the state (Colorado OEDIT n.d.a). The ROO also oversees the implementation of Colorado's Statewide Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (Colorado OEDIT 2025).

The ROO is funded through state general fund appropriations as part of the OEDIT and receives about \$500,000 annually (Ross and Chuang 2024).

RURAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE

The Rural Economic Development Initiative (REDI) is a grant program administered by Colorado's Department of Local Affairs. The program was created in 2020 by Senate Bill 20-002 (Colorado General Assembly 2020). REDI provides grants of up to \$150,000 to rural communities and eligible nongovernmental entities to help diversify their local economies. Counties, municipalities, and councils of government are eligible to apply and can pass funds to eligible partners such as intergovernmental agencies, housing authorities, economic development organizations, nonprofits, private employers, and tribes (DOLA n.d.c). The program funds projects in one or more of four categories: job creation and retention, capacity building, economic resilience, and supporting entrepreneurial ecosystems. Since 2021, the REDI has distributed \$7.1 million in grants and supported more than 50 rural communities. Examples of types of projects that have been funded by REDI include outdoor spaces, water and sewer extensions, main street revitalizations, business incubators, child care centers, and coworking spaces (DOLA n.d.b).

Money for the grants comes from the state's general fund, about \$750,000 annually (Abram 2020). In 2021, DOLA received an additional \$5 million appropriation to use for the REDI program (Colorado General Assembly 2021).

RURAL JUMP-START PROGRAM

The Rural Jump-Start (RJS) Program, started in 2016, is a "collaboration between state and local governments, institutes of higher education, and economic development organizations to incentivize businesses to start or move to rural and economically distressed counties in Colorado" (Colorado OEDIT n.d.b). The program provides tax incentives and grants to businesses in Rural Jump-Start Zones, which are designated areas in economically distressed counties that have committed to participating in the RJS program.

RJS provides tax incentives to encourage businesses to launch or relocate within RJS Zones, including relief from state income tax, refund of state sales and use tax, and relief of county and municipal personal property tax. It also provides relief of state income tax for qualified new hires. Additionally, participating businesses are eligible for grants of up to \$25,000, depending on the area of the state in which they operate. Between 2017 and 2023, the RJS program assisted in the creation of about 836 new jobs in RJS Zones, an average of about 119 jobs per year (Colorado Office of the State Auditor 2025).

RJS originally received funding from the Colorado legislature. The state appropriation for the grant program expired in 2025, but the Colorado Economic Development Commission reallocated strategic fund dollars in 2025 and the grant program is currently supported by \$630,000 in grant funding through 2028 (Colorado OEDIT n.d.b). The tax credits are available until 2031 (Pino 2024).

RURAL TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

The Rural Technical Assistance Program (RTAP), established in 2023, is a partnership between the Colorado Outdoor Recreation Industry Office (OREC), ROO, Colorado State University (CSU) Extension and the University of Colorado Boulder (CU Boulder). RTAP is led by OREC, which provides administrative support and coordinates program enrollment and guidance. The goal of RTAP is to “revitalize Colorado’s rural economies by leveraging their local outdoor recreation opportunities.” Participating communities receive free consulting services and technical assistance to facilitate the creation and implementation of a community action plan (CAP) centered on boosting outdoor recreation.

RTAP pairs graduate students from the Masters of the Environment Program at CU Boulder with rural communities. The graduate students take on the role of consultants and work with their communities to develop a comprehensive CAP. Once the plan is finalized, CSU Extension works with the communities for the following two years to implement the CAP’s action items. To date, nine communities have participated in the program (OREC n.d.). Some tangible program results include:

- Town of Keystone
 - Creating a Trails and Open Space Advisory Board
 - Updating the town’s website
- Huerfano County
 - Establishing a network of gear libraries
- Town of Beulah
 - Launching a series of tours that showcase the community’s unique history and outdoor recreation assets

Communities have also secured grant funding to support the implementation of CAP action items, many of which are currently in progress (Nunez 2026).

Program funding has come from a variety of sources, including state appropriations provided to OREC, university partners, and federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) dollars. For OREC, program costs are primarily overhead expenses (e.g., cost of travel and materials for workshops) and the total expenditure has been about \$12,000 per year (Matt Nunez, pers. comm.).

Georgia

With 1.8 million rural residents and an agribusiness sector that generates over \$11 billion for the state’s economy, rural prosperity in Georgia has been an ongoing strategic priority for its higher education system, business sector, and economic development leadership alike (Georgia Department of Economic Development [GDEcD] n.d.a). Initiatives like the Georgia Chamber Foundation’s Center for Rural Prosperity and the Department of Agriculture’s Georgia Rural Center are driving policy strategy and state investment in rural economic development (Center for Rural Prosperity n.d.; Georgia Department of Agriculture August 2025). The Rural Site Development Initiative, run by the Georgia Department of Economic Development, is making direct development in rural Georgia easier by supporting early stage work to prepare sites to attract business to rural communities (GDEcD n.d.b). To support rural healthcare, the Georgia Helping to Enhance Access to Rural Treatment (HEART) Hospital Program is leveraging tax credits to fund rural hospital organizations (RHOs) and advance healthcare in rural Georgia. Together, these initiatives blend the investment power of state, local, federal, and private entities to sustain rural prosperity initiatives in Georgia.

As shown in Exhibit 2, Georgia’s total population is 11 million people with 1.8 million residing in rural areas, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Atlas of Rural and Small-Town America. With 21 million acres of land area, more than half of Georgia’s total land area, 36.9 million acres, is designated rural. The median household income in rural Georgia is \$44,847 which is below the state median of \$65,030, and the urban median of \$60,927.

Exhibit 2

Georgia by the Numbers

	RURAL*	URBAN*	TOTAL
Land area	21 million acres (56.9 percent)	15.9 million acres (43.1 percent)	36.9 million acres
Population (2023)	1.8 million	9.2 million	11 million
Median household income (2021)	\$44,847	\$60,927	\$65,030

*The terms “rural” and “urban” refer to counties that are not part of a metropolitan area and those that are part of a metropolitan area, respectively, as defined by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (USDA Economic Research Service 2026).

Sources: USDA Economic Research Service March 2025 and September 2025



Initiatives

CENTER FOR RURAL PROSPERITY

The Georgia Chamber Foundation, supported by the Georgia Chamber of Commerce (GCC), opened the Center for Rural Prosperity in its Tifton office in 2017. The center is overseen by the Rural Prosperity Council (RPC), a council within the GCC with over 150 dues-paying members. The RPC, which is led by an appointed chair and vice chair, is one of six GCC policy councils and as “one of the largest and most active councils” it connects a network of rural business owners, leadership, educators, and policymakers that collaborate to identify and recommend solutions for economic prosperity in rural Georgia.

The Center for Rural Prosperity serves to drive economic prosperity in rural Georgia communities by directly interfacing with Georgia legislators and providing strategic policy solutions to address issues faced by the rural Georgia economy. In addition to recommending strategies, the center also advocates for legislation that supports rural economic success (Georgia Chamber n.d.).

GEORGIA HEART HOSPITAL PROGRAM

In 2016, Gov. Nathan Deal signed into law Senate Bill 258, which established the Georgia HEART Hospital Program. Since then, several bills have been enacted that have expanded and extended the program (Georgia HEART Hospital Program n.d.b). Most recently, in 2025, Gov. Brian P. Kemp signed a bill that increased the program’s cap to \$100 million annually and extended the program to December 31, 2029 (Georgia HEART Hospital Program n.d.a.).

The program allows Georgia corporate and individual taxpayers to redirect their state income tax obligations to fund RHOs. In return, they receive a tax credit for 100 percent of the amount they contribute to the program. To date, the program has partnered with 51 RHOs around the state to distribute roughly \$500 million in funding (Georgia HEART Hospital Program n.d.a, n.d.c). Each participating RHO may receive up to \$2 million from corporate contributions and up to \$2 million from individual contributors. Contributors can select which RHO they

would like to fund unless the RHO has met its annual cap of \$4 million. Contribution limits vary depending on factors like taxpayer classification, date, and available credits. In 2025, the Georgia HEART Hospital Program received approximately \$79.2 million in contributions from over 1,300 corporate and 3,689 individual contributors (Georgia HEART Hospital Program n.d.b). According to the previous year’s audit, roughly 3 percent of total contributions are reserved for operational expenses of the program (Bennett Thrasher 2025)

GEORGIA'S RURAL CENTER

In 2018, Gov. Nathan Deal established the Georgia Center for Rural Prosperity and Innovation, now commonly known as Georgia’s Rural Center. For its first seven years, the center was operated out of the University System of Georgia. In 2025, additional legislation supported the transfer of the center to management under the Georgia Department of Agriculture (GDA) (GDA 2025: Georgia’s Rural Center n.d.b). Georgia’s Rural Center is managed by an executive director and overseen by the Georgia House of Representatives Rural Development Council (RDC) (GDA 2025). The RDC is a 15-member body in the Georgia House of Representatives formed in 2017 to support economic growth in rural Georgia. As of 2023, the RDC supported legislation and budget recommendations resulting in \$245 million in investments in agriculture and rural economic development, healthcare, broadband, and transportation. The RDC was renewed in 2023 under the adoption of House Resolution 488 (RDC n.d.).

Since its inception, Georgia’s Rural Center has leveraged a reported \$2.77 million into over \$400 million invested back into rural Georgia using funding from state, local, federal, and private sources (Georgia’s Rural Center n.d.a). This funding has directly impacted over 70 counties in rural Georgia by supporting local projects, including investments in rural workforce development, healthcare, and transportation (Georgia’s Rural Center 2023; GDA 2025). In its 2023–2024 impact report, the center highlighted a few of its statewide initiatives such

as the Timber Resource Education Experience Center, which provides education experiences promoting the use of Georgia wood products in architecture and construction industries. Another statewide initiative was the “Seed to Shirt: The Georgia Cotton Experience,” an immersive experience for attendees of the 2023 Georgia National Fair. The exhibit taught participants how cotton is grown and ultimately transformed into a 100 percent cotton t-shirt. Both initiatives were designed to educate individuals on Georgia’s natural resource-based rural economy (Georgia’s Rural Center n.d.a).

RURAL SITE DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE

Established in 2024, the Georgia Rural Site Development Initiative is a grant program funded through the GDEcD and the Georgia Department of Community Affairs using state appropriations, \$20 million in both 2024 and 2025 (GDEcD n.d.b). The program was created in response to feedback from the economic development community that Georgia was doing a good job of attracting companies to locate in Georgia but that there were not enough physical sites ready for development (Wylly Harrison, pers. comm.). The Rural Site Development Initiative helps rural communities create development-ready sites by providing support for costs associated with the development of vacant land (GDEcD n.d.b).

Since 2025, over \$21 million has been committed to Rural Site Development Initiative grants (GDEcD 2026). The program is divided into two grant opportunities: Site improvement grants and survey and due diligence grants (GDEcD n.d.b).

- **Site improvement grants:** These grants award up to \$2 million to cover land acquisition, site preparation, engineering, infrastructure development or relocation, and roadway specifications (GDEcD n.d.b).
- **Survey and due diligence grants:** These award up to \$250,000 for site surveys, studies, and easements in the pursuance of a Georgia Ready for Accelerated Development (GRAD) Program certification (GDEcD n.d.b). The GRAD certification prequalifies industrial sites for fast-tracked development by completing the due diligence phase before development is initiated (GDEcD n.d.c).

Indiana

Approximately 20 percent of Indiana’s population lives in rural areas, and more than half of its counties are designated as rural (Indiana Rural Health Association 2025). Rural prosperity has been a state-supported initiative for several decades, evidenced by the creation of the Office of Community and Rural Affairs (OCRA) in 2005 (OCRA n.d.a). Subject matter experts identified two initiatives, the Rural Empowerment and Development Program and the Indiana Small Business Development Center, that have successfully served rural communities’ needs and advanced rural prosperity in Indiana. These programs are described below, along with several others designed to reach different sides of rural development and build local capacity for growth.

As shown in Exhibit 3, 11.2 million acres of Indiana’s land area is designated rural, which covers roughly half of the state’s total 22.9 million acres. About 21 percent of the state’s population lives in rural Indiana, with 1.5 million residents living in its rural areas out of nearly 7 million total in the state. The median household income in rural Indiana is \$56,975, approximately 8 percent lower than the total median household income of \$61,944.

Exhibit 3

Indiana by the Numbers

	RURAL*	URBAN*	TOTAL
Land area	11.2 million acres (48.9 percent)	11.7 million acres (51.1 percent)	22.9 million acres
Population (2023)	1.5 million	5.4 million	6.9 million
Median household income (2021)	\$56,975	\$64,764	\$61,944

*The terms “rural” and “urban” refer to counties that are not part of a metropolitan area and those that are part of a metropolitan area, respectively, as defined by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (USDA Economic Research Service 2026).

Sources: USDA Economic Research Service March 2025 and September 2025



Initiatives

OFFICE OF COMMUNITY AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Established as a state agency by legislative action in 2005, OCRA delivers resources and technical assistance to rural Indiana communities (OCRA n.d.a). The 2025–2026 office budget included approximately \$1.3 million in general funds, \$3.2 million in directed funds (e.g., for broadband expansion and access in rural areas and administration of the Rural Economic Development Fund), and \$31.2 million in federal funds to administer the federal Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) Program (Indiana State Budget Agency n.d.). As of June 2025, the office had 16 full-time staff (including the lieutenant governor–appointed executive director), with one of those positions being 100 percent federally funded (OCRA 2025). The OCRA highlighted the following most impactful programs in its 2024 annual report:

- **The NextLevel Connections Program** is an ARPA-funded grant program that issued \$350 million to internet services providers to expand broadband access. The program will expire in 2026 unless it receives additional funding (OCRA n.d.d).
- **The Indiana Connectivity Program**, launched in 2022, provides financial support and connects businesses and residents without broadband access to broadband service providers. Providers review the applications submitted to the state and bid on projects; the state then awards the lowest bidder and provides partial funding for the installation (up to \$4,800 per passing and \$25,000 per line extension) (OCRA n.d.c).
- **The Building Socially Connected Communities** program, which was piloted in 2024, offered \$200,000 in investments to address the U.S. Surgeon General's "Loneliness Epidemic" in rural communities (U.S. Office of the Surgeon General 2023). During its pilot round, the program awarded grants to ten communities to support projects that:
 - Created or sustained social clubs for older individuals
 - Enhanced community centers
 - Supported mental health programs
 - Created intergeneration programs that facilitated meaningful social interactions
- Improved transportation for those experiencing loneliness especially in rural areas
- Enhanced local businesses that supported those experiencing loneliness (OCRA n.d.b)
- **Indiana Main Street** is part of a national accreditation program, Main Street America, sustained by public, private, and nonprofit partners to support placemaking and revitalization of communities' downtown areas (Main Street America n.d.). Indiana Main Street provides technical assistance to communities pursuing accreditation, helping to build institutional capacity and complete early stage economic development planning (OCRA n.d.i). Accredited communities in Indiana are eligible to apply for the PreservINg Main Street Grant Program, which distributes awards up to \$2 million using federal CDBGs (OCRA n.d.e).
- **Rural Empowerment and Development (RED) Program** is a collaborative program between OCRA and Ball State University. RED is a four- to six-month-long program designed to build capacity in leadership, partnership, planning, and engagement. RED was developed in 2024 and launched in 2025. Applications must be submitted by two or more rural units of government with leadership from either a county government or nonprofit. The program teams identify up to 15 community development projects and receive tailored guidance and coaching during development and implementation (OCRA n.d.f).
- **Stellar Pathways Program**, launched in 2011, is a multiyear state agency collaborative program designed to enhance regional collaboration for economic development in rural Indiana. The program supports capacity building, community engagement, and project development and implementation for communities that are not eligible for funding through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development CDBG program. To promote partnership, communities are required to apply in collaboration with a county government, nonprofit organization, or economic development agency. Partnering Indiana state agencies fund the program with local and private match (OCRA n.d.g). From 2011 to 2024, the program distributed \$193 million to 17 communities (OCRA n.d.h).

GROW RURAL INDIANA

Funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Rural Health Transformation Program (RHTP), the Growing Rural Opportunities for Well-Being (GROW) Initiative is a collaborative framework to disperse funding to improve rural health to regions across the state. The program is a new initiative administered by the Indiana Family and Social Services Administration and the Indiana Department of Health, with the first request for proposals opening in March 2026. Funding will support regional rural health initiatives to reduce demand for Medicaid funding. Over the next five years, GROW Rural Indiana will distribute \$600 million in grant funding to rural-serving entities (e.g., rural hospitals, health clinics, local health departments, emergency services, etc.) for projects aligned with the federal RHTP funding categories, which include:

- Improving efficiency and sustainability to ensure access to rural providers is sustained
- Attracting and retaining a skilled rural health professional workforce
- Incentivizing innovative care
- Using innovative technologies to promote efficiency
- Supporting interventions that address prevention and the root cause of disease (State of Indiana 2026)

INDIANA SMALL BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT CENTER

The Indiana Small Business Development Center (ISBDC) supports the development and growth of small businesses by providing technical assistance, financing, and training. The center operates out of the Indiana Economic Development Corporation and was established in 1985 using funding from the state and the U.S. Small Business Administration (ISBDC n.d.a). In 2022, the program received \$780,000 from the State of Indiana and \$2.6 million from the U.S. Small Business Administration; those funds were used to leverage \$2.9 million in cash and in-kind contributions from other partners statewide (ISBDC 2023). Programs offered by the center that serve rural areas include:

- **Agribusiness Initiative:** A service center for small businesses in the agriculture sector that provides counseling, training, financing, U.S. Department of Agriculture loan packaging, and support with commodity development, exports, and yield projections. The Agribusiness Initiative is administered in partnership with Purdue University at no cost for participants (ISBDC n.d.b).
- **Manufacturing Initiative:** The Manufacturing Initiative provides business advisement and training for small manufacturing operations in Indiana. Consultation topics include capital access, expansion planning, process improvement, supply chain management, and exporting. The program is offered at no cost for participants (ISBDC n.d.c).
- **Indiana Technical Assistance Program (INTAP):** INTAP covers up to \$15,000 in services for the expansion or development of small businesses. Businesses can apply to fund projects that will advance business capacities or efficiencies. Ineligible projects include purchasing new equipment, construction projects, digital marketing, renovation projects, or covering operating expenses (ISBDC n.d.d).

Iowa

With over a third of its population living in rural areas and 89 of its 99 counties with populations below 65,000, Iowa is a predominantly rural state known for recognizing and embracing its rural identity (Health Resources and Services Administration 2024). To counter declining population and workforce in rural areas, the State has implemented policies focused on broadband expansion, entrepreneurship, and community revitalization. Sustained efforts such as the Empower Rural Iowa (ERI) Initiative and the Iowa Rural Vitality Coalition represent a collaborative commitment to rural prosperity (Iowa Rural Development Council [IRDC] n.d.). Among other functions, these initiatives provide recommendations for policymakers and organizations to increase Iowa’s rural communities’ access to resources and support.

As shown in Exhibit 4, nearly 28 million acres of land area are designated rural, which cover more than 75 percent of the state. Roughly 38 percent of the state’s total population lives in rural Iowa with 1.2 million residents living in its rural areas out of 3.2 million total in the state. The median household income in rural Iowa is \$65,429, which is approximately 15 percent lower than the median household income of its urban counterpart, \$70,934.

Exhibit 4

Iowa by the Numbers

	RURAL*	URBAN*	TOTAL
Land area	27.9 million acres (78.2 percent)	7.8 million acres (21.8 percent)	35.7 million acres
Population (2023)	1.2 million	2 million	3.2 million
Median household income (2021)	\$60,000	\$70,934	\$65,429

*The terms “rural” and “urban” refer to counties that are not part of a metropolitan area and those that are part of a metropolitan area, respectively, as defined by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (USDA Economic Research Service 2026).

Sources: USDA Economic Research Service March 2025 and September 2025



Initiatives

EMPOWER RURAL IOWA INITIATIVE

Launched in 2018 under Gov. Kim Reynolds's Executive Order Number Three, the Empower Rural Iowa Initiative was formed to develop recommendations for policies and programs that benefit rural Iowa communities. These recommendations are developed for the governor before each legislative session (Iowa Economic Development and Finance Authority [IEDFA] n.d.c). The ERI Initiative is composed of three task forces that are overseen by an executive committee led by the Lieutenant Governor's Office and the Iowa Rural Development Council (IEDFA n.d.b). The task forces are open to nominations and appointments are confirmed by the governor (Iowa IAppoint n.d.) The task forces include:

- **Investing in Rural Iowa**, which focuses on addressing housing and economic development.
- **Growing Rural Iowa**, which is charged with strengthening rural leadership.
- **Connecting Rural Iowa**, which focuses on financing broadband expansion.

Recommendations for policy changes and program design made by these task forces are implemented by the Center for Rural Revitalization, a division of the Iowa Economic Development and Finance Authority (IEDFA n.d.c).

Another initiative that partners with ERI is the Iowa Rural Vitality Coalition. The coalition is a membership-based organization of statewide organizations representing rural Iowa that work collectively to pool resources and knowledge to develop solutions for rural challenges. Coalition leadership is composed of representatives from the Governor's ERI Initiative, the IRDC, Iowa State University Extension and Outreach, the Institute for Decision Making at the University of Northern Iowa, the University of Iowa College of Public Health, and Wellmark Blue Cross and Blue Shield. The coalition is piloting their efforts in Van Buren County and the community of Manchester to help them assess their needs and strategize solutions using the Rural Wealth Capital Framework, an assessment tool that helps communities determine needs, gaps, and strengths in various asset classes (IRDC n.d.).

CENTER FOR RURAL REVITALIZATION

Iowa's Center for Rural Revitalization was developed in 2018 to execute the goals and complete the day-to-day operations of the ERI Initiative. The center is housed in the IEDFA where it provides funding and technical assistance to rural communities and serves as the liaison between communities and the ERI Initiative task forces (IEDFA n.d.b). The center has facilitated multiple grant programs that have boosted rural prosperity across Iowa. These programs are supported by an annual appropriation from the Iowa legislature, which has been set at \$700,000 (Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds 2024 and IEDFA n.d.c). Below are some of the supported programs:

- **Rural Child Care Planning Program:** Funding from this program supports feasibility studies and analysis for rural communities to address local child care needs and identify realistic solutions to address gaps through funding (IEDFA n.d.h).
- **Rural Innovation Grant Program:** To expand housing availability in rural Iowa and is designed to provide funding to communities that have demonstrated progress in addressing this issue. Awardees are granted additional funding to further their projects and develop a replicable model for other rural Iowa communities (IEDFA n.d.i). In 2025, the center distributed \$300,000 in funding through the Rural Innovation Grant Program (IEDFA n.d.c).
- **Rural Leadership Bootcamp:** This program is a half day bootcamp for rural leaders who are interested in creating their own local leadership programs. Following the half day training, leaders have a workplan to implement. The program also includes a one-year mentorship and the opportunity to attend the Leadership Exchange, an event tailored to provide educational and networking opportunities for local leadership (IEDFA n.d.j).

- **Iowa United First Aid Grant Program:** Funding available through this program supports the provision of GPS-location technology training and equipment for emergency response volunteers. With this technology and training, volunteers are notified of medical emergencies within their immediate geographical area, which allows them to deploy emergency intervention while waiting for ambulance assistance. Volunteers are given a “go-bag” with intervention supplies and a phone application that notifies them of an emergency in their area (IEDFA n.d.e and n.d.f).
- **Rural Building Ownership and Organization by Strengthening Teams (BOOST) program:** The BOOST program, established in 2023, deploys funding in addition to mentorship and targeted technical assistance to complete development planning in rural communities. The program is administered by the Center for Rural Revitalization and funded with appropriations from the Iowa legislature (Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds 2024). Eligible grantees include rural city, county, or tribal governments and nonprofit organizations. Awarded communities receive a team of three to five experts who build a customized action plan and a \$10,000 reimbursement-based grant to begin implementation. Grantees are required to establish a BOOST steering committee of seven to ten individuals that represent a diverse set of interests across the community. A match requirement of \$5,000 is required to demonstrate community buy-in (IEDFA n.d.g). Eligible uses of grant funds include engineering, planning, and design; training and certification programs; marketing strategies; succession planning; economic development training, and grant writing training. The program is designed to be adaptable to the unique needs of different communities (IEDFA 2025b). In 2025, the center awarded \$10,000 in funding to one community (IEDFA n.d.c).
- **Rural Housing Readiness Assessment Grant Program** is another initiative managed by the Center for Rural Revitalization in collaboration with Iowa State University Extension and Outreach. Funding for the program is provided by appropriations from the Iowa legislature (Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds 2024). The program deploys funding for rural communities to conduct housing assessment studies to determine how policies, ordinances, codes, and incentives can be shaped or reformed to encourage housing development in their communities. Awardees receive

\$20,000 on a reimbursement basis to conduct research and complete a housing assessment report. Eligible applicants include city, county, and tribal governments in rural communities. The program requires a minimum cash match of \$10,000. In 2025, the center distributed \$120,000 in funding for six projects (IEDFA n.d.c)

ENDOW IOWA TAX CREDIT AND COUNTY ENDOWMENT FUND

The Endow Iowa Tax Credit allows community foundation donors to receive a state tax credit for up to 25 percent of their total donation. The program is administered in partnership with the IEDFA and the Iowa Council of Foundations. Eligible entities include individuals, businesses, and financial institutions. The maximum individual tax credit is \$100,000 and as of 2025, the maximum amount of total tax credits was \$3.5 million (IEDFA n.d.d). In 2024, \$6 million was awarded through tax credits, with approximately \$24 million in charitable donations made to community foundations (Iowa Council of Foundations and the Iowa Economic Development Authority 2025).

A similar but separately managed program is the County Endowment Fund, which is funded through a percentage of Iowa’s gaming tax revenue. Funding is issued to community foundations in counties that do not hold a state gaming license, and those community foundations retain 25 percent in an endowment fund and distribute the remaining 75 percent for local charitable projects (IEDFA n.d.d).

Minnesota

Although urban Minnesota has the highest concentration of population growth in the state, “brain gain” is occurring in rural areas. This phenomenon, defined by a net in-migration of 30- to 49-year-olds, is causing state and local leadership to emphasize rural population retention and recruitment strategies (Winchester 2012). The State has also implemented several initiatives, such as the Center for Rural Policy and Development, Minnesota Long-Range Planning, the Border-to-Border Broadband Grant Program, and the Iron Range Resources and Rehabilitation Agency, to address rural issues and increase rural prosperity.

As shown in Exhibit 5, 38.9 million acres of Minnesota’s land area is designated as rural, accounting for more than three-quarters of the state’s total 50.9 million acres. Roughly 22 percent of the state’s population lives in rural Minnesota, with 1.3 million residents living in its rural areas out of 5.7 million total population in the state. The median household income in rural Minnesota is \$62,040, which is approximately 23 percent lower than the median household income of its urban counterpart, \$81,442.

Exhibit 5

Minnesota by the Numbers

	RURAL*	URBAN*	TOTAL
Land area	38.9 million acres (76.4 percent)	12 million acres (23.6 percent)	50.9 million acres
Population (2023)	1.3 million	4.5 million	5.7 million
Median household income (2021)	\$62,040	\$81,442	\$77,706

*The terms “rural” and “urban” refer to counties that are not part of a metropolitan area and those that are part of a metropolitan area, respectively, as defined by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (USDA Economic Research Service 2026).
Sources: USDA Economic Research Service March 2025 and September 2025



Initiatives

CENTER FOR RURAL POLICY AND DEVELOPMENT

Created in 1997 through legislation, the Minnesota Center for Rural Policy and Development is a nonprofit organization that operates out of Mankato State University. This research organization distributes nonpartisan reports representing the rural perspective for policymakers to use in decision making, including an annual report detailing the status of rural Minnesota and its most pressing challenges and opportunities (Minnesota Center for Rural Policy and Development n.d.; Asche 2026). The center is overseen by a board of directors appointed by the governor (Minnesota Office of the Revisor of Statutes 2025a). The board represents diverse perspectives across legislators; state, local, county, and tribal governments; and nonprofit organizations representing rural issues. The center receives funding from the state and philanthropic partners (Minnesota Center for Rural Policy and Development n.d.).

MINNESOTA LONG-RANGE PLANNING

Operated out of the Minnesota Department of Management and Budget, the Long-Range Planning office supports collaboration between communities and state government for long-term strategy. The office was created through legislation in 2023 and launched in 2025 (Minnesota Long-Range Planning n.d.a). Research conducted by the office in 2025 led to the following outcomes:

- Budget recommendations
- Local planning assistance
- Policy proposals
- Communications or public relations efforts
- Changes in government practice (Minnesota Long-Range Planning n.d.b)

The office identified rural prosperity as one of the seven issues its team will take on to shape Minnesota's long-term future (Minnesota Long-Range Planning n.d.a). The office issued a brief stating that achieving prosperity will require strategies to encourage migration to rural Minnesota by expanding the housing supply, improving child care access, investing in outdoor recreation, and attracting youth (Minnesota Long-Range Planning n.d.c). To achieve this, the Long-Range Planning office will engage leadership, experts, and community stakeholders to develop policy and strategy recommendations (Minnesota Long-Range Planning n.d.b).

BORDER-TO-BORDER BROADBAND GRANT PROGRAM

Established by legislative action in 2014, the Border-to-Border Broadband Development Grant Program expands broadband access to underserved communities in Minnesota. Grant awards are capped at \$10 million and may be used for planning, permitting, and construction of broadband. Eligible grant recipients include incorporated businesses and partnerships, local and tribal governments, nonprofit organizations, co-ops, and limited liability corporations (Minnesota Office of Broadband Development 2024). The program has been supported by both state and federal funding, most recently receiving \$50 million from the state legislature in 2025. Future grant rounds are anticipated to be funded with approximately \$650 million in federal Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment funds. Since 2014, the program has issued over \$357 million in grants for 293 broadband development projects (Minnesota Office of Broadband Development n.d.).

DEPARTMENT OF IRON RANGE RESOURCES AND REHABILITATION

The Minnesota Department of Iron Range Resources and Rehabilitation (IRRR) utilizes revenues from Minnesota's mining production tax to fund economic development and community infrastructure projects in the Taconite Assistance Area, a predominantly rural region in the northeastern part of the state that encompasses 13,000 square miles. The agency is funded primarily by a portion of the local taconite production tax paid by mining companies on each ton of iron ore pellets produced. The tax is paid in lieu of property taxes by mining companies located within the IRRR's service area (Minnesota Office of the Revisor of Statutes 2025b). The agency provides loans, grants, and loan guarantees for businesses looking to relocate or expand in the region and also administers grants to local units of government and organizations working to promote workforce development and sustainable communities (e.g., nonprofits and educational institutions) (IRRR 2026). The agency is led by a commissioner and is supported by about 40 full-time staff members (IRRR n.d.). In FY 2025, the IRRR invested more than \$163 million into the region, though it is worth noting that about half of that investment was financed by revenue bonds issued in 2024 (IRRR 2025).

North Carolina

Seated between the Atlantic Ocean and the Appalachian Mountains, North Carolina is home to a diverse outdoor recreation landscape and the second largest rural population in the country (Cline 2023). The commitment to rural prosperity is ongoing at the state level and is echoed by Gov. Josh Stein, who stated that, “When rural North Carolina wins, all of North Carolina wins.” (North Carolina Office of the Governor Josh Stein 2026). North Carolina’s Rural Economic Development Division (REDD) is the primary state agency that administers programs aimed at supporting rural communities and boosting rural prosperity. Examples of such programs include the Rural Infrastructure Program, Rural Planning Program, and the Creating Outdoor Recreation Economies (CORE) Program.

As shown in Exhibit 6, rural North Carolina covers more than half of the state’s total land area. Roughly 20 percent of the state’s population (2.2 million residents) lives in rural North Carolina. The median household income in rural North Carolina is \$48,962, which is nearly 20 percent lower than the median household income for all of North Carolina.

Exhibit 6

North Carolina by the Numbers

	RURAL*	URBAN*	TOTAL
Land area	18.1 million acres (58.2 percent)	13 million acres (41.8 percent)	31.1 million acres
Population (2023)	2.2 million	8.6 million	10.8 million
Median household income (2021)	\$48,962	\$59,284	\$60,516

*The terms “rural” and “urban” refer to counties that are not part of a metropolitan area and those that are part of a metropolitan area, respectively, as defined by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (USDA Economic Research Service 2026).

Sources: USDA Economic Research Service March 2025 and September 2025



Initiatives

RURAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT DIVISION

Established by the bipartisan Appropriations Act of 2013 and housed within the North Carolina Department of Commerce (NC Commerce), REDD supports business development in rural areas by providing planning assistance and distributing grants and resources (North Carolina General Assembly 2013). The division is overseen by the Rural Infrastructure Authority, which is a 17-member appointed board (eight members are appointed by the governor, eight by the legislature, and one by the secretary of commerce) that approves grant funding and provides policy recommendations for the operation of the division (North Carolina Office of the Governor n.d.). REDD administers programs and services in four primary support categories, which are described below.

PUBLIC INFRASTRUCTURE SUPPORT

REDD issues funding for rural public infrastructure through the following programs:

- **Utility Account:** The account is used to issue grants to counties determined to be distressed by NC Commerce. Funding supports water, sewer, gas, transportation infrastructure, or electrical utility lines for publicly owned sites (NC Commerce July 2024).
- **Rural Infrastructure Program:** This program issues grants to rural communities for water, natural gas, road, and public rail infrastructure. A 5 percent nonstate or federal cash match is required, and award sizes are determined by the location, quantity and quality of jobs created, and overall economic impact. The grant program is reserved for local governments in counties designated as distressed according to NC Commerce (NC Commerce December 17, 2025). In the 2026–2027 NC Commerce budget, \$12.1 million was appropriated for the Rural Infrastructure Program (State of North Carolina Office of State Budget and Management 2025).

BUILDING RENOVATION AND DEMOLITION

State-funded grants designed to support building demolition and reuse in rural areas include:

- **Rural Building Reuse Program:** Grants are given to local governments located in distressed counties for the purpose of renovating vacant buildings, rural healthcare facilities, and eligible businesses that meet wage and benefits standards. Grant amounts vary depending on factors like project location, quantity and quality of jobs created, and overall economic impact. Grants awards will never exceed one-half of the project cost (NC Commerce August 2024).
- **Rural Demolition Program:** Local governments in distressed counties to demolish blighted, publicly owned buildings with the intent of using the space for economic development. The program awards grants of up to \$150,000 to successful applicants, depending on factors like size of the building and potential for economic impact and job creation on the redeveloped site (NC Commerce December 12, 2025).

BUILDING AND SITE DEVELOPMENT

- **Rural ReadySites:** This new program was created to attract employers to rural, economically distressed areas. The program will provide grant funding to eligible local governments for infrastructure improvements (water, sewer, gas, telecommunications, broadband, electric, or transportation) that serve publicly owned or publicly controlled industrial sites (NC Commerce n.d.b).
- **Rural Downtown Economic Development Grants:** This grant program provides funding of up to \$850,000 to rural local communities to support downtown revitalization and economic development initiatives. Funding availability is determined based on an analysis that considers factors like project location, community-wide use, and anticipated economic impact (NC Commerce March 2024).

STRATEGIC ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PLANNING

- **Regional Commissions:** REDD staffs two regional commissions—the Appalachian Regional Commission and the Southeast Cresent Regional Commission (SCRC)—that exist to deliver resources and economic support to their respective regions. Both commissions collaborate with a range of partners to achieve their goals. In 2024, the two commissions deployed over \$26 million in grant funding to invest in infrastructure, workforce development, leadership capacity, and other rural priorities in North Carolina (SCRC 2024; NC Commerce n.d.b).
- **NC Main Street and Rural Planning Center (the Center):** The Center focuses on placemaking and asset-based economic development in rural North Carolina. In addition to providing ongoing planning, technical assistance, training, and education support for rural communities, the NC Main Street and Rural Planning Center manages several programs (NC Main Street and Rural Planning Center 2025).
 - **NC Main Street Program:** The Center administers the NC Main Street Program, which is part of an accreditation process from the National Main Street Center (Main Street America n.d.). The process supports placemaking by providing technical support to communities that create economic development plans in accordance with the National Main Street Center’s “Four-Point Approach” (NC Main Street and Rural Planning Center 2025).
 - **Rural Economic Development grants:** In 2024, the Center issued over \$15 million in these grants to invest in public infrastructure, buildings, and mixed-use developments to support rural downtown economies. The program is supported by state funding (NC Main Street and Rural Planning Center 2025).
 - **Rural Planning Program:** The Rural Planning Program operates out of the NC Main Street and Rural Planning Center. The program provides ongoing technical assistance, training, education, and community development planning for local governments and organizations that support economic development in rural communities (NC Commerce 2026). In addition to these services, the Rural Planning Program administers five programs:
 - **Creating Outdoor Recreation Economies:** Initially funded by a \$1.4 million U.S. Economic Development Administration State Tourism grant, the program provides communities with technical assistance and strategic planning support to incorporate outdoor recreation assets into economic growth strategies. To date, 34 communities have participated in the CORE program (NC Commerce 2026). CORE is set to expire in 2027; however, the Rural Planning Program is actively pursuing additional funding to enable it to continue (Karen Smith, pers. comm.).
 - **Community Economic Development Assessments:** Staff from the Rural Planning Program conduct asset mapping, consensus building, and stakeholder engagement in rural communities to identify achievable economic development goals for the community to implement in the immediate term (NC Commerce 2026).
 - **Five-Year Strategic Economic Development Plans:** This program is designed for longer-term planning. The Rural Planning Center provides in-depth planning services that include asset mapping, identifying economic drivers, stakeholder engagement, and analysis (NC Commerce 2026).
 - **One-Day Action Planning Workshops:** The workshop is a one-day facilitation hosted by the Rural Planning Center intended to complete economic development strategic action planning with leadership and stakeholders in the community. Rural Planning Program staff and partners also provide technical assistance to implement findings from the workshop (NC Commerce 2026).
 - **Community Economy Recovery and Resiliency Initiative:** The program included a facilitated community assessment to develop economic recovery strategies and technical assistance for communities most impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The program was funded by federal COVID-19 relief dollars and will expire in 2026 (NC Commerce 2026).

Pennsylvania

Rural Pennsylvania is home to almost two million individuals according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Atlas of Rural and Small-Town America. Supporting those residents has been a state priority for decades, marked by the 1987 Rural Revitalization Act. Among other provisions, the Rural Revitalization Act established the Center for Rural Pennsylvania (Center for Rural Pennsylvania n.d.a). Since then, the State has implemented initiatives to address specific rural issues and support rural communities, such as the Rural Population Revitalization Commission, Office of Rural Health, and the Agriculture Innovation Grant Program. These initiatives are described below in more detail.

As shown in Exhibit 7, more than half of Pennsylvania’s total land area is designated rural and about 14 percent of Pennsylvanians reside in rural areas. The median household income in rural Pennsylvania is \$56,315, which is 17 percent lower than the urban median household income of \$68,109.

Exhibit 7

Pennsylvania by the Numbers

	RURAL*	URBAN*	TOTAL
Land area	15.5 million acres (54 percent)	13.1 million acres (46 percent)	28.6 million acres
Population (2023)	1.8 million	11.2 million	13 million
Median household income (2021)	\$56,315	\$68,109	\$67,587

*The terms “rural” and “urban” refer to counties that are not part of a metropolitan area and those that are part of a metropolitan area, respectively, as defined by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (USDA Economic Research Service 2026).

Sources: USDA Economic Research Service March 2025 and September 2025



Initiatives

CENTER FOR RURAL PENNSYLVANIA

Created by the bipartisan 1987 Rural Pennsylvania Revitalization Act, the Center for Rural Pennsylvania was designed to support the prosperity of rural Pennsylvania communities. The center is a bipartisan legislative agency housed in the Pennsylvania General Assembly. The center sponsors policy research, collects and tracks data, disseminates research results to the public, and hosts in forums on rural issues (Center for Rural Pennsylvania n.d.a).

The center is run by a director who reports to an 11-member board that includes four legislators appointed by Pennsylvania General Assembly leadership, four members representing leadership from the higher education system, the director of the Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development, and two governor appointees from rural based organizations. The board of directors was created to oversee the center in a 2009 amendment to the enabling legislation. The center currently has six staff members supporting the director (Center for Rural Pennsylvania n.d.e).

Since 2024, the center has received \$1.25 million in annual general fund appropriations each year (Pennsylvania Office of the Budget 2026). Each year, the center issues grant funding to faculty members of the Pennsylvania State University, the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education universities, and the regional campuses of the University of Pittsburgh for targeted research on topics that are set each year by the board of directors. In 2026, the board of directors targeted the following topics:

- Rural people and communities
- Economic development
- Local government finance and administration
- Community services
- Natural resources and environment
- Educational outreach
- Rural values and social change

Grant applications are reviewed and approved by the board of directors. For the 2027 cycle, the maximum grant award is \$60,000 for standard grants and \$18,000 for mini grants (Center for Rural Pennsylvania 2026). The center uses the research grant findings to build data-driven policy recommendations for the state's legislative

and executive branches. The center publishes grant findings and hosts forums to share data with the public (Center for Rural Pennsylvania n.d.a).

The center also maintains a database called the Center for Rural Pennsylvania Data Hub, a space to house demographic data on rural Pennsylvania. The center's enabling legislation requires that this platform serve as a knowledge base of the status of rural communities. The database has profiles at the county, municipal, and school district level related to the following demographics:

- Agriculture
- Economic development
- Local government capacity and fiscal stress indicators
- Transportation
- Sociodemographic data
- Healthcare and human services
- Environment and natural resources
- Education
- Local infrastructure conditions (Center for Rural Pennsylvania n.d.b)

PENNSYLVANIA RURAL POPULATION REVITALIZATION COMMISSION

The Pennsylvania Rural Population Revitalization Commission was established in 2024 to address declining population and workforce in rural Pennsylvania, and to deliver data-driven recommendations to mitigate these issues (Center for Rural Pennsylvania n.d.c). The commission was formed as a result of the passage of Public Act 21 of 2024, which outlines that the commission must have a board of commissioners that includes two individuals appointed by the governor, legislators from both political parties, the director of the Center for Rural Pennsylvania, and the executive director of the Pennsylvania Rural Development Council, in addition to representatives from higher education, county government, rural public education, agriculture, business, and healthcare (Center for Rural Pennsylvania n.d.d). The commission is supported by the Center for Rural Pennsylvania and commissioners serve without salary or compensation (Pennsylvania General Assembly 2024). While it operates adjacently to the Center for Rural Pennsylvania, the commission was created specifically to address rural population recruitment and retention efforts. The commission is empowered to use data, reviews, expert consultation, and public input to

develop recommendations for legislation and regulatory change to address the following issues:

- Census participation
- Affordable housing
- Access to healthcare and social services
- Population decline
- Grant awards and tax credit opportunities
- Costs associated with statutes and regulations for municipalities, businesses, and communities

Recommendations are to be distributed to the legislature and the governor and posted on the Center for Rural Pennsylvania's website. Additionally, the commission is charged with maintaining a database on rural demographic trends (Pennsylvania General Assembly 2024).

AGRICULTURAL INNOVATION GRANT PROGRAM

The Pennsylvania Agriculture Innovation Grant Program was established in 2025 to help farmers and agricultural businesses implement innovative agriculture, conservation, and renewable energy technologies. Initial program funding came from a \$10 million state appropriation in FY 2025 and was renewed in FY 2026 with an additional \$10 million appropriation (Commonwealth of Pennsylvania n.d.). The program is administered by the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture (Pennsylvania Bulletin 2026). Eligible projects include technologies that:

- Improve the management, production, or processing efficiency of a facility
- Improve energy or water efficiency
- Improve water quality, reduce odors, or address solid waste or biosecurity for plants or animals
- Produce energy from agricultural commodities

Grants are available in three categories:

- **Innovation planning project grants** are issued for between \$7,500 and \$50,000 for the planning stage of technology implementation.
- **Onsite project grants** are awarded for \$5,000 to \$20,000 for direct implementation of technologies.
- **Regional impact grants** are awarded for projects that impact more than one individual or entity and range from \$100,000 to \$2 million.

In 2025, the program received more than \$68 million in funding requests and ultimately funded 88 projects totaling \$10 million. Examples of funded projects include installations of anaerobic digesters, composting systems, and robotic milkers; equipment upgrades to enhance crop spraying and planting efficiency; and planning for facility upgrades and expansions (Commonwealth of Pennsylvania 2025).

PENNSYLVANIA OFFICE OF RURAL HEALTH

The Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health (PORH) is a collaborative initiative involving the federal government, state government, and Pennsylvania State University to provide leadership and expertise and facilitate collaboration between rural health providers and organizations. PORH is housed in the Pennsylvania State University College of Health and Human Development. The office receives state and federal funding to provide technical assistance to rural individuals, organizations, and communities, "... regarding funding opportunities, program development, referrals, rural health information, and more." In addition, the office assists with healthcare provider recruitment, and supports networking, coordination, and partnership development between rural health organizations for the purpose of knowledge sharing and collaboration. PORH also supports health advocacy and outreach and administers the Medicare Rural Hospital Flexibility Program, which is a federal grant program that issues funding to eligible rural hospitals for patient services provided to Medicare and Medicaid beneficiaries (PORH n.d.a, n.d.b). In 2024 the office highlighted several successful initiatives in their impact report, including:

- Coordinating with higher education institutions to address the recruitment and retention of healthcare professionals in rural communities
- Providing technical assistance and sharing data with rural clinics and hospitals to support organizational capacity
- Convening statewide forums to develop recommendations for rural health issues to be shared with the governor for action planning

The 2023–2024 impact report identified that 70 percent of the office's funding was from federal sources and the majority of remaining funds were obligated from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (PORH 2024).

Wisconsin

In 2020, rural prosperity was brought to the forefront of Gov. Tony Evers’s administration’s priorities (Aspen Institute 2020). Even though there were 1.5 million people living in rural Wisconsin, it was apparent that the rural perspective was missing from the state’s economic development initiatives. To help address this issue, Governor Evers issued Executive Order Number 65, which established the Blue Ribbon Commission on Rural Prosperity. The commission’s findings formed the guideposts of Wisconsin’s vision for rural prosperity. To operationalize the commission’s recommendations, Governor Evers also created the Wisconsin Office of Rural Prosperity (Wisconsin ORP) as an office out of the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC) (Aspen Institute 2020). The WEDC and Wisconsin ORP share resources, provide technical support, and issue grant funding to rural communities through programs like Thrive Rural Wisconsin and the Wisconsin Investment Fund. More information about these programs and other initiatives that support rural Wisconsin is below.

As shown in Exhibit 8, rural Wisconsin is vast and covers about 70 percent of the state’s total land area. Roughly 25 percent of the state’s population lives in rural Wisconsin. The median household income in rural Wisconsin is \$59,369, which is approximately 17 percent lower than the urban median household income of \$71,792.

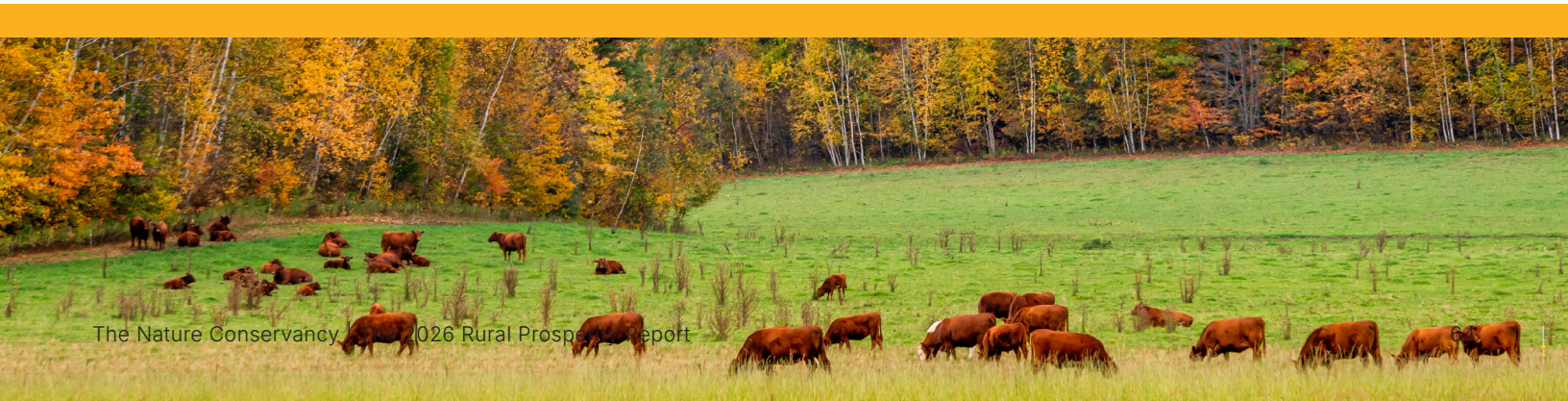
Exhibit 8

Wisconsin by the Numbers

	RURAL*	URBAN*	TOTAL
Land area	24.3 million acres (70 percent)	10.4 million acres (30 percent)	34.7 million acres
Population (2023)	1.5 million	4.4 million	5.9 million
Median household income (2021)	\$59,369	\$71,792	\$67,080

*The terms “rural” and “urban” refer to counties that are not part of a metropolitan area and those that are part of a metropolitan area, respectively, as defined by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (USDA Economic Research Service 2026).

Sources: USDA Economic Research Service March 2025 and September 2025



Initiatives

GOVERNOR'S BLUE RIBBON COMMISSION ON RURAL PROSPERITY

Created in 2020 by Executive Order Number 65, Governor Evers's Blue Ribbon Commission of Rural Prosperity was designed to gather public input on strategies for addressing challenges faced by residents in rural Wisconsin. When making appointments to the 12-member commission, the governor chose to appoint members who reflect Wisconsin's rural communities, including people who live and work in different regions of rural Wisconsin. In 2020, the commission hosted three virtual public engagement sessions that engaged more than 500 individuals, collected 45 written submissions from interested parties, and collectively attended 25 meetings with stakeholders (Aspen Institute 2020).

SUMMARY OF STAKEHOLDER INPUT

Across these means of engagement, the following key themes emerged:

- **Need for expanded capacity for rural leadership:** Due to shrinking populations and increased turnover, it is difficult for rural communities to maintain skilled leadership in local government. Local governments face fiscal challenges and state-imposed property tax levy limits can be restrictive and prevent progress. Municipalities also lack the capacity to take advantage of tax increment financing. Additionally, rural communities do not have the capacity or resources to hunt and apply for funding opportunities.
- **Importance of sustaining culture:** Rural Wisconsin communities are interested in opportunities to support local arts, culture, and placemaking. Wisconsin's rural communities are diverse and home to Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC). Wisconsin is also home to 11 federally recognized tribes and over 55 percent of the Native population lives in rural areas. Collaboration with rural BIPOC populations is critical to ensure prosperity in rural communities is based in equity.
- **Necessity of improving broadband access and maintaining connectivity:** Broadband access is critical to support the livelihood of rural communities. Stakeholders suggested that until broadband access

is expanded and widespread wireless adoption takes place, state agencies should focus on using existing media channels in rural communities (e.g., radio, local newspapers, and trusted local institutions) to disseminate information and opportunities.

- **Need for rural investments:** Stakeholders suggested areas for investment across multiple sectors to support rural prosperity, including child care, education, health and healthcare, housing, and rural economic development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The commission distilled the stakeholder input and suggestions into ten recommendations, which serve as a roadmap for the Wisconsin ORP and Wisconsin's rural areas:

1. Create a place within the state government to support rural communities and Native Nations
2. Maintain the governor's commitment to rural prosperity and making rural voices heard
3. Make existing Wisconsin ORP programs more rural friendly through collaboration across different state departments.
4. Distribute state and federal resources equitably to ensure rural and tribal communities have the same opportunities
5. Learn from other states
6. Update state laws that restrict communities' ability to innovate
7. Invest in University of Wisconsin Extension to serve as partners for rural and tribal communities
8. Adjust state business incentives to be inclusive of economic development in rural and tribal communities
9. Invest in broadband, child care, housing, healthcare, career development, transportation, and other elements deemed critical to economic development strategy
10. Continue the work of the Blue Ribbon Commission in helping lift rural voices to identify more solutions for rural prosperity (Aspen Institute 2020 and Wisconsin ORP n.d.a)

WISCONSIN OFFICE OF RURAL PROSPERITY

The Wisconsin ORP operates out of the WEDC as part of the Business and Community Development Division, which houses four other strategic offices. In 2025, the Business and Community Development Division had a budget of \$44.4 million, which was primarily sourced from state appropriations. However, because those dollars were spread across all five strategic offices, it is unclear how much funding was directed to the Wisconsin ORP (WEDC 2024). The Wisconsin ORP consists of five staff members, including the senior director (Wisconsin ORP n.d.c). Formed in conjunction with the Blue Ribbon Commission on Rural Prosperity, the office serves as a resource for rural communities and deliver toolkits, trainings, and share funding opportunities related to the Blue Ribbon Commission's mission (WEDC 2022). The Wisconsin ORP also fosters a network of state and regional partnerships to enhance rural capacity, assist in building relationships between rural and tribal communities, promote sustainable energy solutions, and advance innovation (Wisconsin ORP n.d.b).

The office's strategic priorities and related programs and initiatives include:

- Entrepreneurship and rural industry
 - **Wisconsin Cooperative Development Grant:** This grant program deploys funds that support existing or establish new cooperative businesses. These businesses can use the funding to cover consulting, business planning, feasibility studies, and legal and accounting fees for business development or expansion. Grant awards are capped at \$50,000 (WEDC n.d.a).
- Housing development
 - **Organizing Developer Tours Toolkit:** The toolkit outlines how communities can host a successful developer tour to encourage housing developments in their communities. The toolkit also contains sample meeting materials and resources (WEDC n.d.b).
- Placemaking
 - The office has not developed specific programs tailored for placemaking, but it partners with organizations such as Wisconsin Humanities, the Citizens' Institute on Rural Design, and the Wisconsin Office of Outdoor Recreation to support placemaking efforts in rural areas (Wisconsin ORP n.d.c):

- Broadband
 - **Connecting Wisconsin:** A Broadband Toolkit for Rural Economic Development: This toolkit is designed to help educate rural leadership about broadband, its benefits, how communities can conduct due diligence and planning for broadband expansion, and what funding opportunities are available (Wisconsin ORP n.d.b).
- Leadership and organization development
 - **Capacity Building Grants:** The purpose of this grant program is to expand regional collaboration and support activities necessary for economic development planning. Eligible applicants include local governments, economic development organizations, nonprofit organizations, and tribal organizations. Single municipalities are not eligible as the program's intent is to promote regional collaboration. In 2026, \$500,000 was made available for grants, with award sizes up to \$50,000 (WEDC 2025).
 - **Thrive Rural Wisconsin:** Led by the Wisconsin ORP and funded by the state, the Thrive Rural Wisconsin program delivers project management assistance, technical assistance, and financial support for the advancement of collaboration between a community's economic development partners. The program expands local capacity to allow communities to apply for and accept state and federal funding. Awards are available for up to \$50,000. In 2025, \$250,000 in grants were distributed through the Thrive Rural Wisconsin program (WEDC 2025).

WISCONSIN INVESTMENT FUND

Launched in 2024 with funding from the federal State Small Business Credit Initiative program, the Wisconsin Investment Fund partners with venture capital funders to provide seed money for start-up organizations. The venture funds match investment from the Wisconsin Investment Fund with private-equity capital at a one-to-one basis, doubling the capital available for start-ups. The program was implemented by the WEDC and partners with five local venture capital funds to distribute to investments. Using investment returns, the fund is able to continue to invest in future start-up companies. To apply, entrepreneurs reach out to the partnered venture capitalist firms. This program is available to entrepreneurs in all Wisconsin communities (WEDC n.d.c).

References

- Abram, Josh. 2020. "SB 20-002: Final Fiscal Note." Colorado Legislative Council Staff. https://leg.colorado.gov/bill_files/59638/download
- Asche, Kelly. 2026. "The State of Rural 2026." Minnesota Center for Rural Policy and Development, March. <https://www.ruralmn.org/the-state-of-rural-2026/>
- Asche, Kelly and Marnie Werner. 2021. "The State of Rural—2021 Update." Minnesota Center for Rural Policy and Development, December. <https://www.ruralmn.org/the-state-of-rural-2/>
- Aspen Institute. 2021. Rural Voices for Prosperity: A Report of the Governor's Blue Ribbon Commission on Rural Prosperity. WEDC. <https://ruralwi.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Governors-Blue-Ribbon-Commission-Report.pdf>
- Bennett Thrasher. 2025. Georgia HEART Hospital Program: Financial Statements December 31, 2024 and 2023. Bennett Thrasher. <https://www.georgiaheart.org/library/doclib/2025/05/2024-Georgia-HEART-Audited-Financials.pdf>
- Center for Rural Pennsylvania. 2026. 2027 Research Grant Program Request for Proposals. Center for Rural Pennsylvania. <https://www.rural.pa.gov/download.cfm?file=Resources/PDFs/2027%20Request%20for%20Proposals%20Web.pdf>
- . n.d.a. "About." Center for Rural Pennsylvania. Accessed April 7, 2026. <https://www.rural.pa.gov/about>
- . n.d.b. "Center for Rural Pennsylvania Data Hub." Center for Rural Pennsylvania. Accessed April 7, 2026. <https://center-for-rural-pennsylvania-data-hub-ruralpa.hub.arcgis.com/>
- . n.d.c. "Pennsylvania Rural Population Revitalization Commission." Center for Rural Pennsylvania, Accessed April 7, 2026. <https://www.rural.pa.gov/commission>
- . n.d.d. "Rural Pennsylvania Revitalization Act." Center for Rural Pennsylvania. Accessed April 7, 2026. <https://www.rural.pa.gov/about-center/enabling-legislation#snav-content1>
- . n.d.e. "Staff." Center for Rural Pennsylvania. Accessed April 7, 2026. <https://www.rural.pa.gov/about-center/staff>
- Cline, Michael. 2023. "15 Things We Learned from the New 2020 Census Data." North Carolina Office of State Management and Budget, May 25. <https://www.osbm.nc.gov/blog/2023/05/25/15-things-we-learned-new-2020-census-data>
- Colorado Department of Local Affairs (DOLA). n.d.a. "Roadmap Program." Colorado DOLA. Accessed March 16, 2026. <https://coresiliency.colorado.gov/roadmap-program>
- . n.d.b. "Rural Economic Development Initiative Awards." Colorado DOLA. Accessed March 16, 2026. <https://dlg.colorado.gov/rural-economic-development-initiative-awards>
- . n.d.c. "Rural Economic Development Initiative Notice of Funding Availability." Colorado DOLA. Accessed March 16, 2026. <https://dlg.colorado.gov/REDI-notice-of-funding-availability>
- Colorado General Assembly. June 29, 2020. "SB20-002: Rural Economic Development Initiative Grant Program." <https://leg.colorado.gov/bills/SB20-002>
- . June 15, 2021. "SB21-204: Rural Economic Development Initiative Grant Program Funding." <https://leg.colorado.gov/bills/SB21-204>
- . August 7, 2023. "SB23-006: Creation of the Rural Opportunity Office." <https://leg.colorado.gov/bills/sb23-006>
- Colorado Governor Jared Polis. 2019. "Gov. Polis Releases Rural Economic Blueprint." Colorado Governor Jared Polis, November 23. <https://www.colorado.gov/governor/news/gov-polis-releases-rural-economic-blueprint>
- Colorado Office of Economic Development and International Trade (OEDIT). 2025. Elevating Colorado: A

- Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) for the State of Colorado. Colorado OEDIT. https://oedit.colorado.gov/sites/coedit/files/documents/CEDS_2025_Accessible_092225%20FINAL.pdf
- . n.d.a. "Rural Exchange." Colorado OEDIT. Accessed March 16, 2026. <https://oedit.colorado.gov/programs-and-funding/regional-partners/rural-exchange>
- . n.d.b. "Rural Jump-Start Program." Colorado OEDIT. Accessed March 16, 2026. <https://oedit.colorado.gov/rural-jump-start-program>
- . n.d.c. "Rural Opportunity Office." Colorado OEDIT. Accessed March 16, 2026. <https://oedit.colorado.gov/rural-opportunity-office>
- Colorado Office of the State Auditor. 2025. Rural Jump-Start Tax Expenditures. Colorado Office of the State Auditor. https://content.leg.colorado.gov/sites/default/files/2025-te2_rural_jump-start_tax_expenditures-accessible.pdf
- Colorado Outdoor Recreation Industry Office (OREC). n.d. "OREC Rural Technical Assistance Program." OREC. Accessed March 16, 2026. <https://oedit.colorado.gov/about/oedit-divisions/colorado-outdoor-recreation-industry-office/orec-rural-technical-assistance>
- Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. 2025. "Shapiro Administration Announces Recipients of the Nation's First Agricultural Innovation Grant to Continue Pennsylvania's Legacy as a National Leader in Agriculture." Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. <https://www.pa.gov/governor/newsroom/2025-press-releases/shapiro-administration-announces-recipients-of-the-nation-s-firs>
- . n.d. "Apply for the Agricultural Innovation Grant." Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Accessed April 7, 2026. <https://www.pa.gov/services/pda/apply-for-the-agricultural-innovation-grant>
- Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Office of the Governor. 2026. Governor Josh Shapiro Executive Budget 2026–2027. Pennsylvania Office of the Budget. <https://www.pa.gov/content/dam/copapwp-pagov/en/budget/documents/publications-and-reports/commonwealthbudget/2026-27-budget-documents/2026-27%20budget%20document.web.v.3.pdf>
- Georgia Chamber. n.d. "The Center for Rural Prosperity." Georgia Chamber. Accessed April 6, 2026. <https://www.gachamber.com/center-for-rural-prosperity/>
- Georgia Department of Agriculture (GDA). 2025. "Georgia's Rural Center Moves Under the Georgia Department of Agriculture, Charlie Fiveash Hired as Center's New Executive Director." GDA. <https://www.agr.state.ga.us/pr/georgias-rural-center-moves-under-georgia-department-agriculture-charlie-fiveash-hired-centers>
- Georgia Department of Economic Development (GDEcD). 2026. "Gov. Kemp Announces Third Round of Rural Site Development Grants." GDEcD. <https://georgia.org/press-release/gov-kemp-announces-third-round-rural-site-development-grants>
- . n.d.a. "From Global to Local: Industries the Put Georgia on the Map." GDEcD. Accessed April 6, 2026. <https://georgia.org/blog/global-local-industries-put-georgia-map>
- . n.d.b. "Georgia Ready for Accelerated Development (GRAD)." GDEcD. Accessed April 6, 2026. <https://georgia.org/grad-certified-sites/application>
- . n.d.c. "Georgia Rural Site Development Program." GDEcD. Accessed April 6, 2026. <https://georgia.org/georgia-rural-site-development-program>
- Georgia HEART Hospital Program. n.d.a. "About Georgia HEART." Georgia HEART Hospital Program. Accessed April 6, 2026. <https://www.georgiaheart.org/about>
- . n.d.b. "Legislation." Georgia HEART Hospital Program. Accessed April 6, 2026. <https://www.georgiaheart.org/about/page/legislation>
- . n.d.c. "Results." Georgia HEART Hospital Program. Accessed April 6, 2026. <https://www.georgiaheart.org/results>

Georgia House of Representatives Rural Development Council (RDC). n.d. 2023 Overview and Recommendations. State of Georgia House of Representatives. https://www.house.ga.gov/Documents/CommitteeDocuments/2023/Rural_Development_Council/House_Rural_Development_Council_2023_Final_Report.pdf

Georgia's Rural Center. 2023. "PRESS RELEASE: Georgia's Rural Center Marks Fifth Anniversary, Celebrates 'Phenomenal' Return on Investment." Georgia's Rural Center. https://www.ruralga.org/_files/ugd/382612_05c3bccc3fea4d909fb4eae9eb5273f3.pdf

—. n.d.a. 24–25 Annual Report. Georgia's Rural Center. Accessed April 6, 2026. https://www.ruralga.org/_files/ugd/382612_135b50472c3145388dccf23c01b4f9e3.pdf

—. n.d.b. "Our Story." Center for Rural Prosperity and Innovation. Accessed April 6, 2026. <https://www.ruralga.org/our-story>

Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA). 2024. "III.B. Overview of the State – Iowa – 2024." U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://mchb.tvisdata.hrsa.gov/Narratives/Overview/75c5f239-9cab-4800-8a7e-fac56f467355>

Indiana Office of Community and Rural Affairs (OCRA). 2024. The Indiana Office of Community and Rural Affairs 2024 Annual Report. OCRA. https://www.in.gov/ocra/files/OCRA_2024-Annual-Report_.pdf

—. 2025. "OCRA Strategic Budget Plan for FY26–27." OCRA. <https://www.in.gov/sba/files/BU-38-Lt.-Governor-Office-of-Community-and-Rural-Affairs-Approved-FY-2026-Plan-Final.pdf>

—. n.d.a. "About." OCRA. Accessed April 6, 2026. <https://www.in.gov/ocra/about/>

—. n.d.b. "Building Socially Connected Communities Program." OCRA. Accessed April 6, 2026. <https://www.in.gov/ocra/bssc/>

—. n.d.c. "Indiana Connectivity Program." OCRA. Accessed April 6, 2026. <https://www.in.gov/ocra/broadband/icp/>

—. n.d.d. "Next Level Connections." OCRA. Accessed April 6, 2026. <https://www.in.gov/ocra/nlc/>

—. n.d.e. "PreservINg Main Street." OCRA. Accessed April 6, 2026. <https://www.in.gov/ocra/preserving-main-street/>

—. n.d.f. "Rural Empowerment and Development Program." OCRA. Accessed April 6, 2026. <https://www.in.gov/ocra/red/>

—. n.d.g. "Stellar Pathways Program." OCRA. Accessed April 6, 2026. <https://www.in.gov/ocra/stellar/>

—. n.d.h. Stellar Pathways Program Application Guidance and Evaluation Framework. OCRA. Accessed April 6, 2026. <https://www.in.gov/ocra/strategic-initiatives/files/Stellar-Program-Guide.pdf>

—. n.d.i. "What Is Indiana Main Street." OCRA. Accessed April 6, 2026. <https://www.in.gov/ocra/mainstreet/what-is-indiana-main-street/>

Indiana Rural Health Association's Data Committee. 2024. 2025 Rural Health in Indiana. Indiana Rural Health Association. https://www.indianaruralhealth.org/clientuploads/resources/State_Rural_Health_Reports/IRHA_2025_Indiana_State_Rural_Health_Report_Version_1.0.pdf

Indiana Small Business Development Center (ISBDC). 2023. Indiana Small Business Development Center: 2022 Annual Report. ISBDC. <https://isbdc.org/files/annual-reports/2022-ISBDC-Annual-Report.pdf>

—. n.d.a. "About." ISBDC. Accessed April 6, 2026. <https://www.isbdc.org/about/>

—. n.d.b. "Agribusiness Initiative." ISBDC. Accessed April 6, 2026. <https://www.isbdc.org/programs/agribusiness-initiative/>

—. n.d.c. "Indiana Technical Assistance Program (INTAP)." ISBDC. Accessed April 6, 2026. <https://www.isbdc.org/programs/INTAP/>

- . n.d.d. "Manufacturing Initiative." ISBDC. Accessed April 6, 2026. <https://www.isbdc.org/programs/manufacturing-initiative/>
- Indiana State Budget Agency. n.d. "2025–2027 As-Passed Budget." Indiana State Budget Agency. Accessed April 6, 2026. <https://www.in.gov/sba/budget-information/budget-data/2025-2027-budget/2025-2027-as-passed-budget/>
- Iowa Council of Foundations and the Iowa Economic Development Authority. 2025. Endow Iowa Tax Credit and County Endowment Fund Programs—2024: A Report to the Governor and the Iowa Legislature. IEDFA. <https://opportunityiowa.gov/media/6758/download?inline>
- Iowa Economic Development and Finance Authority (IEDFA). 2023. Governor's Empower Rural Iowa Initiative Annual Report December 2023. IEDFA. https://iowaeconomicdevelopment-site.azurewebsites.net/UserDocs/eri_report_112023.pdf
- . 2025a. Governor's Empower Rural Iowa Initiative Annual Report December 2025. IEDFA. <https://opportunityiowa.gov/media/7461/download?inline>
- . 2025b. Rural Boost Grant Guidelines. IEDFA. <https://opportunityiowa.gov/media/6856/download?inline>
- . n.d.a. "2026 Iowa Leadership Bootcamp and Exchange." State of Iowa. Accessed April 6, 2026. <https://opportunityiowa.gov/events/2026-iowa-leadership-bootcamp-and-exchange>
- . n.d.b. "Center for Rural Revitalization." State of Iowa. Accessed April 6, 2026. <https://opportunityiowa.gov/community/revitalization/center-rural-revitalization>
- . n.d.c. "Empower Rural Iowa Task Forces." State of Iowa. Accessed April 6, 2026. <https://opportunityiowa.gov/about/boards/empower-rural-iowa-task-forces>
- . n.d.d. "Endow Iowa." State of Iowa. Accessed April 6, 2026. <https://opportunityiowa.gov/community/revitalization/endow-iowa>
- . n.d.e. "Governor's Empower Rural Iowa Initiative Iowa United First Aid." IEDFA. Accessed April 6, 2026. <https://opportunityiowa.gov/media/7390/download?inline>
- . n.d.f. "Iowa United First Aid Grant Program." State of Iowa. Accessed April 6, 2026. <https://opportunityiowa.gov/community/revitalization/center-rural-revitalization/iowa-united-first-aid-grant-program>
- . n.d.g. "Rural BOOST Program." State of Iowa. Accessed April 6, 2026. <https://opportunityiowa.gov/community/revitalization/center-rural-revitalization/rural-boost-program>
- . n.d.h. "Rural Child Care Planning Program." State of Iowa. Accessed April 6, 2026. <https://opportunityiowa.gov/community/revitalization/center-rural-revitalization/rural-child-care-planning-program>
- . n.d.i. "Rural Innovation Grant Program." State of Iowa. Accessed April 6, 2026. <https://opportunityiowa.gov/community/revitalization/center-rural-revitalization/rural-innovation-grant-program>
- . n.d.j. "Rural Leadership Bootcamp Program." State of Iowa. Accessed April 6, 2026. <https://opportunityiowa.gov/community/revitalization/center-rural-revitalization/rural-leadership-bootcamp-program>
- Iowa Governor Kim Reynolds. 2024. "State of Iowa Awards \$190,000 to Strengthen Rural Communities Across Iowa." State of Iowa. <https://governor.iowa.gov/press-release/2024-10-02/state-iowa-awards-190000-strengthen-rural-communities-across-iowa>
- Iowa IAppoint. n.d. "Board Profile: Empower Rural Iowa Initiative." State of Iowa. Accessed April 6, 2026. <https://boards-iappoint.iowa.gov/boards/162>
- Iowa Rural Development Council. n.d. "About Us." Iowa Rural Development Council. Accessed April 6, 2026. <https://iowardc.org/iowa-rural-vitality-coalition/>
- Kian, Ava. 2024. "Otter Tail County Is Growing, Defying Rural Population Trends." Twin Cities Business, August 29.

<https://tcbmag.com/otter-tail-county-is-growing-defying-rural-population-trends/>

Longwoods International. 2023. 2023 Minnesota Halo Effect Research. Longwoods International. https://mn.gov/tourism-industry/assets/Minnesota%202023%20Halo%20Report_tcm1135-586904.pdf

Main Street America. n.d. "About." National Main Street Center, Inc. Accessed April 6, 2026. <https://mainstreet.org/>

Minnesota Center for Rural Policy and Development. n.d. "About Us." Minnesota Center for Rural Policy and Development. Accessed April 6, 2026. <https://www.ruralmn.org/about-us/>

Minnesota Department of Iron Range Resources and Rehabilitation (IRRR). 2025. Minnesota Department of Iron Range Resources and Rehabilitation Annual Report Fiscal Year 2025. IRRR. https://mn.gov/irrrb/assets/2025%20Annual%20Report%20tagged_tcm1047-739094.pdf

—. 2026. Taconite Assistance Area Resource Guide. IRRR. https://mn.gov/irrrb/assets/2026%20Resource%20Guide%20tagged_tcm1047-739095.pdf

—. n.d. "Staff Directory." IRRR. Accessed April 9, 2026. <https://mn.gov/irrrb/about-us/who-we-are/staff-directory.jsp>

Minnesota Long-Range Planning. n.d.a. "About." Minnesota Management and Budget. Accessed April 6, 2026. <https://mn.gov/mmb/planning/about/>

—. n.d.b. "Dreams to Direction." Minnesota Management and Budget. Accessed April 6, 2026. <https://mn.gov/mmb/planning/dreams-to-direction/>

—. n.d.c. Long-Range Planning Issue Brief: Rural Prosperity. Minnesota Long-Range Planning Team. Accessed April 6, 2026. <https://mn.gov/mmb-stat/long-range-planning/issue-briefs/rural-prosperity.pdf>

Minnesota Office of Broadband Development. 2024. "Broadband Infrastructure Grant 2024 Round 10 (FY25) Grant Program Overview." Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development. https://mn.gov/deed/assets/broadband-round10-webinar_tcm1045-615033.pdf

—. n.d. "Broadband Grant Program." Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development. Accessed April 6, 2026. <https://mn.gov/deed/programs-services/broadband/grant-program/>

Minnesota Office of the Revisor of Statutes. 2025a. "2025 Minnesota Statutes: 116J.421 Rural Policy and Development Center." Minnesota Legislature. <https://www.revisor.mn.gov/statutes/cite/116j.421>

—. 2025b. "2025 Minnesota Statutes: 298.24 Tax on Taconite and Iron Sulphides." Minnesota Legislature. <https://www.revisor.mn.gov/statutes/2025/cite/298.24>

NC Main Street and Rural Planning Center. 2024. The Economic Impact of Main Street & Rural Planning in North Carolina: 2024 Annual Report. North Carolina Department of Commerce.

North Carolina Department of Commerce (NC Commerce). March 2024. "Downtown Development Funds." State of North Carolina. <https://www.commerce.nc.gov/grants-incentives/downtown-development-funds>

—. July 2024. "Utility Account." State of North Carolina. <https://www.commerce.nc.gov/grants-incentives/public-infrastructure-funds/utility-account>

—. August 2024. "Rural Building Reuse Program." State of North Carolina. <https://www.commerce.nc.gov/grants-incentives/building-or-site-funds/building-reuse/building-reuse-state-rural-grants>

—. August 2025. "Rural Infrastructure Authority." State of North Carolina. <https://www.commerce.nc.gov/about-us/boards-commissions/rural-infrastructure-authority>

—. December 12, 2025. "Rural Demolition Program." State of North Carolina. <https://www.commerce.nc.gov/grants-incentives/building-or-site-funds/demolition/demolition-state-rural-grants>

—. December 17, 2025. "Rural Infrastructure Program." State of North Carolina. <https://www.commerce.nc.gov/>

grants-incentives/public-infrastructure-funds/infrastructure-state-rural-grants

—. 2026. "NC Rural Planning Program." State of North Carolina. <https://www.commerce.nc.gov/about-us/divisions-programs/rural-economic-development-division/nc-main-street-rural-planning-center/nc-rural-planning-program>

—. n.d.a. "Appalachian Regional Commission." State of North Carolina. Accessed April 7, 2026. <https://www.commerce.nc.gov/about-us/divisions-programs/rural-economic-development-division/appalachian-regional-commission#Tab-InvestmentPriorities-158>

—. n.d.b. "Criteria or Guidelines | Rural Ready Sites Program Criteria." State of North Carolina. Accessed April 7, 2026. <https://www.commerce.nc.gov/documents/criteria-or-guidelines-rural-ready-sites-program-criteria>

North Carolina General Assembly. 2013. "Senate Bill 402: Appropriations Act of 2013." North Carolina General Assembly. <https://www.ncleg.gov/BillLookup/2013/S402>

North Carolina Office of the Governor Josh Stein. 2026. "Governor Stein Announces \$43 Million of Investment and 206 New Jobs for North Carolina." North Carolina Office of the Governor. <https://governor.nc.gov/news/press-releases/2026/02/19/governor-stein-announces-43-million-investment-and-206-new-jobs-rural-north-carolina>

—. n.d. "North Carolina Rural Infrastructure Authority." North Carolina Office of the Governor. Accessed April 7, 2026. <https://bc.governor.nc.gov/BoardDetails/202e5c1d-db98-e911-a98b-001dd8308076>

Nunez, Matt. 2026. "RTAP Implementation_Background Research Spreadsheet." OREC. Unpublished Data.

Pennsylvania Bulletin. 2026. "Pennsylvania Agriculture Innovation Grant Program; 2025–2026 Program Guidelines." Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. <https://www.pacodeandbulletin.gov/Display/pabull?file=/secure/pabulletin/data/vol56/56-4/113.html>

Pennsylvania General Assembly. June 10, 2024. "Act No. 21 of 2024." Pennsylvania General Assembly. <https://www.palegis.us/statutes/unconsolidated/law-information?sessYr=2024&sessInd=0&actNum=21>

—. September 29, 2025. "House Bill 1667." Pennsylvania General Assembly. <https://www.palegis.us/legislation/bills/2025/hb1667>

Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health (PORH). 2024. 2023–24 Impact Report. PORH. <https://www.porh.psu.edu/wp-content/uploads/PORH-Annual-Report.23-24.pdf>

—. n.d.a. "About PORH." PORH. Accessed April 7, 2026. <https://www.porh.psu.edu/about-porh/>

—. n.d.b. "FLEX Executive Summary." PORH. Accessed April 7, 2026. <https://www.porh.psu.edu/hospital-and-health-system-initiatives/medicare-rural-hospital-flexibility-program-flex/flex-executive-summary/>

Pino, Louis. 2024. "HB 24-1001: Final Fiscal Note." Colorado Legislative Council Staff. https://leg.colorado.gov/bill_files/47970/download

Ross, Tracy, and Tamara Chuang. 2024. "What's Working | How the Pandemic Helped Provide Permanent Funding for Colorado's Economic Development." The Colorado Sun, February 6. <https://coloradosun.com/2024/02/03/rural-colorado-economic-development-jobs/>

Southeast Crescent Regional Commission (SCRC). 2024. "Southeast Crescent Regional Commission Announces State Economic and Infrastructure Development (SEID) Grant Recipients in North Carolina." SCRC, July 17. <https://scrc.gov/index.php/news-events/southeast-crescent-regional-commission-announces-state-economic-and-infrastructure-2>

State of Indiana. 2026. "Regional Grants." State of Indiana. <https://www.in.gov/grow-rural-health/regional-grants/>

State of North Carolina Office of State Budget and Management. 2025. "Certified Budget Summary By Purpose Biennium 2025–27: Commerce - General." State of North Carolina Office of State Budget and Management. <https://>

www.osbm.nc.gov/media/4612/download?attachment

USDA Economic Research Service. March 2025. "State Fact Sheets—State Data." USDA Economic Research Service. <https://data.ers.usda.gov/reports.aspx?ID=4035>

—. September 2025. "Atlas of Rural and Small-Town America." USDA Economic Research Service. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/atlas-of-rural-and-small-town-america>

—. February 2026. "Rural Classifications—What Is Rural?" USDA Economic Research Service. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/rural-economy-population/rural-classifications/what-is-rural>

U.S. Office of the Surgeon General. 2023. Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community. U.S. Office of the Surgeon General. <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>

Winchester, Benjamin S. 2012. Continuing the Trend: The Brain Gain of the Newcomers: A Generational Analysis of Rural Minnesota Migration, 1990–2010. University of Minnesota Extension. <https://conservancy.umn.edu/items/ba483aee-a6b9-4bcd-a30e-addcc49cfc86>

Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC). 2022. "Focus on Rural Wisconsin." WEDC. <https://wedc.org/focus-on-rural-wisconsin/>

—. 2024. Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation Operations and Budget Plan Fiscal Year 2025. WEDC. https://wedc.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/WEDC_OperationsBudgetPlan_FY25-Final.pdf

—. 2025. Capacity Building Program: Program Guidelines for Fiscal Year 2026. WEDC, https://wedcazurecdn.blob.core.windows.net/public/OnlineDirectoryProgramGuidelines/BCD_CB_FY26_PG.pdf

—. n.d.a. Apply for a Cooperative Development Grant. WEDC. Accessed April 7, 2026. <https://wedc.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/FY26-Coop-Development-Grant.pdf>

—. n.d.b. Organizing Developer Tools: A Tool for Rural Real Estate Success. WEDC. Accessed April 7, 2026. <https://ruralwi.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/WEDC-ORP-Developer-Tour-Toolkit.pdf>

—. n.d.c. "Wisconsin Investment Fund." WEDC. Accessed April 7, 2026. <https://wedc.org/innovate-in-wisconsin/wisconsin-investment-fund/>

Wisconsin Office of Rural Prosperity (Wisconsin ORP). n.d.a. "Blue Ribbon Commission." WEDC. Accessed April 7, 2026. <https://ruralwi.com/blue-ribbon-commission/>

—. n.d.b. "Connecting Wisconsin: A Broadband Toolkit for Rural Economic Development." WEDC. Accessed April 7, 2026. <https://ruralwi.com/rural-priorities/broadband-home/>

—. n.d.c. "Placemaking." WEDC. Accessed April 7, 2026. <https://ruralwi.com/rural-priorities/placemaking/>

—. n.d.d. "Who We Are." WEDC. Accessed April 7, 2026. <https://ruralwi.com/about-us/>

Appendix C

Public Funding of Michigan's Natural Resources: Sources, Trends, and Pressures

A Michigan Department of Natural
Resources Case Study

Introduction

Michigan's natural resources are nothing short of extraordinary, consisting of freshwater systems, extensive forests, and highly productive agricultural soils. The state has 3,300 miles of Great Lakes shoreline, nearly 11,000 inland lakes, more than 52,000 miles of streams and rivers, over 45,000 farms, 20.1 million acres of forests, and approximately 8.5 million acres of public land. These resources are foundational to the state's economy, offer a wide range of economic opportunities to its residents and businesses, and provide diverse, high-quality recreational opportunities for residents and visitors.

Michigan's economy depends on the availability of quality, well-managed natural resource assets; agriculture, forestry, and outdoor recreation are all key economic drivers. Combined, they support over a million jobs and contribute more than \$165 billion annually to the state's economy.

While three state agencies—the Department of Natural Resources (DNR), the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (MDARD), and the Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy (EGLE)—play distinct roles in helping Michiganders care for the state's natural resources, this report will focus on the DNR, the agency primarily responsible for resource management. The DNR oversees approximately 4.6 million acres of public land. This includes 3.9 million acres of state forests (the largest state forest system in the nation), 103 state parks and recreation areas, more than 1,000 boating access sites, 178 state game and wildlife areas, and over 13,400 miles of state-designated trails (DNR n.d.a, -i, -k, -l, -o).

Despite the scale and importance of these responsibilities, the DNR funding model described in detail later in this report is under increasing strain. The state's funding structure for the DNR is unique among government agencies, relying heavily on user fees and earned revenue—particularly from hunting and fishing license sales, campground and boat slip rental fees, and timber sales. Some of these revenue sources have declined over time as participation in outdoor activities has evolved with consumer preferences. At the same time, demand for outdoor recreation and other DNR services continues to grow, placing additional pressure on the resources and infrastructure that support their use and enjoyment. This was highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic, when state park visitation surged.

Interested parties, including The Nature Conservancy (TNC), have raised concerns that Michigan's current natural resources management (NRM) funding model is inadequate to meet the DNR's obligations and the needs of the state's extensive natural resource assets. In response, TNC engaged Public Sector Consultants to examine Michigan's NRM funding structure to better understand how it could be modified to ensure more sustainable management of the state's natural resources and of the agency charged with delivering those management services.

This report provides an overview of the DNR's funding model, including key funding sources, historical trends, and structural considerations that shape the state's ability to manage its natural resources effectively.

NRM Funding in Michigan

The Michigan DNR is responsible for managing the state's natural resources through the Fisheries Division, Wildlife Division, Forest Resources Division (including wildfire management), and Parks and Recreation Division. In addition, the DNR's Law Enforcement Division functions across all of these resource areas.

The State of Michigan finances its public trust responsibilities for fish, wildlife, and the habitats that support them through the American System of Conservation Funding, which relies on hunting and fishing license sales and excise taxes on specific hunting and fishing equipment for revenue (AWFA n.d.). Although this user-pay system once adequately supported the DNR, it has become increasingly unsustainable. The number of hunters and anglers in the state has been steadily decreasing, and in turn, so has the revenue generated by hunting and fishing license sales and related purchases.

Management of forests, including fire management, was once primarily funded through general taxes. The lands that make up the state forest system were mostly abandoned, cutover lands that required extensive restoration. Starting in the 1990s, as these forests regained productivity, funding shifted to timber sales. This is beneficial because it provides raw materials for an important economic sector while maintaining infrastructure used for both forestry and recreation. However, this funding depends on the health of the forest products industry, and during downturns in that

industry, revenue is insufficient to cover the wildfire management and infrastructure maintenance needs of the forests.

Outdoor recreation is funded through various user fees; however, it is important to note that any resident or visitor can enter and enjoy any state park, trail, recreation area, or forest for free. The service fees are charged for specific activities, such as driving a motor vehicle into a park or recreation area, occupying a campground or boat slip, launching a boat, or obtaining a trail permit for a snowmobile or off-road vehicle (ORV). Aligning these fee structures with constantly changing and evolving recreational demand, generating adequate revenue to meet operational, facility, and infrastructure maintenance needs, while keeping public recreational opportunities affordable for all Michigan citizens, has proven challenging.

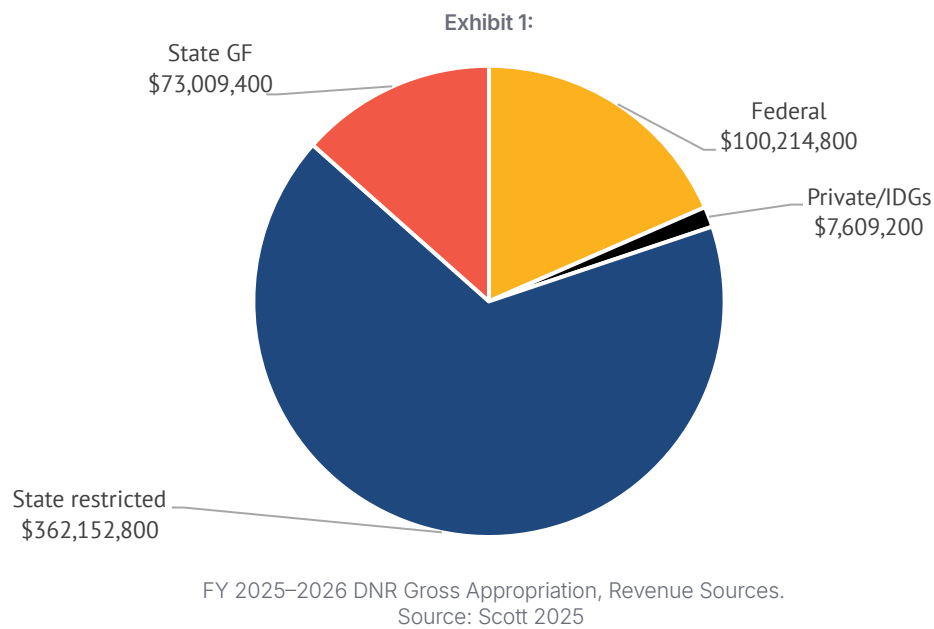
Finally, because of these numerous user-pay mechanisms, many users have insisted on safeguards and limitations to ensure that the fees they pay are used only to manage the resource they are concerned with. This results in parts of the DNR's budget appearing overfunded while other areas lack resources. This complicated, disjointed funding model is no longer sufficient to support the DNR's obligations. Former DNR Director Keith Creagh succinctly articulated the problem: "simply put: the cost of conservation has gone up, while the funding model has stood still" (Creagh and Nichols 2026).

Funding Levels over Time

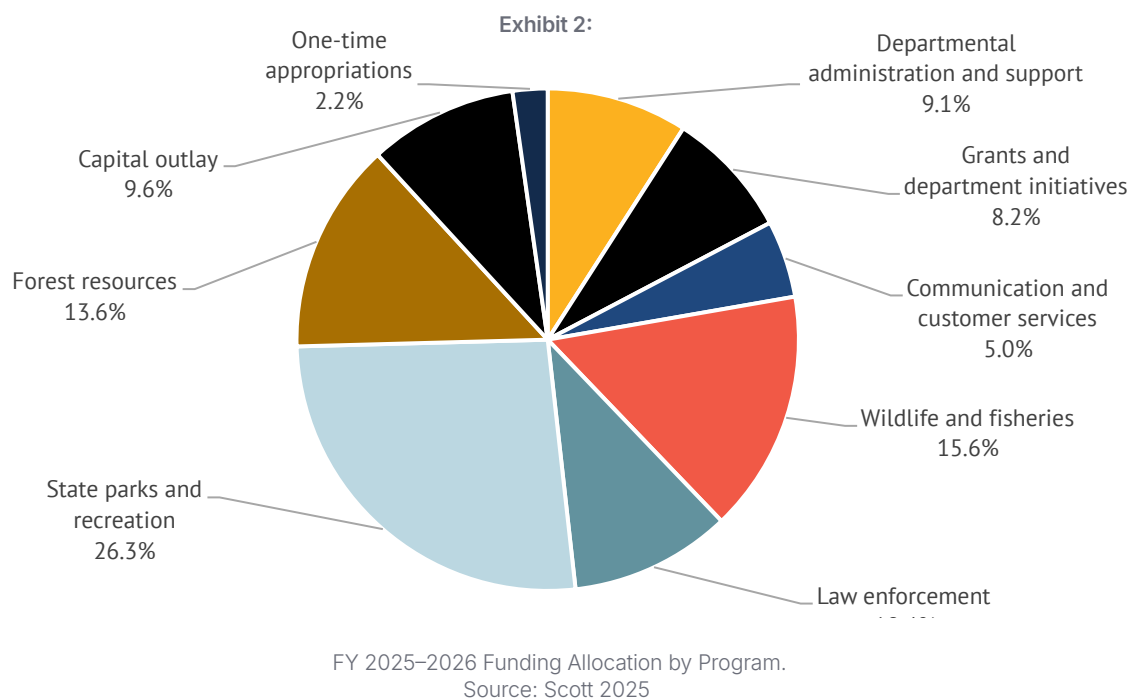
Over the past two decades, DNR funding has increased at a modest rate (an average of 3.3 percent annually from 2000 to 2020), but it has not kept pace with the costs of managing the state's natural resource assets (Michigan Senate Fiscal Agency 2026). As the popularity of using parks and public lands has continued to grow, so have DNR operations and maintenance costs, resulting in strained budgets and a maintenance backlog in state parks alone estimated at over \$300 million in 2025 (James 2023; Herberg and House 2025).

Current Funding

In fiscal year (FY) 2025–2026, the majority (66.7 percent) of the DNR’s budget consisted of state restricted funds, which are primarily supported by user fees. As shown in Exhibit 1, federal revenue sources—such as the Pittman-Robertson and Dingell-Johnson programs—comprised the next largest portion of the DNR’s budget (18.4 percent), followed by state general fund/general purpose (GF) revenue (13.4 percent), and private revenue (e.g., grants and gifts) along with interdepartmental grants (IDGs)/transfers (1.4 percent). This funding structure underscores the DNR’s heavy reliance on user-based and restricted revenues, which are tied to participation levels and fee structures that have not consistently kept pace with inflation.



The revenue sources detailed above are used to fund the agency’s operations and major programs. In FY 2025–26, the \$543.2 million budget was allocated across five resource divisions, as well as administration, grants, and other agency responsibilities. Exhibit 2 shows the funding allocation by program.



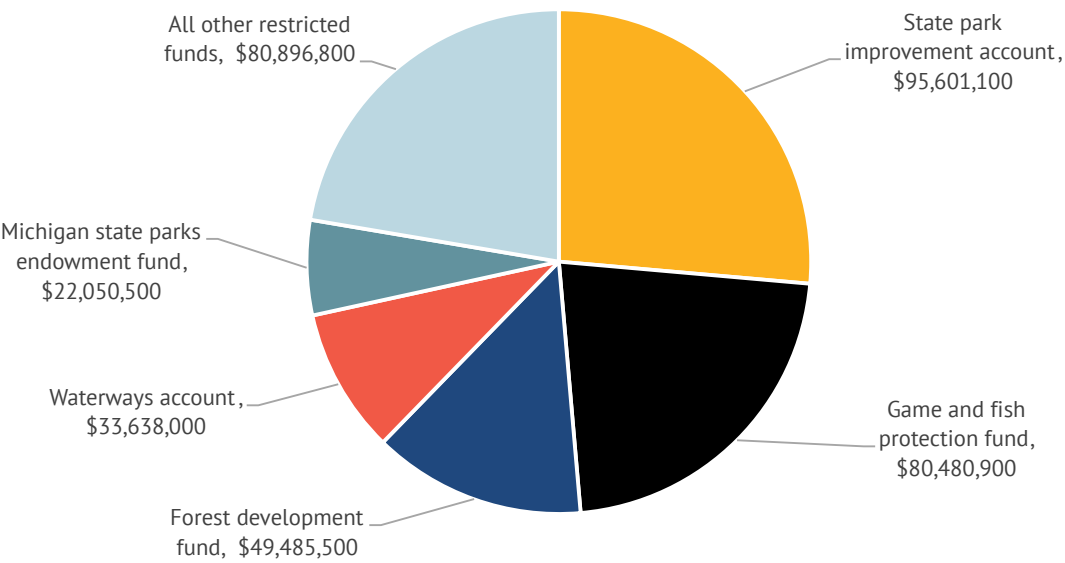
Funding Sources

As outlined in Exhibit 1, there are four categories of funding sources for the DNR: state restricted revenue, federal funding, GF revenue, and private revenue along with IDG/transfers.

State Restricted Revenue

State restricted revenue sources, which are available only for specific purposes based on restrictions put forth in the Michigan Constitution, statute, or another source, make up the largest portion (more than two-thirds) of the DNR's funding stream. Within the DNR budget, there are 40 restricted revenue funds, five of which comprise over 75 percent of the total: the state park improvement account, game and fish protection fund, forest development fund, waterways account, and the Michigan state parks endowment fund (Michigan House Fiscal Agency n.d.a). Exhibit 3 shows the FY 2025-2026 appropriations from these funds compared to all the other restricted funds. The primary funding mechanisms for these state restricted funds are user fees (e.g., hunting and fishing licenses), Recreation Passport sales, royalties from oil, gas, and mineral extraction, and timber sales.

Exhibit 3.



FY 2025-2026 DNR Restricted Fund Appropriations.
Source: Michigan House Fiscal Agency n.d.b

User Fees

The Parks and Recreation Division is almost entirely funded by user fees, including camping and lodging fees, snowmobile and ORV trail permits and stickers, and watercraft registration fees. Similarly, both the Wildlife and Fisheries Divisions are heavily dependent on hunting and fishing license fee revenues.

HUNTING AND FISHING LICENSES

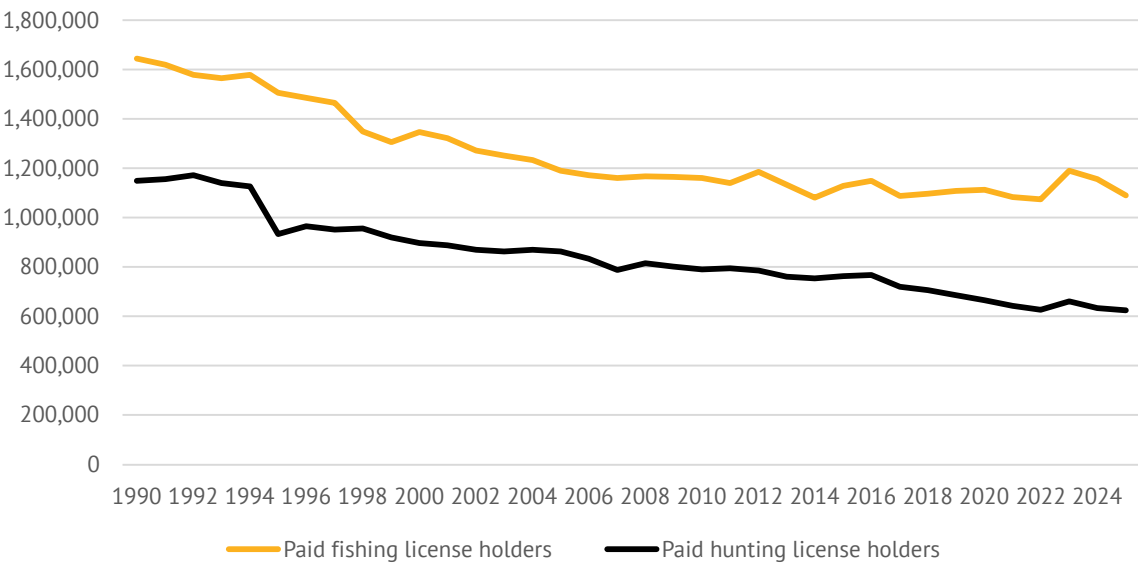
For decades, Michigan has relied on hunting and fishing license sales to support NRM. However, the number of hunters and anglers has decreased over time. At the same time, the popularity of other recreational uses (e.g., hiking and biking) has increased, resulting in a broken funding model in which many recreational users do not contribute financially to the DNR’s overall funding but still benefit from its resources.

Michigan has a long history of utilizing hunting and fishing license sales to support NRM. The state began issuing commercial fishing licenses in the mid-1860s and hunting licenses in the early 1890s (Hosang 2023; Steen 2014). Today, the DNR sells 42 types of hunting and fishing licenses. The current fee structure for hunting licenses requires a base license (\$10 for residents, plus a \$1 surcharge) that allows hunters to hunt small game and waterfowl. Additional hunting tags must be

purchased to add to the base license for other types of game (e.g., deer and turkey) and fur harvesting (DNR n.d.d). Revenue from the sale of hunting and fishing licenses is deposited into the game and fish protection fund, which supports the DNR’s Fisheries, Wildlife, and Law Enforcement Divisions. Hunting and fishing license fee increases require legislative approval; the last time this occurred was in 2014, although multiple bills have been introduced to raise the fees, most recently in 2025 (Houtz 2025; Scott 2015).

In federal apportionment year 2025, about 625,000 people purchased hunting licenses and 1.1 million people purchased fishing licenses, generating approximately \$63.8 million.¹ This is a drastic decrease from 1990, when 1.1 million people purchased hunting licenses and 1.6 million people purchased fishing licenses, which generated \$41.8 million—equivalent to about \$104.6 million in today’s dollars (US Inflation Calculator n.d.) (Exhibits 4 and 5).

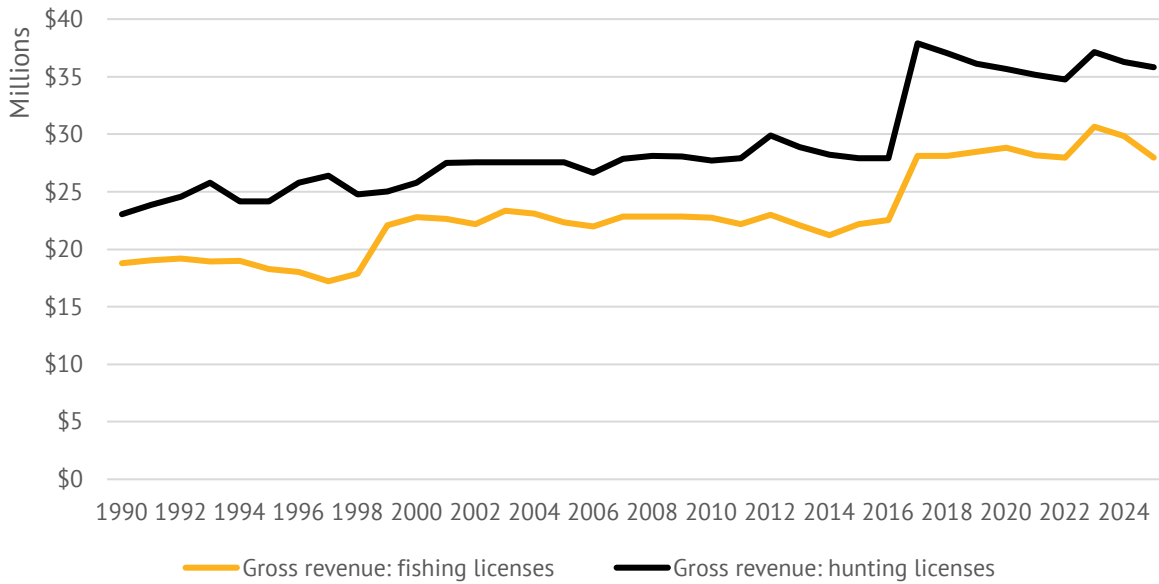
Exhibit 4.



Michigan Paid Hunting and Fishing License Holders, 1990–Present.
Source: USFWS n.d.c, n.d.d

¹ The federal apportionment year is two years after the states issued the licenses. For example, apportionment year 2025 figures are based on sales that occurred in federal FY 2023, which ran from October 1, 2022, to September 30, 2023.

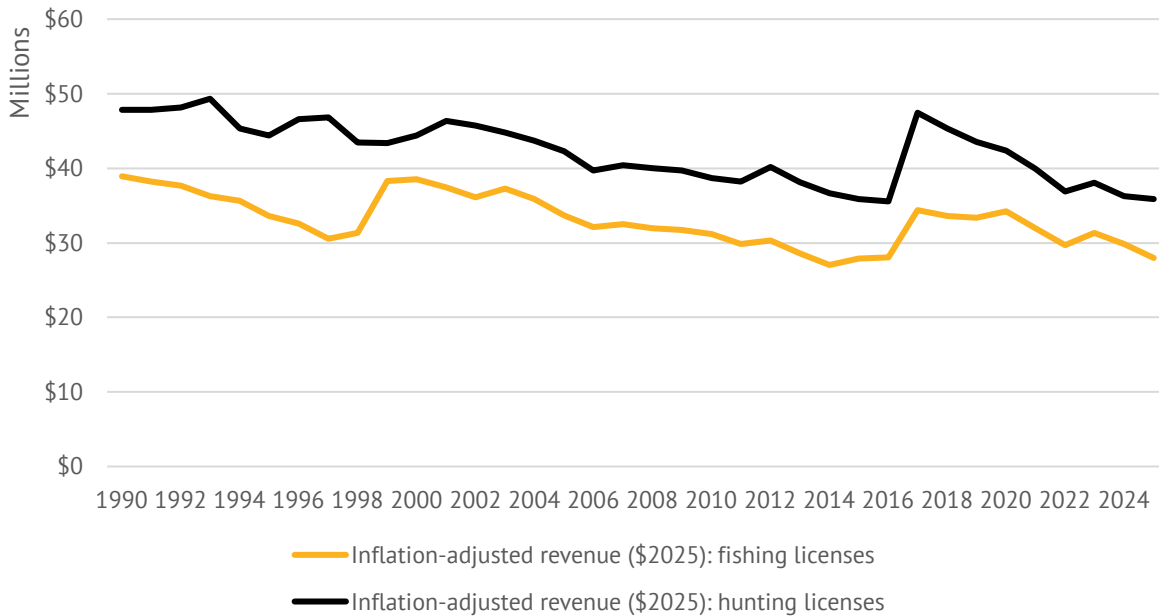
Exhibit 5.



Michigan Hunting and Fishing License Revenue, 1990–Present (Actual Revenue, Not Adjusted for Inflation).
Source: USFWS n.d.c, n.d.d

As shown in Exhibit 6, although revenue from hunting and fishing license sales has increased over time, it has not kept pace with inflation.

Exhibit 6.



Michigan Hunting and Fishing License Revenue, 1990–Present, Adjusted for Inflation to 2025 Dollars.
Source: USFWS n.d.c, n.d.d

CAMPING AND LODGING FEES

Revenue received from camping and lodging fees is deposited into the state park improvement account and the forest recreation account, which are used for the maintenance and improvement of state parks and recreation areas, and state forest campgrounds, respectively (DNR n.d.f; Michigan House Fiscal Agency n.d.). The DNR has the statutory authority to adjust camping fees. Fees currently range from \$26 to \$236 per night, depending on the location and type of site (DNR n.d.b). In FY 2020–2021, camping and lodging fees at DNR-managed properties generated about \$48.7 million (House 2021).

MOTORIZED TRAIL PERMITS AND STICKERS

Michigan's motorized trail system includes more than 4,000 miles of state-designated ORV trails and routes, over 6,000 miles of designated snowmobile trails, six scramble areas, state forest and national forest roads, and the frozen surfaces of public waters (DNR 2021). The state began issuing ORV registrations in the late 1970s and snowmobile permits in the early 1980s (Nelson 2005; MISORVA n.d.).

ORV licenses are required to ride ORVs on eligible county roads, frozen surfaces of public waters, state forest roads that are open to ORV use, and eligible national forest roads. An additional ORV trail permit is required to ride on state-designated ORV trails and scramble areas (DNR n.d.I). Revenue from the sale of ORV licenses and trail permits is deposited into the ORV trail improvement fund and the ORV safety education fund, which support ORV trail expansion, maintenance, infrastructure improvements, law enforcement, and youth ORV safety training programs (Michigan House Fiscal Agency n.d.). In FY 2021–2022, ORV licenses and trail permit sales generated about \$10.3 million (Crandall 2023).

To operate snowmobiles on public land in Michigan, riders are required to purchase snowmobile permits in addition to registering with the Secretary of State. The snowmobile trail permit enables snowmobilers

to ride on state-designated snowmobile trails, public roads, and public lands (where authorized) (DNR n.d.I). Revenue from the sale of snowmobile permits is deposited into three funds—the snowmobile registration fee revenue fund, the snowmobile trail improvement fund, and the permanent snowmobile trail easement subaccount—which pay for trail grooming, maintenance, improvements, easements, and other snowmobile-related expenditures (Michigan House Fiscal Agency n.d.). Snowmobile registrations have drastically decreased since the mid-2000s; down from about 262,000 in FY 2007–2008 to 164,000 in FY 2021–2022. In FY 2021–2022, snowmobile permit sales generated approximately \$8.5 million (Crandall 2023).

The DNR relies on grant sponsors, which are qualified nonprofit organizations, units of government, or private businesses, to perform most of the maintenance for the motorized trail system. The DNR reimburses grant sponsors for their efforts with grants paid out of the ORV trail improvement fund or the snowmobile trail improvement fund, depending on the type of trail they maintain (MISORVA 2018).²

WATERCRAFT REGISTRATION FEES

All watercraft must be registered in Michigan, except those that are shorter than 16 feet, propelled by oars or paddles, or registered in another state and used only temporarily in Michigan. Watercraft registration fees are based on the length of the watercraft and range from \$5 to \$448 (Michigan Department of State n.d.). Watercraft registration fee rates have not been raised since 1995, although legislation to increase them has been introduced, most recently in 2024 (Yuille and Scott 2024). Revenue is deposited into the waterways account and marine safety fund, which are used for the construction, operation, and maintenance of recreational boating facilities, property acquisition, grants, boating safety education programs, and law enforcement (Michigan House Fiscal Agency n.d.). In FY 2021–2022, watercraft registration fees generated \$9.8 million (Crandall 2023).

² Unlike the motorized program, the DNR does not currently have a dedicated funding program to support the maintenance of nonmotorized trails. To provide greater funding equity across the state's trail system, this absence of dedicated funding for nonmotorized trails should be addressed.

Exhibit 7 outlines the user fees currently in place, fee amounts, and annual revenue generated by each fee.

USER FEE	FEE AMOUNT (RESIDENT/NONRESIDENT)	APPLICATION	ANNUAL REVENUE
Camping and lodging fees	\$26–\$236 per night, depending on the location and type of site	Camping and lodging in state parks and recreation area campgrounds	\$48.7 million (FY 2020–2021)
Fishing license	\$10–\$26/\$10–\$76	Fishing in the public waters of the state	\$27.9 million (\$19.2 million resident/\$8.6 million nonresident)*
Fur harvester license	\$15 (in addition to base license: \$11 resident/\$151 nonresident)	Hunting and trapping furbearing animals	Not available
Hunting license	\$12–\$100/\$12–\$80 (in addition to base license: \$11 resident/\$151 nonresident)	Hunting for deer, bear, elk (Michigan residents only), small game, turkey, and waterfowl	\$35.8 million (\$30.2 million resident/\$5.6 million nonresident)*
ORV license	\$26.25	Riding eligible county roads, frozen surfaces of public waters, state forest roads (open to ORV use), and eligible national forest roads	\$7.9 million (FY 2021–2022)
ORV trail permit	\$10	Riding on state-designated ORV trails and scramble areas	\$2.5 million (FY 2021–2022)
Snowmobile permit	\$52	Riding on state-designated trails, public roads, and public lands (where authorized)	\$8.5 million (FY 2021–2022)
Watercraft registration	\$5–\$448, depending on type and length of watercraft	Boating (valid for three years)	\$9.8 million (FY 2021–2022)

Exhibit 7: User Fees and Revenue

*The revenue from these fees is based on sales that occurred in federal FY 2023, which ran from October 1, 2022, to September 30, 2023.

Motor Vehicle Permits/ Recreation Passport Program

In the late 1950s, in response to growing popularity and demand for parks, Michigan's Conservation Commission (later renamed the Natural Resources Commission) asked the state legislature to establish a fee system to support the state parks system. In 1960, after several rounds of vetoes for similar legislation, the Michigan State Parks System Act (Public Act 149 of 1960) was signed into law by Democratic Governor G. Mennen Williams. Among other provisions, the law created the first vehicle entry fees (windshield sticker permits) for Michigan state parks (Mining Journal 2019; Mills 2021). The windshield sticker permits were first implemented in 1961 and initially cost \$2 per year or \$0.50 per day. When the permit was replaced in 2010 by the Recreation Passport program, the cost was \$24 per year or \$6 per day for Michigan residents, and \$29 per year or \$8 per day for nonresidents (Bowerman 2009). In fiscal year 2009–2010, resident motor vehicle permits raised approximately \$10.7 million (Sefton 2015).

The Recreation Passport program was established by statute in 2010 under Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm and a Republican-majority legislature. The Recreation Passport is an annual pass that grants motorized vehicles access to state parks and recreation areas, state-managed boating access sites, and state forest campgrounds. Michigan drivers can voluntarily choose to purchase the passport (i.e., "opt in") when renewing the registration for their vehicle(s).³ Michigan was the second state in the country (after Montana) to fund parks through optional license plate fees. Revenue from the sale of Recreation Passports is deposited into state restricted funds that support state park infrastructure, a local grant program for community recreation agencies, state forest recreation infrastructure (e.g., campgrounds and trails), state parks cultural and historic resources, and marketing and promotion. The current price for a one-year Recreation Passport is \$15 for residents and \$42 for nonresidents (DNR n.d.n). In FY 2022–2023, the Recreation Passport generated \$42.4 million (DNR n.d.g).

Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund

The Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund (MNRTF) is a constitutionally protected fund used to acquire recreation land and help develop public recreation facilities. The fund evolved from the Michigan Land Trust Fund (MLTF), which was established by statute in 1976 under Republican Governor William Milliken and a Democratic-majority legislature. In 1984, nearly two-thirds of Michigan voters approved a constitutional amendment that created the MNRTF using money from the MLTF. The new fund officially replaced the MLTF in 1985. The MNRTF accrues revenue from the sale of oil, gas, and mineral leases, as well as royalties from oil, gas, and mineral extractions on state lands. Each year, a portion of the fund is distributed to eligible entities—state and local units of government and school districts or recreation authorities that are legally constituted to provide recreation—via grants. MNRTF grants can be used for land acquisition or development for public outdoor recreation facilities. In 2023, the trust fund awarded \$27.3 million in grants to 53 projects (Lofton 2023).

The MNRTF is widely recognized as a cornerstone of Michigan's conservation funding system. Over its 48-year history, it has awarded nearly \$1.4 billion to state and local units of government for more than 3,000 projects in all 83 counties of the state (DNR 2026b).

³ There have been several attempts, most recently in 2024, to switch the Recreation Passport program to an opt-out model, where Michigan drivers would automatically pay the \$15 fee unless they choose to opt out. Proponents of the legislation have estimated that requiring drivers to opt out could increase participation in the program by more than 20 percent and generate an estimated additional \$17 million per year to support Michigan's parks (Larson 2024).

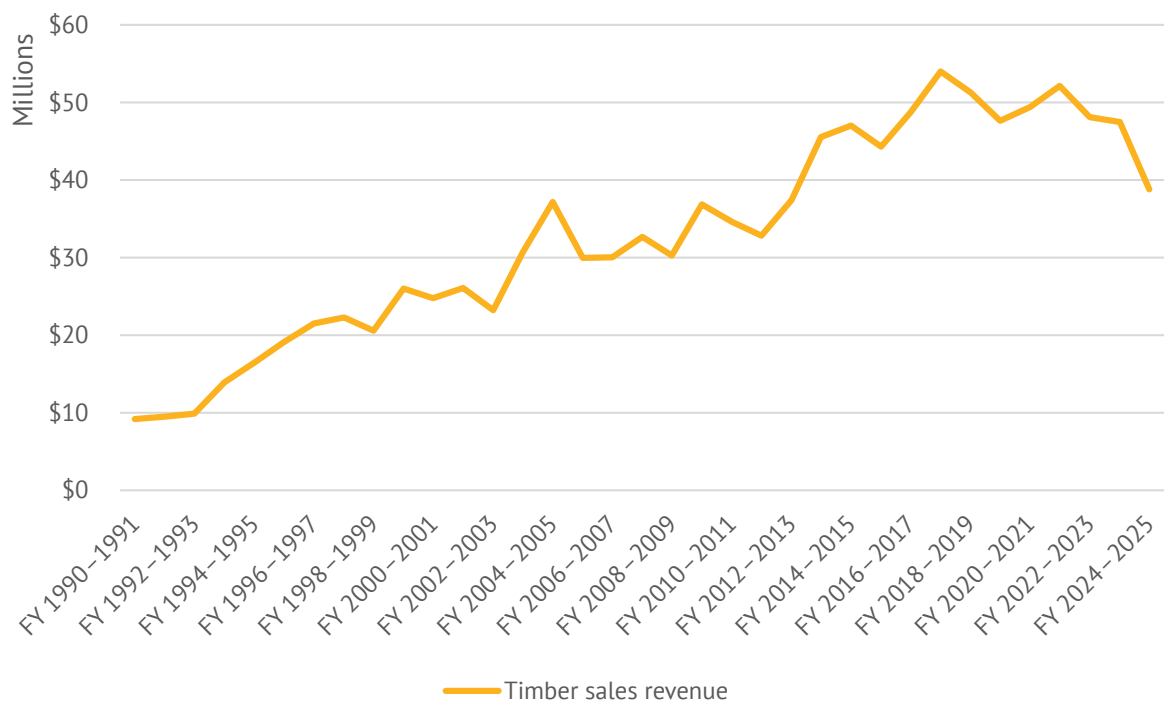
Michigan State Parks Endowment Fund

Established in 1994, the Michigan state parks endowment fund (MSPEF) is a constitutionally protected fund that supports state parks. The MSPEF collects the majority of the proceeds from oil, gas, and mineral royalties on state lands, and may also receive private contributions. In 2020, 84 percent of Michigan voters approved a ballot measure that, among other provisions, required at least 20 percent of the fund’s annual spending to be used for state park improvements (Ballotpedia n.d.a; Hohman and Hayes 2020). Until the fund’s accumulated principal balance reaches \$800 million, not more than 50 percent of the annual royalty revenue may be appropriated for expenditure. However, the legislature may appropriate all other earnings (e.g., interest and private contributions). Amounts available for expenditure are used for capital improvements, operations and maintenance, acquisition of land for state parks, and administration of the fund (Michigan Legislature 2020). In FY 2022–2023, \$22.3 million was appropriated from the MSPEF (Lord 2024).

Timber Sales

Timber sales provide a major revenue stream for the Forest Resources Division, which is responsible for managing nearly four million acres of state forest land—the largest state forest system in the country—and, in partnership with the U.S. Forest Service, an additional three million acres of federal forest land (Michigan Office of the Auditor General n.d.). Proceeds from the sale of timber on state forest land are deposited into the forest development fund, a restricted revenue fund that supports the management of the state forest system. Over the past four years, timber sale receipts have declined due to changes in the market values of timber;. In FY 2024–2025, the DNR received an estimated \$38.8 million in revenue from state timber sales, down from \$54 million in FY 2017–2018 (DNR 2026a) (Exhibit 8).

Exhibit 8.



DNR Timber Sales Revenue, FY 1990–1991 to 2024–2025. Sources: DNR 2026a

Federal Funding Mechanisms

Federal dollars made up about 18.4 percent of the DNR's total budget in FY 2025–2026. These funds primarily came from the Dingell-Johnson and Pittman-Robertson programs, which support the Fisheries Division and Wildlife Division, respectively. The Land and Water Conservation Fund, the Recreational Trails Program, and the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative are three other important federal funding programs that the state currently uses to support its natural resources and recreation efforts. While these programs represent significant funding streams for the DNR, they all come with restrictions on how they may be used, as described below.

Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Act

The Pittman-Robertson (P-R) Wildlife Restoration Act, passed by Congress in 1937, was a response to the decline of important game species in the United States. The act allocates revenue from federal excise taxes on firearms, ammunition, and archery equipment to projects that “restore, conserve, manage, and enhance wild birds and mammals and their habitat” (USFWS n.d.e). The excise tax revenue is distributed to the states annually in proportion to each state's population, acreage, and number of hunting licenses sold. The following activities are eligible for funding under the P-R Act: wildlife restoration, hunter education and safety, and hunter and recreational shooter recruitment (Wildlife for All n.d.). At its outset, the P-R Act required that states, to qualify for funding, pass laws limiting the use of hunting license fee revenue to the state wildlife agency (Ward, Sheikh, and DeSantis 2022). In FY 2026, the Michigan DNR received approximately \$23.9 million in Pittman-Robertson funding (USFWS n.d.b).

Dingell-Johnson Sport Fish Restoration Act

The Sport Fish Restoration Act, also known as the Dingell-Johnson (D-J) Act, was passed by Congress in 1950. Modeled after the P-R Act, the D-J program provides funds to states for fishery, boating access, and aquatic education projects. Revenue for the program comes from excise taxes on fishing gear, import duties on boats and tackle, and the portion of the gas tax attributable to motorboats (USFWS n.d.d). To be eligible for funding under the D-J Act, states must have a law restricting the use of fishing license fee revenue to

the state agency that manages fisheries. Revenue is apportioned based on a state's landmass and its number of licensed anglers. D-J funding is available for projects that benefit the recreational boating and sportfishing public (Alaska Legislative Finance Division n.d.). In FY 2026, the Michigan DNR received about \$13.7 million in D-J funds (USFWS n.d.a).

Land and Water Conservation Fund

The Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), established by the U.S. Congress in 1965, provides funding to states to purchase land and develop outdoor recreation facilities. The LWCF invests earnings from offshore oil and gas leasing to “help strengthen communities, preserve our history, and protect our national endowment of lands” (National Park Service 2024). Similar to the MNRTF, the principle behind this fund is that the government uses revenue from a nonrenewable natural resource (oil and gas) to support another natural resource. For a state to receive LWCF funding, it must have a current Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan. The DNR administers the Michigan LWCF program, which provides matching grants to state and local governments for the development of outdoor recreation areas and facilities (DNR n.d.h). In FY 2025–2026, the DNR budget included \$12.9 million in LWCF funds (Scott 2025b).

Recreational Trails Program

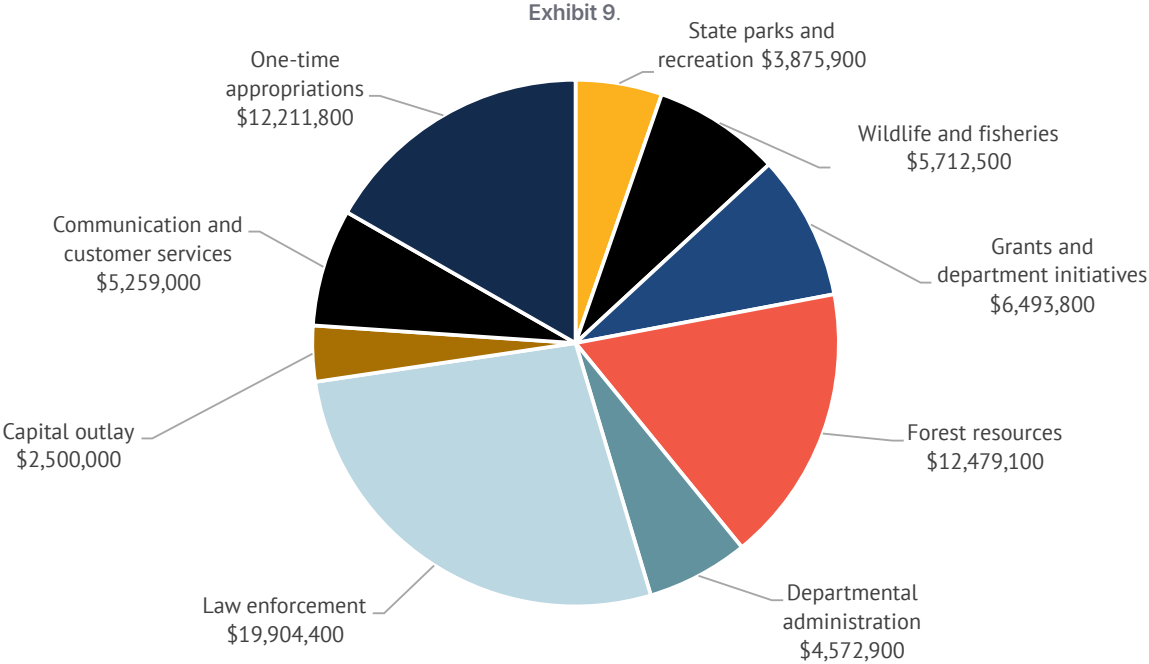
The Recreational Trails Program (RTP), created in 1991, is funded by the Federal Highway Trust Fund, which collects approximately \$270 million per year in nonhighway recreational fuel excise taxes. The RTP provides funding to states to develop and maintain recreational trails and trail-related facilities. RTP funds are allocated directly to the states and are generally administered through a specific state regulatory agency (in Michigan’s case, the DNR). Of the total RTP funds available, 40 percent must be used for diverse recreational trails, 30 percent for motorized trails, and the remaining 30 percent for nonmotorized trails. In FY 2020, Michigan received \$2.8 million in RTP funding (FHWA 2021).

Great Lakes Restoration Initiative

Launched in 2010, the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) is a federally funded program intended to protect and restore the Great Lakes by addressing several focus areas. These areas include invasive species, toxic substances and areas of concern (AOCs), habitats and species, nonpoint source pollution impacts on nearshore health, and foundations for future restoration actions (EPA 2025). The GLRI requires federal agencies to maintain their base level of funding for Great Lakes activities regardless of GLRI funding, so that GLRI funding is added to existing funding rather than replacing it. Congress designated the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) as the lead agency for the GLRI and authorized it to distribute funds to other government agencies; those agencies identify which projects they will fund. As of March 2022, federal agencies had allocated \$3.37 billion under the GLRI to 6,851 projects (Gatz and Lipiec 2022). In FY 2023–2024, the DNR received about \$2.9 million from the GLRI (Scott 2023).

State General Fund Revenue

Michigan’s GF revenue is generated primarily by taxes. Unlike state restricted revenue, there are no constitutional or statutory restrictions concerning how GF revenue may be used. GF revenue accounted for \$73 million, or 13.4 percent, of the DNR’s total budget in FY 2025–2026. However, \$12.2 million of that funding consisted of one-time appropriations for projects such as the Nature Awaits program and ice storm and wildfire protection. Exhibit 9 displays GF revenue by DNR appropriation area in FY 2025–2026.



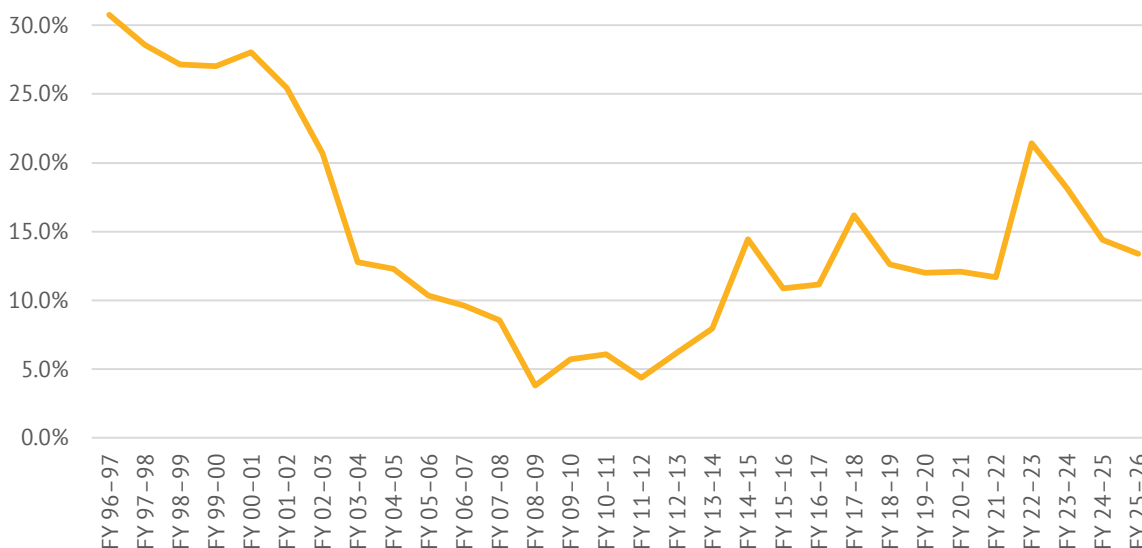
FY 2025–2026 GF Revenue by DNR Appropriation Area.
Source: Scott 2025

Historically, the DNR relied more heavily on state GF appropriations to support its core operations. Over time, however, the state shifted toward a funding model that places greater emphasis on user fees and restricted revenues, such as hunting and fishing license sales, recreation fees, and dedicated funds. Several factors drove this transition. First, the longstanding user-pay model in conservation, particularly for wildlife and fisheries, established a precedent for funding natural resource management through licenses and activity-based revenues. Second, increasing pressure on the state's GF from competing priorities such as education, healthcare, and public safety reduced the availability of discretionary funding for natural resources. In response, policymakers have relied more heavily on restricted funding streams that provide more predictable, program-specific support without requiring broad-based tax increases. For example, GF once accounted for more than two-thirds of the state

parks system's annual budget. However, since 2004, state parks have received little to no general funding for operations and maintenance as other funding sources have been utilized.⁴ While this approach has created stability for certain programs, it has also resulted in a funding structure that is more closely tied to specific user groups and less aligned with the broader, growing public demand for NRM services.

Today, the DNR receives only about 10 percent of its funding from the state's GF, which accounts for less than 1 percent of the total state GF. From FY 2022–2023 to FY 2025–2026, the DNR received a larger share of GF than in previous years; however, much of that was for one-time appropriations from federal COVID relief funding. Historically, the department's general funding has fluctuated and, in recent years, peaked at 30.7 percent in 1997 (Exhibit 10).

Exhibit 10.



GF Revenue as a Percentage of DNR Gross Appropriation, FY 1996–1997 through FY 2025–2026.

Source: Austin Scott, Senior Fiscal Analyst at Michigan House Fiscal Agency, pers. communication, November 2024.

⁴ Of note, the DNR Parks and Recreation Division received a significant amount of one-time state general funding in FY 2020–2021 as part of the federal COVID-19 pandemic relief funding.

Other Funding Mechanisms

In addition to its primary revenue sources, the DNR also uses several supplemental funding mechanisms, including bonds, concession fees, and private revenues. While these sources provide important support for specific projects and initiatives, they are generally limited in scale, episodic, or restricted in use; therefore, they do not address the agency's underlying structural funding challenges.

Bonds

GENERAL OBLIGATION BONDS

Voters must approve general obligation bonds. They are backed by the full faith of the state and are generally repaid from unrestricted revenue sources, such as the state's GF (Michigan State Budget Office n.d.). In 1988 and 1998, voters approved two general obligation bond issues that provided funding for outdoor recreation and NRM.

QUALITY OF LIFE RECREATION BOND PROGRAM

In 1988, 63 percent of Michigan voters approved the Quality of Life Recreation Bond Program (Ballotpedia n.d.c). The \$140 million bond package included \$70 million for improving the infrastructure of Michigan's state and local parks. Quality of Life bonds funded more than 190 projects at 64 state parks, including sewage system improvements, road and parking lot resurfacing, electrical system replacements, and facility renovation and construction (Bowerman 2009).

While bonds have played an important role in funding major capital investments, they are one-time funding sources and do not provide ongoing operational support.

Concession Fees

The DNR partners with businesses to expand visitor services (e.g., restaurants, gift shops, rental outfitters, trail guides) in state parks and other DNR-managed properties. These concessionaires pay a fee to operate their businesses on state property (DNR n.d.c). Concession revenue, however, represents a relatively small portion of overall funding and is not sufficient to meaningfully offset broader funding pressures.

CLEAN MICHIGAN INITIATIVE

In 1998, 62 percent of voters approved the Clean Michigan Initiative (CMI), which allowed the state to issue \$675 million in bonds to finance environmental and natural resources protection programs (Ballotpedia n.d.b; Sefton 2015). The CMI included \$100 million for public recreation projects: \$50 million in grants to local units of government for the development and renovation of public recreation facilities and \$50 million for state park renovations (Bowerman 2009).

STATE PARK REVENUE BONDS

Part 741 of the Natural Resources and Environmental Protection Act (PA 451 of 1994) authorizes the Natural Resources Commission (NRC) to issue revenue bonds for state park improvements, payable from state park revenues. The statute allows up to \$100 million in bonds to be issued in total (Michigan Legislature 1995). In 2002, the NRC exercised this authority and issued \$15.5 million in revenue bonds for major capital improvements at Sterling State Park (Michigan Office of the Auditor General 2004).

Private Revenue

The DNR can receive revenue from gifts, grants, and donations from nongovernment entities (e.g., corporations, individuals, philanthropic organizations, and advocacy groups). Often, funds received from these sources must be used for specific purposes. In FY 2025–2026, private revenue accounted for about 1 percent of the DNR's total budget (Scott 2025). As a result, private funding serves as a supplemental resource but does not provide a scalable or reliable funding base for core operations.

Conclusion

Michigan's natural resources and abundant natural beauty are sources of inspiration for the state's citizens and tourists alike. The state's official motto, which translates to "if you seek a pleasant peninsula, look about you," and a long-established unofficial motto, "winter-water wonderland," attest to the unique landscapes of the state and the importance of nature in Michiganders' sense of place.

In the mid-1990s, Michigan made a deliberate policy shift away from using taxpayer dollars to fund natural resources management, relying instead on user fees and earned revenue. As illustrated in this report, this approach has presented significant challenges due to changes in the recreational activities users choose to participate in, political difficulties in adjusting fees to offset inflationary pressures, and fluctuations in the market values of commodities such as timber. As user demand for the services and opportunities provided by public lands and public trust resources continues to increase, developing innovative strategies that address the challenges of current funding models and fairly share the burden of management costs will be key to successfully stewarding Michigan's natural resources for generations to come.



References

- AFWA (Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies). n.d. "The American System of Conservation Funding." AFWA. Accessed April 13, 2026.
<https://www.fishwildlife.org/afwa-informs/resources/american-system-conservation-funding>
- Alaska Legislative Finance Division. n.d. LFD Informational Paper 21-3: Dingell-Johnson Federal Sport Fish Restoration Act. Alaska Legislature. Accessed April 8, 2026.
https://www.adfg.alaska.gov/static/regulations/regprocess/fisheriesboard/pdfs/2021-2022/se/rcs/rc159_Curt_Whitehead_Comment_on_Dingell_Johnson_Funds.pdf
- Ballotpedia. n.d.a. "Michigan Proposal 1, Use of State and Local Park Funds Amendment (2020)." Ballotpedia. Accessed April 8, 2026.
[https://ballotpedia.org/Michigan_Proposal_1_Use_of_State_and_Local_Park_Funds_Amendment_\(2020\)](https://ballotpedia.org/Michigan_Proposal_1_Use_of_State_and_Local_Park_Funds_Amendment_(2020))
- . n.d.b. "Michigan Proposal C, Environmental and Natural Resource Protection Bond Measure (1998)." Ballotpedia. Accessed April 8, 2026.
[https://ballotpedia.org/Michigan_Proposal_C_Environmental_and_Natural_Resource_Protection_Bond_Measure_\(1998\)](https://ballotpedia.org/Michigan_Proposal_C_Environmental_and_Natural_Resource_Protection_Bond_Measure_(1998))
- . n.d.c. "Michigan Proposal D, Recreation Projects Bond Measure (1988)." Ballotpedia. Accessed April 8, 2026.
[https://ballotpedia.org/Michigan_Proposal_D_Recreation_Projects_Bond_Measure_\(1988\)](https://ballotpedia.org/Michigan_Proposal_D_Recreation_Projects_Bond_Measure_(1988))
- Bowerman, Bill. 2009. State Park Motor Vehicle Permit Fees. Michigan Senate Fiscal Agency.
<https://sfa.senate.michigan.gov/Publications/Notes/2009Notes/NotesJulAug09bb.pdf>
- Crandall, Jason. 2023. "Budget and Revenue Overview." Presentation, 2023 Grant Administrators Workshop, Houghton Lake, Michigan.
<https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/-/media/Project/Websites/dnr/Documents/Grants/MarineSafety/Budget-Revenue-Presentation.pdf>
- Creagh, Keith, and Tim Nichols. 2026. "Opinion: Michigan's Conservation Funding Model Is Broken." Detroit News, March 25.
<https://www.detroitnews.com/story/opinion/2026/03/25/opinion-michigans-conservation-funding-model-is-broken/89312548007/>
- DNR (Michigan Department of Natural Resources). 2021. Michigan Department of Natural Resources Trails Plan 2022–2032. DNR.
https://www2.dnr.state.mi.us/Publications/PDFS/Trails/DNR_TrailsPlan_2022-32.pdf
- . 2026a. "Michigan DNR Forest Resources Division Timber Production on State Forest Land Fiscal Years 1986–2025." DNR. Unpublished data.
- . 2026b. "50 years and counting: Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund's Golden Record of Elevating Outdoor Recreation, Conservation." DNR.
<https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/about/newsroom/releases/2026/03/03/50-years-and-counting-michigan-natural-resources-trust-fund>
- . n.d.a. "Acreage of DNR-Managed Lands." DNR. Accessed April 8, 2026.
<https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/managing-resources/public-land/acreage-of-dnr-managed-land>
- . n.d.b. "Camping and Overnight Lodging Fee Adjustments." DNR. Accessed April 16, 2026.
<https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/things-to-do/camping-and-lodging/fee-adjustments>
- . n.d.c. "Concessions." DNR. Accessed April 8, 2026.
<https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/managing-resources/business/concessions>
- . n.d.d. "Fishing and Hunting License Information." DNR. Accessed April 8, 2026.
<https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/things-to-do/fishing/license-info>
- . n.d.e. "Forest Products Economy." DNR. Accessed May 5, 2026.
<https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/managing-resources/forestry/products/econ>
- . n.d.f. "Funding." DNR. Accessed April 8, 2026.
<https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/about/funding>
- . n.d.g. FY 2023 State Park and Boating Access Site Revenue Streams. DNR. Accessed April 8, 2026.
<https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/-/media/Project/Websites/dnr/Documents/Executive/Legislative-Reports/Archive/FY-2024/Sec-20455-and-6-PA-451-of-1994--FY23-State-Park-BAS-Revenue-Streams.pdf>
- . n.d.h. "Land and Water Conservation Fund." DNR. Accessed April 8, 2026.
<https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/buy-and-apply/grants/rec/lwcf>

- . n.d.i. Managed Public Land Strategy Highlights. DNR. Accessed April 8, 2026.
https://www.house.mi.gov/hfa/PDF/NaturalResources/DNR_Managed_Public_Land_Presentation%202-24-15.pdf
- . n.d.j. "Managing Our Trails System." DNR. Accessed April 8, 2026.
<https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/managing-resources/prd/trails>
- . n.d.k. "Managing Our Waterways Facilities." DNR. Accessed April 8, 2026.
<https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/managing-resources/prd/waterways>
- . n.d.l. "Natural Resources at a Glance." DNR. Accessed April 8, 2026.
<https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/about/natural-resources-at-a-glance>
- . n.d.m. "Purchase Permit, Learn Requirements." DNR. Accessed April 8, 2026.
<https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/things-to-do/orv-riding/permits-and-requirements>
- . n.d.n. "Recreation Passport." DNR. Accessed April 8, 2026.
<https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/Buy-and-Apply/rec-pp>
- . n.d.o. "State Game/Wildlife Areas." DNR. Accessed April 8, 2026.
<https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/things-to-do/hunting/where/state-wildlife-game-areas-list>
- EPA (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency). 2025. "Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI)." EPA.
<https://www.epa.gov/great-lakes-funding/great-lakes-restoration-initiative-glri>
- FHWA (Federal Highway Administration). 2021. 2020 Recreational Trails Program Annual Report. FHWA-HEP-20-036. FHWA.
https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/environment/recreational_trails/overview/report/2020/
- Gatz, Laura, and Eva Lipiec. 2022. Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI). Congressional Research Service.
<https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF12280>
- Herberg, Laura, and Kelly House. 2025. "As Inflation Strains Michigan Parks, DNR Budgets, Lawmakers Weigh Fee Hikes." Bridge Michigan, July 1.
<https://bridgemi.com/outdoors-life/inflation-strains-michigan-parks-dnr-budgets-lawmakers-weigh-fee-hikes>
- Hohman, James M., and Jason Hayes. 2020. Proposal 1 of 2020: Use of State and Local Park Funds Amendment. Mackinac Center for Public Policy.
<https://www.mackinac.org/S2020-09#appendix-a-proposal-1s-textual-changes-to-michigan-constitution>
- Hosang, Elizabeth. 2023. "Hunting Deer in Michigan: the History, Statistics and Benefits." 9&10 News, November 14.
<https://www.9and10news.com/2023/11/14/hunting-deer-in-michigan-the-history-statistics-and-benefits/>
- House, Kelly. 2021. "Michigan Parks Are Popular, but Underfunded. They Want Some COVID Money." Bridge Michigan, September 23.
<https://www.greatlakesnow.org/2021/09/michigan-parks-popular-underfunded-covid-money/#>
- . 2024. "Michigan Eyes Hunting, Fishing, Boating Fee Increases, Change to Park Fees." Bridge Michigan, December 9.
<https://www.bridgemi.com/michigan-environment-watch/michigan-eyes-hunting-fishing-boating-fee-increases-change-park-fees>
- Houtz, Jonah. 2025. Bill Analysis: Hunting and Fishing License Modifications S.B. 276 (S-3) & S.B. 277: Summary of Bill Reported from Committee. Michigan Senate Fiscal Agency.
<https://www.legislature.mi.gov/documents/2025-2026/billanalysis/Senate/pdf/2025-SFA-0276-F.pdf>
- James, Janelle D. 2023. "Michigan Parks Need More Summer Workers to Help with Spike in Visitors." Bridge Michigan, January 23.
<https://bridgemi.com/michigan-environment-watch/michigan-parks-need-more-summer-workers-help-spike-visitors>
- Jen, Kyle I. 2015. "Memorandum: Changes in State Appropriations." Michigan House Fiscal Agency, July 7.
https://www.house.mi.gov/hfa/PDF/Alpha/Approp_History_Memo_FY16.pdf
- Larson, Lucas Smolcic. 2024. "Bills Would Make Michiganders 'Opt Out' to Avoid State Park Pass During Car Registration." MLive, December 5.
<https://www.mlive.com/environment/2024/12/bills-would-make-michiganders-opt-out-to-avoid-state-park-pass-during-car-registration.html>
- Lofton, Justine. 2023. "Michigan Trust Fund Awards \$27M for 53 Recreation Projects: See Them Here." MLive, December 23.
<https://www.mlive.com/news/ann-arbor/2023/12/michigan-trust-fund-awards-27m-for-53-recreation-projects-see-them-here.html>

- Lord, Dan. 2024. Section 74119(9) of PA 1994 Parks Endowment Fund Revenue and Expenditures FY 2023. DNR, September 27.
<https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/-/media/Project/Websites/dnr/Documents/Executive/Legislative-Reports/Archive/FY-2024/Sec-74119-PA-451-of-1994--Park-Endowment-Fund-Rev-and-Exp-FY23.pdf?rev=294cbfcc2b8a4184830ca3961d21eb18&hash=ADEFB956D0DC6E29257D73CE636F9>
- MEDC (Michigan Economic Development Corporation). n.d.a. "Agribusiness." MEDC. Accessed May 5, 2026.
<https://www.michiganbusiness.org/industries/agribusiness/>
- . n.d.b. "Focus Industry: Outdoor Recreation." MEDC. Accessed April 8, 2026.
<https://www.michiganbusiness.org/industries/outdoor-recreation/>
- MDARD (Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development). n.d. "Michigan Agriculture Resources." MDARD. Accessed May 5, 2026.
<https://www.michigan.gov/mdard/about/michigan-agriculture-resources>
- Michigan Department of State. n.d. "Recreational Vehicles and Watercraft." Michigan Department of State. Accessed April 8, 2026.
<https://www.michigan.gov/sos/vehicle/recreational-vehicles-watercraft>
- Michigan House Fiscal Agency. n.d.a. Department of Natural Resources Restricted Funds FY 2024–25. Michigan House Fiscal Agency. Accessed April 8, 2026.
https://www.house.mi.gov/hfa/PDF/NaturalResources/DNR_Data_Restricted_Funds_FY25.pdf
- . n.d.b. History of Restricted Fund Appropriation in DNR. Michigan House Fiscal Agency. Accessed May 6, 2026.
https://www.house.mi.gov/hfa/PDF/NaturalResources/DNR_Data_History_of_Restricted_Appropriations.pdf
- Michigan Legislature. May 24, 1995. "Section 74106: Revenue Bonds; Issuance; Amount; Notice; Includable Costs; Resolution." Natural Resources and Environmental Protection Act (Excerpt): Act 451 of 1994.
<https://www.legislature.mi.gov/Laws/MCL?objectName=mcl-324-74106>
- . December 19, 2020. "Section 35a: Michigan State Parks Endowment Fund." State Constitution (Excerpt) Constitution of Michigan of 1963.
<https://www.legislature.mi.gov/Laws/MCL?objectName=mcl-Article-IX-35a>
- Michigan Office of the Auditor General. 2004. Financial Audit, Including the Provisions of the Single Audit Act, of the Department of Natural Resources: October 1, 2001 through September 30, 2003. 75-100-04. Michigan Office of the Auditor General.
https://audgen.michigan.gov/finalpdfs/03_04/r7510004.pdf
- . n.d. "Forest Resource Division and Forest Development Fund—751-0152-24." Michigan Office of the Auditor General. Accessed April 16, 2026.
<https://audgen.michigan.gov/in-progress/forest-resource-division-forest-development-fund/>
- Michigan Senate Fiscal Agency. 2026. Department of Natural Resources Funding History. Michigan Senate Fiscal Agency.
https://sfa.senate.michigan.gov/Departments/FundHistory/FHdnr_web.pdf
- Michigan State Budget Office. n.d. "What Does the State Do When It Needs to Borrow?" Michigan State Budget Office. Accessed April 8, 2026.
<https://www.michigan.gov/budget/budget-offices/ofm/faq-pages/state-finances/what-does-the-state-do-when-it-needs-to-borrow>
- Mills, Rick. 2021. "From Early Years to Today, History of Michigan State Parks at 100 years." Morning Sun, June 17.
<https://www.themorningsun.com/2019/05/10/from-early-years-to-today-history-of-michigan-state-parks-at-100-years/>
- Mining Journal. 2019. "Supporting State Parks: The Recreation Passport." Mining Journal, May 6.
<https://www.miningjournal.net/uncategorized/2019/05/state-parks-centennial/>
- MISORVA (Michigan Snowmobile & ORV Association). 2018. "Another 'Weird' Snowmobile Season—Where Does Your Trail Permit Money Go?" MISORVA.
<https://misorva.org/another-weird-snowmobile-season-where-does-your-trail-permit-money-go/>
- . n.d. "What Has MSA Done for You? How Will MISORVA Continue?" MISORVA. Accessed April 8, 2026.
<https://misorva.org/what-has-msa-done-for-you-how-will-misorva-continue/>
- National Park Service. 2024. "Land and Water Conservation Fund." National Park Service.
<https://www.nps.gov/subjects/lwcf/index.htm>
- Nelson, Dr. Charles. 2005. Draft Michigan Off-Road Vehicle (ORV) Plan 2005. Michigan State University.
<https://www2.dnr.state.mi.us/publications/pdfs/forestslandwater/ORV/2008/DraftPlan/A--MSU-ORVPlanMay4,2005.doc>
- Scott, Austin. 2015. Memorandum: Hunting and Fishing License Fees. Michigan House Fiscal Agency, October 12.
https://www.house.mi.gov/hfa/Archives/PDF/NaturalResources/DNR_Hunting_Fishing_License_Memo.pdf

- . 2023. Budget Briefing: Natural Resources—December 2023. Michigan House Fiscal Agency.
https://www.house.mi.gov/hfa/PDF/Briefings/DNR_BudgetBriefing_fy23-24.pdf
- . 2024. Budget Briefing: Natural Resources—December 2024. Michigan House Fiscal Agency.
https://www.house.mi.gov/hfa/PDF/Briefings/DNR_BudgetBriefing_fy24-25.pdf
- . 2025a. Budget Briefing: Natural Resources—December 2025. Michigan House Fiscal Agency.
https://www.house.mi.gov/HFA/PDF/Briefings/DNR_BudgetBriefing_fy25-26.pdf
- . 2025b. Line Item and Boilerplate Summary Natural Resources Fiscal Year 2025–26. Michigan House Fiscal Agency.
https://www.house.mi.gov/hfa/PDF/LinelItemSummaries/DNR_lineFY26.pdf
- Sefton, Josh. 2015. State Parks Funding in Michigan—A 15-Year History. Michigan Senate Fiscal Agency.
<https://sfa.senate.michigan.gov/Publications/Issues/StateParksFunding/StateParksFunding.pdf>
- Steen, Paul. 2014. Michigan Fisheries 200 Years of Change. Huron River Watershed Council.
https://www.hrwc.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Michigan-Fisheries_-200-years.pdf
- USFWS (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service). n.d.a. Amended Final Apportionment of Dingell-Johnson Sport Fish Restoration Funds for Fiscal Year 2026. USFWS. Accessed April 8, 2026.
<https://www.fws.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2026-02/fy-26-sfr-final-apportionment-table.pdf>
- . n.d.b. Final Apportionment of Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Funds for Fiscal Year 2026. USFWS. Accessed April 8, 2026.
<https://www.fws.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2026-02/fy-26-wr-final-apportionment-table.pdf>
- . n.d.c. “Fishing Licenses, Holders, and Costs by Apportionment Year: 2025.” USFWS. Accessed April 2, 2026.
<https://tracs.fws.gov/oci-dashboards/fishing-licenses>
- . n.d.d. “Hunting Licenses, Holders, and Costs by Apportionment Year: 2025.” USFWS. Accessed April 2, 2026.
<https://tracs.fws.gov/oci-dashboards/hunting-licenses>
- . n.d.e. “Sport Fish Restoration.” USFWS. Accessed April 8, 2026.
<https://www.fws.gov/program/sport-fish-restoration>
- . n.d.f. “Wildlife Restoration.” USFWS. Accessed April 16, 2026.
<https://www.fws.gov/program/wildlife-restoration>
- US Inflation Calculator. n.d. “US Inflation Calculator.” CoinNews Media Group. Accessed April 2, 2026.
<https://www.usinflationcalculator.com/>
- Ward, Erin H., Pervaze A. Sheikh, and Mark K. DeSantis. 2022. The Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Act. Congressional Research Service.
<https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF12229>
- Wildlife for All. n.d. “The Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Act Explained.” Wildlife for All. Accessed April 16, 2026.
<https://wildlifeforall.us/resources/pittman-robertson-wildlife-restoration-act-explained/>
- Yuille, Rick, and Austin Scott. 2024. Legislative Analysis: Recreation Registration Fees House Bill 6230 as Introduced. Michigan House Fiscal Agency.
<https://legislature.mi.gov/documents/2023-2024/billanalysis/House/pdf/2023-HLA-6230-C0600B3A.pdf>

Appendix D

Natural Resource Management State Funding Profiles

Alabama

	FY 2023–2024	FY 2018–2019
Overall state budget*	\$45.5 billion	\$32.1 billion
State budget dedicated to natural resource management	\$413.6 million (0.9%)	\$353.9 million (1.1%)
Total general fund dollars in budget	\$3 billion	\$2 billion
State general fund dedicated to natural resource management	\$6 million (0.2%)	\$0 (0%)

* Alabama received an influx of one-time federal funding during the COVID-19 pandemic. Those dollars may still be present in the current budget, artificially inflating the budget trend. For comparison, we have included budget numbers from fiscal year (FY) 2018–2019, the year before the COVID-19 pandemic began, in addition to budget numbers for FY 2023–2024.

ACRES OF STATE LAND

1 million

POPULATION

5 million

MANAGED BY THE STATE

3.1% of state's total land area

STATE'S TOTAL LAND AREA

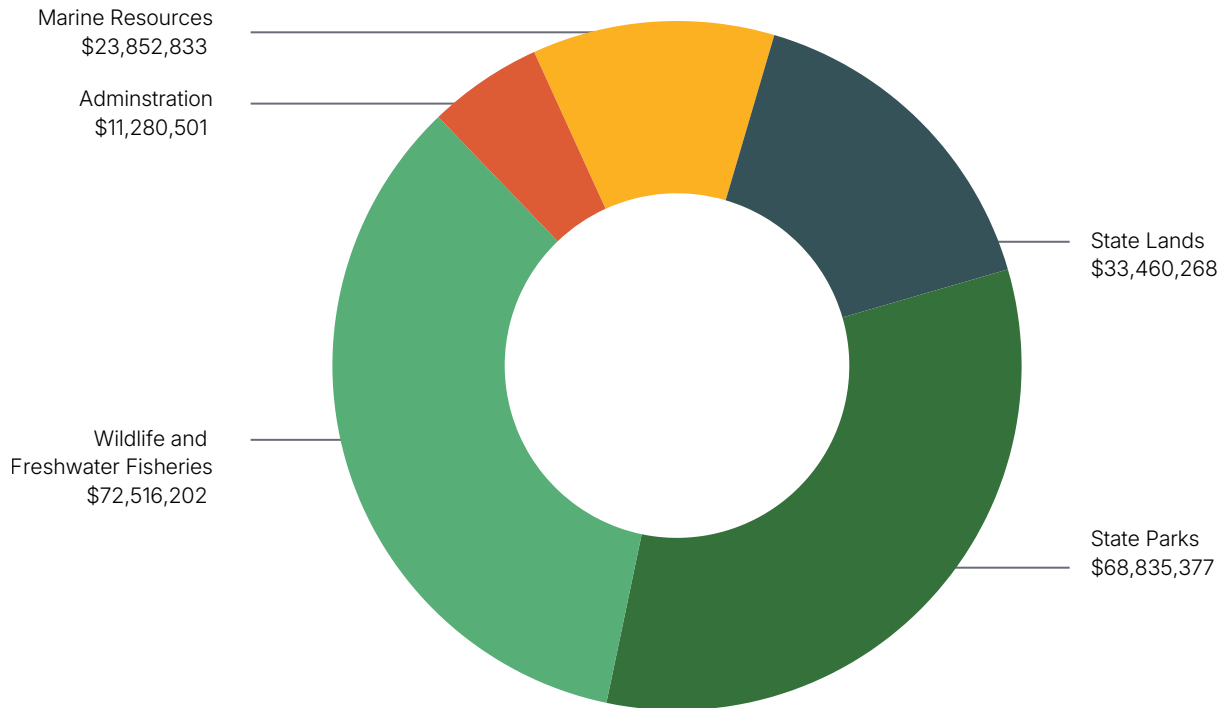
32.4 million acres

Alabama is a state with widely varying landscapes and natural resources, ranging from the Appalachian Mountains in the north to the Gulf Coast in the south. About 70 percent of the state is covered in forest, which supports the second largest commercial timberland base among states in the country. Alabama's natural resources support a vibrant outdoor recreation industry that generates \$6.6 billion, provides more than 65,000 jobs, and produces \$3 billion in direct compensation annually.

The Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (ADCNR) is responsible for managing the state's natural resources, including freshwater fish, wildlife, marine resources, state lands, and state parks. The department administers 21 state parks, 23 public fishing lakes, three freshwater fish hatcheries, 162 public boat ramps, 35 wildlife management areas (WMAs), 12 shooting ranges, and numerous other facilities, including an aquatic biodiversity center, a saltwater mariculture center, and seven special opportunity areas for hunting. Cumulatively, the department oversees more than one million acres. The ADCNR also maintains a state land resources information center, administers the Forever Wild Land Trust (FWLT) program, and coordinates all Deepwater Horizon oil spill-related activities.

In FY 2023–2024, the ADCNR's total budget was \$413.6 million. However, a large portion (about 40 percent) of this budget consisted of pass-through funds for the Deepwater Horizon oil spill restoration. As in Michigan, funding for natural resource management is primarily provided by user fees, federal funding programs, and oil and gas revenues.

ADCNR Division Budgets, FY 2023–2024



Funding Mechanisms

General Fund

General fund (GF) revenue is generated primarily by taxes. Historically, the ADCNR has received very little or no funding from the state's GF. In FY 2022–2023, the ADCNR received \$6 million from the state's GF for "the first time in our memory," according to ADCNR commissioner Chris Blankenship. In FY 2023–2024, the Alabama legislature appropriated an additional \$6 million of the GF to the ADCNR.

Federal Funding

Similar to many other states, the ADCNR uses the federal Pittman-Robertson (PR) and Dingell-Johnson (DJ) programs to fund its fish and wildlife programs. About two-thirds of the Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division's budget is made up of PR and DJ funds.

State-Dedicated Funding

Cigarette tax revenue: The State of Alabama taxes the sale, storage, distribution, and use of cigarettes at a rate of 33.75 mills per cigarette, which is about \$0.675 per pack of 20 cigarettes. Of that revenue, 6.06 percent is used to support the operation and development of state parks. In FY 2021–2022, this equated to approximately \$8.7 million.

Forever Wild Land Trust: The FWLT program, a state land acquisition program, was established in 1992 by a constitutional amendment supported by 83 percent of Alabama voters. The program was initially authorized for 20 years. In 2012, the FWLT's 20-year authorization expired, and reauthorization for another 20 years was put up for public vote and approved by 75 percent of Alabama voters. Funding for the FWLT is primarily provided by the Alabama Trust Fund (ATF), which receives funding from the sale of offshore drilling rights and oil and gas revenues; the FWLT receives 10 percent of the ATF's distributed interest, up to \$15 million per year. The FWLT also receives some funding from sales of FWLT state license plate tags (\$259,000 in FY 2022–2023). Since its inception, the program has acquired more than 248,000 acres of land through acquisitions and long-term leases. All FWLT lands are managed by the ADCNR and are available for public use.

User fees: Similar to Michigan, the management of Alabama’s natural resources is primarily funded by user fees, including hunting and fishing licenses and permits, state park entry fees, and recreational fees. Unlike Michigan, which offers a Recreational Passport that provides entry to all Michigan state parks and recreation areas, Alabama does not offer a park pass that covers all Alabama state parks. Instead, daily and annual park passes are issued for individual park locations. Several Alabama state parks are free to enter, though there may be fees for camping and other activities. The Lodge at Gulf State Park, a Hilton hotel in Gulf State Park that is owned by the ADCNR, generates about \$5 to \$6 million in lodging revenue per year.

The following table outlines the user fee types, fee amounts, and revenue generated from each fee.

USER FEE	FEE AMOUNT (RESIDENT/NONRESIDENT)	APPLICATION	ANNUAL REVENUE
Baiting privilege license	\$18.05/\$61.85	Hunting deer and feral swine over bait	Not available
Saltwater fishing recreational licenses and permits	\$3.45–\$29.35 (nonresidents only)	Fishing or possessing fish in saltwater areas of the state	
Freshwater fishing recreational licenses and permits	\$2.00–\$16.60/\$2–\$74.65	Fishing in public freshwaters of the state	\$18.6 million (\$12.1 million resident/\$6.5 million nonresident)*
Public fishing lake (PFL) license	\$7.50–\$30/\$8.80–\$30	Fishing in PFLs (if not in possession of a freshwater fishing license)	
Freshwater fishing commercial license	\$119	Commercial fishing in the public waters of the state	
Recreational hunting licenses and permits	\$1.10–\$33.55/\$22.20–\$389.40	Hunting for deer, turkey, waterfowl and upland game birds, feral swine, alligators, black bears, and small game	\$24.7 million (\$15.1 million resident/\$9.6 million nonresident)*
Commercial hunting licenses and permits	\$27.25–\$2,500/\$32–\$2,500	Hunting for commercial purposes in the state	
Recreational fees (e.g., lodging, golf, rentals)	Varies depending on location	Lodging and participating in certain recreational activities in state parks	Not available
Recreational hunting licenses and permits	\$1.10–\$33.55/\$22.20–\$389.40	Hunting for deer, turkey, waterfowl and upland game birds, feral swine, alligators, black bears, and small game	\$24.7 million (\$15.1 million resident/\$9.6 million nonresident)*
State park entrance fees	Daily: \$2–\$5, depending on the park Annual: \$50–\$180, depending on the park	Entering state parks	Not available
Wildlife management area license	\$22.50	Hunting in WMAs	Not available

* The revenue from these fees is based on sales that occurred in federal FY 2023, which ran from October 1, 2022, to September 30, 2023.

Other funding mechanisms: Other identified funding mechanisms that support the ADCNR include timber sales, leases on state lands, specialty license plate tags (e.g., the Alabama State Parks license plate tag), fines, direct donations, and voluntary state income tax refund checkoffs.

Colorado

	FY 2024–2025	FY 2018–2019
Overall state budget*	\$42.9 billion	\$30.6 billion
State budget dedicated to natural resource management	\$440.9 million (1%)	\$305.4 million (1%)
Total general fund dollars in budget	\$12.3 billion	\$11.4 billion
State general fund dedicated to natural resource management	\$45.1 million (0.4%)	\$32 million (0.3%)

* Colorado received an influx of one-time federal funding during the COVID-19 pandemic. Those dollars may still be present in the current budget, artificially inflating the budget trend. For comparison, we have included budget numbers from fiscal year (FY) 2018–2019, the year before the COVID-19 pandemic began, in addition to budget numbers for FY 2024–2025.

ACRES OF STATE LAND

3.5 million acres

POPULATION

5.7 million

MANAGED BY THE STATE

5.3% of state's total land area

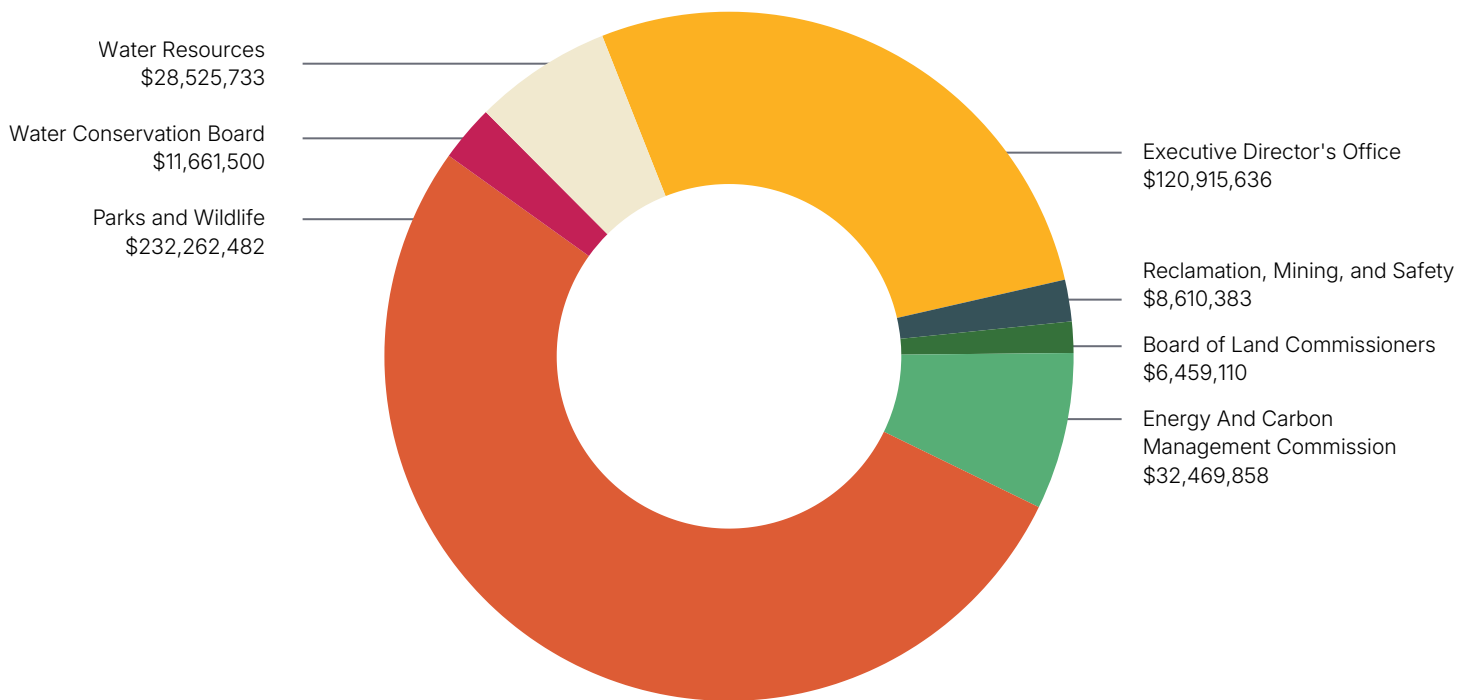
STATE'S TOTAL LAND AREA

66.3 million acres

In many ways, Colorado is a characteristically Western state: 43 percent of its land is publicly owned, outdoor recreation is a major driver of its economy (generating \$13.9 billion in gross domestic product per year), and wildfires and water ownership are growing concerns. In 2022, 96 percent of Coloradans reported recreating outdoors in the past year, and as the state's population continues to grow, pressure is increasing on its natural resources management agencies. In 2016, Colorado became the first state to adopt outdoor principles that intentionally integrate conservation and recreation. As in Michigan, Colorado residents can buy a state parks pass with their vehicle registration; unlike Michigan, that pass is automatically included with vehicle registrations unless Coloradans opt out. Hunter numbers are also declining in Colorado, but an increase in fishing license sales has offset that revenue loss.

The Colorado Department of Natural Resources (CODNR) manages Colorado's forest resources, mining, oil and gas, parks, wildlife, state trust lands, and water resources, including administering water rights. The CODNR is funded through a variety of sources, including user fees, oil and gas severance taxes, and lottery proceeds.

CODNR Budget by Division, FY 2024–2025



Funding Mechanisms

General Fund

The CODNR received 10.2 percent of its funding from the state general fund in FY 2024–2025, totaling \$45.1 million, with the majority of that revenue allocated to the Division of Water Resources and the Executive Director's Office to support administration. The Division of Parks and Wildlife, the largest division by budget within the CODNR, receives about 5 percent of the department's total general fund revenue. The Oil and Gas Conservation Commission, the Water Conservation Board, the State Board of Land Commissioners, and the Division of Reclamation, Mining, and Safety receive no general fund dollars.

Federal Funding

Federal dollars made up 9.2 percent of the CODNR's total budget in FY 2024–2025. Federal funds come from the Dingell-Johnson and Pittman-Robertson programs, the Land and Water Conservation Fund, the Recreational Trails Program, and other federal programs.

State-Dedicated Funding

User Fees: About half of the CODNR's Division of Parks and Wildlife budget is funded through hunting and fishing licenses and state park permits, including the opt-out Keep Colorado Wild Pass, which is discussed in more detail below. Other user fees, such as off-highway vehicle registrations and snowmobile passes, also contribute. The Colorado Parks and Wildlife Commission is authorized to raise hunting and fishing license fees in accordance with the Consumer Price Index.

The following table outlines the user fee types, fee amounts, and revenue generated from each fee.

USER FEE	FEE AMOUNT (RESIDENT/NONRESIDENT)	APPLICATION	ANNUAL REVENUE
Fishing license	\$42/\$117	Standard fishing license	\$28.1 million*
Hunting license	\$36–\$366/\$99–\$2,686	Hunting for small game, waterfowl, deer, elk, moose, bear, pronghorn, turkey, furbearers, and/or mountain lion	\$83.6 million*
Off-highway vehicle trails pass	Annual \$25.25/\$25.25	Use of public motorized trails	Not available
Snowmobile registration or trail pass	Annual \$30.25/\$30.25	Use of public snowmobile trails	Not available
State parks vehicle admission pass	Annual \$29–\$80/\$80 Daily \$10/\$10	Entry into any state park	\$41 million (Keep Colorado Wild Pass alone) (FY 2024–2025)

* The revenue from these fees is based on sales that occurred in federal FY 2023, which ran from October 1, 2022 to September 30, 2023.

Keep Colorado Wild Pass: This state parks pass is a \$29 add-on to every vehicle registration in the state unless the vehicle owner opts out. In FY 2023–2024, the first year of the program, about 70 percent of Coloradans opted out, but the program nonetheless raised \$40.9 million. Passed in 2021 by a Democratic governor and legislature, the bulk of the revenue from this program goes to Colorado Parks and Wildlife, with \$2.5 million allocated to search and rescue organizations and \$1 million to the Colorado Avalanche Information Center.

Lottery Revenue: All of Colorado’s net lottery proceeds go to conservation programs, with 50 percent annually going to the Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO) program, 40 percent to the Conservation Trust Fund, and the remaining 10 percent directly to Colorado Parks and Wildlife. Voters approved a constitutional amendment in 1992 to establish a state lottery and allocate the proceeds in this manner.

Great Outdoors Colorado: GOCO’s board awards competitive grants to local governments and land trusts and makes investments in land acquisition, stewardship, and recreation through Colorado Parks and Wildlife. GOCO received \$90 million in FY 2024–2025.

Conservation Trust Fund: Funding is distributed to local governments on a per capita basis for the acquisition and maintenance of conservation sites. Local governments can also use these funds for capital improvements or maintenance for recreational purposes on any public site. The Conservation Trust Fund distributed \$71.7 million in funding in 2024.

Severance Taxes: Colorado collects severance taxes on the extraction of oil, natural gas, oil shale, certain minerals, and coal. Half of these taxes go to the CODNR, split evenly between two trust funds: one used to finance state water projects and the other to fund CODNR operations.

Georgia

	FY 2024–2025	FY 2018–2019
Overall state budget*	\$66.8 billion	\$51 billion
State budget dedicated to natural resource management	\$355.4 million (0.5%)	\$279.9 million (0.5%)
Total general fund dollars in budget	\$31.3 billion	\$24.9 billion
State general fund dedicated to natural resource management	\$188.1 million (0.6%)	\$118.8 million (0.5%)

* Georgia received an influx of one-time federal funding during the COVID-19 pandemic. Those dollars may still be present in the current budget, artificially inflating the budget trend. For comparison, we have included budget numbers from fiscal year (FY) 2018–2019, the year before the COVID-19 pandemic began, in addition to budget numbers for FY 2024–2025.

ACRES OF STATE LAND

1 million

POPULATION

10.7 million

MANAGED BY THE STATE

**2.7% of state's total
land area**

STATE'S TOTAL LAND AREA

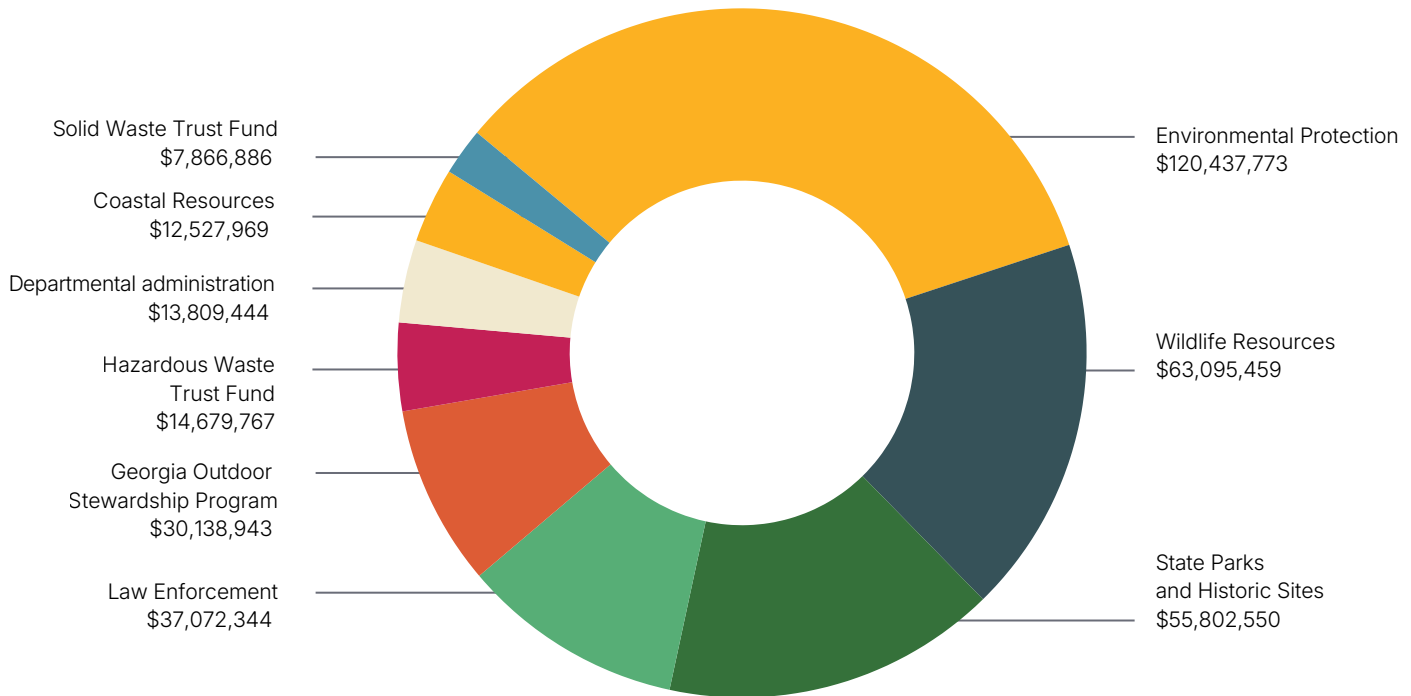
36.9 million acres

The State of Georgia, the largest state east of the Mississippi River, is known for its abundance of natural resources. Much of the state (over 60 percent) is heavily forested and produces nearly three-quarters of the nation's pine timber supply. The state's water resources include over 425,000 acres of inland lakes, 70,000 miles of streams and rivers, over 4.5 million acres of freshwater wetlands, and 100 miles of ocean coastline. Georgia's topography varies greatly, with mountains in the northern part of the state, the Atlantic Ocean coast in the east, and swampland in the south. The state's natural resources support a robust outdoor recreation industry that generates \$18.5 billion in consumer spending and \$9.3 billion in wages and salaries annually, and directly supports 161,000 jobs.

The Georgia Department of Natural Resources (GDNR), the state agency responsible for natural resources management, oversees about one million acres of land, or about 2.7 percent of the state's overall area. The majority of that land (88.3 percent) is managed by the Wildlife Resources Division (WRD) as either a wildlife management area (WMA) or a natural area. The Division of State Parks and Historic Sites operates most of the remaining GDNR property (about 7.5 percent), which includes 48 state parks and 16 historic sites.

Like Michigan, the GDNR's work is primarily funded by user fees and federal funding sources. However, the GDNR also uses a sales tax collected on outdoor recreation equipment to fund its work.

GDNR Program Budgets, FY 2024-2025



Funding Mechanisms

General Fund

Georgia's state general fund (GF) is primarily supported by tax revenue and funds the ordinary operations of the state's agencies. GF revenue accounted for 52.9 percent of the GDNR's total budget in FY 2024–2025, totaling about \$188.1 million. Of all the GDNR divisions, the Law Enforcement Division's budget has the greatest portion of GF revenue (92.6 percent).

Federal Funding

Federal dollars made up 19.9 percent of the GDNR's total budget in FY 2024–2025. These funds primarily come from the Dingell-Johnson and Pittman-Robertson programs, the Land and Water Conservation Fund, and the Recreational Trails Program. The Coastal Resources Division is funded primarily by federal dollars from the National Coastal Zone Management Program.

State-Dedicated Funding

Georgia Outdoor Stewardship Program (GOSP): The GOSP uses a portion (40 percent) of state sales and use tax revenue collected from outdoor recreation equipment sold by establishments classified under the 2007 North American Industry Classification System code 451110 (sporting goods stores) to fund land conservation, trails, parks, and outdoor recreation. The program was established in 2018 by the Georgia Outdoor Stewardship Act, which was passed by a Republican majority legislature, signed into law by Republican Governor Nathan Deal, and approved by 83 percent of Georgia voters. A broad coalition of conservation organizations—including The Nature Conservancy, the Trust for Public Land, and the Georgia Wildlife Federation—worked for nearly a decade to secure the funding. Revenue from the sales tax is deposited into the Georgia Outdoor Stewardship Trust Fund and distributed to eligible entities (local governments, certain nongovernmental organizations, and state government agencies) via Conserve Georgia grants and loans. During its 2024–2025 grant cycle, the GOSP allocated \$24.6 million to conservation projects. The program is temporary and will automatically be repealed in 2029, but it may be extended by the Georgia legislature for an additional ten years.

License plate sales: The GDNR has six license plates, each funding a different conservation program. The five nongame plates (Bald Eagle, Trout Unlimited, Bobwhite Quail Restoration, Butterfly, and Marine Habitat) cost \$45 per year. The sixth plate, the GDNR Law Enforcement Plate, is a specialty tag that costs \$80 the first year and \$55 each year to renew. Of the fees, 80 percent goes directly to the associated programs, and the remainder goes to the state's GF. In 2023, reported nongame license plate revenue was \$1.5 million. Although license plate sales make up a small portion of the GDNR's funding stream, they are a relatively stable and dependable source of revenue for the agency.

User fees: The State Parks and Historic Sites Division is primarily funded by user fees, including state park and historic site entry fees, trail user fees, and camping fees. Similarly, the WRD depends on revenues generated by hunting and fishing license fees. Over the past decade, the number of paid hunting license holders in Georgia has seen a dramatic increase, doubling from 395,000 in 2015 to 821,000 in 2025.

The following table outlines the user fee types, fee amounts, and revenue generated from each fee.

USER FEE	FEE AMOUNT (RESIDENT/NONRESIDENT)	APPLICATION	ANNUAL REVENUE
Camping fees	Average \$30–\$35 per night	Camping in state parks	Not available
Equestrian Trail Annual Pass	\$70	Access to equestrian trails in state parks	Not available
Fishing license	\$3–\$20/\$10–\$200	Freshwater and saltwater fishing	\$15.8 million (\$12.4 million resident/\$3.4 million nonresident)*
Georgia Lands Pass	\$30/\$60	Access to WMAs and Public Fishing Areas	Not available
Historic Site Annual Pass	\$25–\$50	Admission to state historic sites	Not available
Hunting license	\$3–\$75/\$20–\$250	Hunting for deer, turkey, dove and waterfowl, small game, bear, alligator, and nonnative and invasive species (e.g., feral hogs)	\$20.7 million (\$9.9 million resident/\$10.8 million nonresident)*
ParkPass	Annual \$50 Daily \$5	Parking at state parks	Not available
Trapping license	\$40/\$325	Furbearer trapping and selling furs, hides, and pelts	Not available

* The revenue from these fees is based on sales that occurred in federal FY 2023, which ran from October 1, 2022, to September 30, 2023.

Other funding mechanisms: Other identified funding mechanisms that support the GDNR include bond funds, timber revenue, a state income tax checkoff, and fee revenue (e.g., from hunting and fishing violations).

Illinois

	FY 2024–2025	FY 2018–2019
Overall state budget*	\$177.4 billion	\$93.2 billion
State budget dedicated to natural resource management	\$1.9 million (1.1%)	\$895.3 million (1%)
Total general fund dollars in budget	\$52 billion	\$36.2 billion
State general fund dedicated to natural resource management	\$96.6 million (0.2%)	\$38.7 million (0.1%)

* Illinois received an influx of one-time federal funding during the COVID-19 pandemic. Those dollars may still be present in the current budget, artificially inflating the budget trend. For comparison, we have included budget numbers from fiscal year (FY) 2018–2019, the year before the COVID-19 pandemic began, in addition to budget numbers for FY 2024–2025.

ACRES OF STATE LAND

405,900 acres

POPULATION

12.8 million

MANAGED BY THE STATE

1.1% of state's total land area

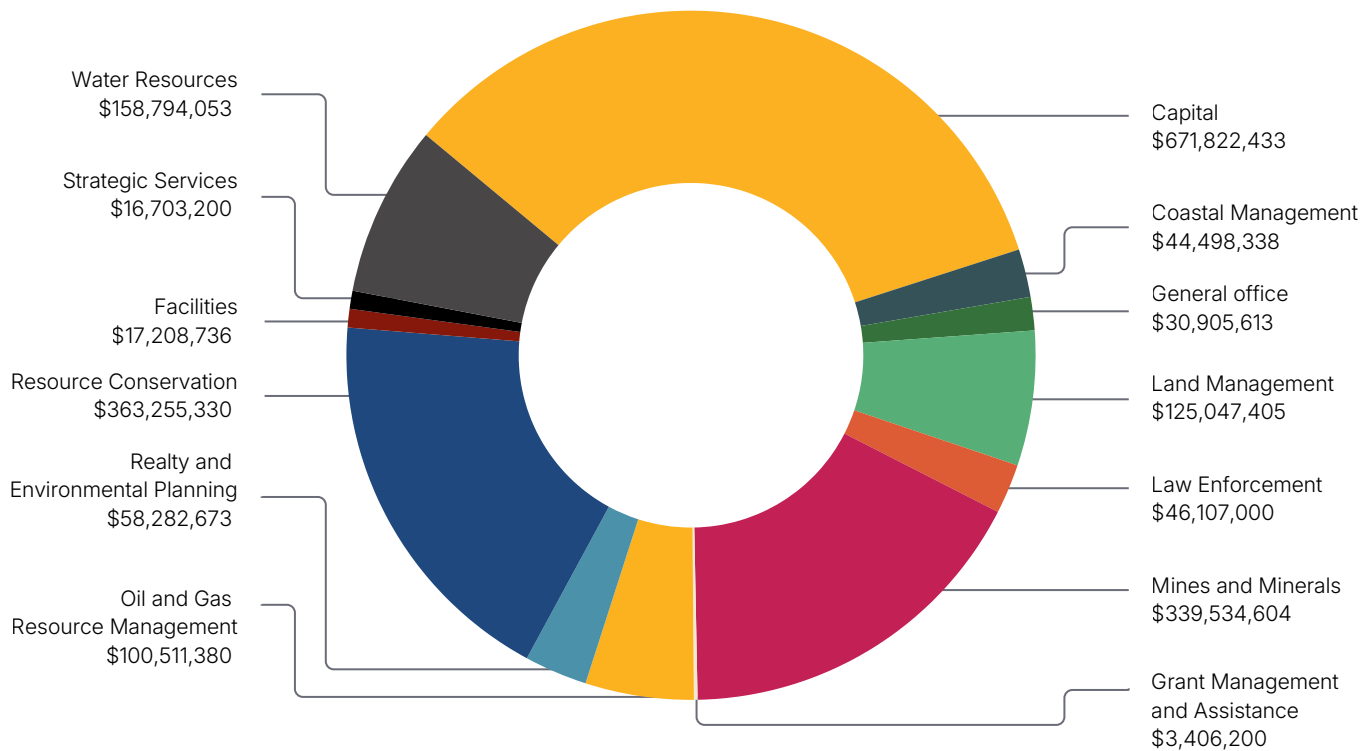
STATE'S TOTAL LAND AREA

35.5 million acres

Illinois's Lake Michigan shoreline is one of the few natural resources it shares with Michigan. Ranked 44 out of the 50 states for its percentage of public land and with only about 14 percent of the state forested, Illinois is known more for agriculture than for natural areas. It is also in the bottom fifth of states in terms of hunters per capita. However, the two states share some population characteristics (Illinois is the sixth most populous state; Michigan is the tenth), a water border, and an industrial history that influences both states' landscapes to the present day.

The Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) manages wildlife, state-owned land, mining, and water resources in the state. Activities related to the IDNR support \$32 billion in economic activity annually. Like the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, the IDNR is funded largely through user fees and federal funds, but Illinois also dedicates part of its real estate transfer tax to natural resources management and has a vehicle registration surcharge that supports the maintenance and operations of state parks.

IDNR Appropriations by Program/Office, FY 2024–2025



Funding Mechanisms

General Fund

The IDNR received approximately 5 percent of its funding from the state general fund in FY 2024–2025, totaling about \$96 million. This is significantly less general funding than the IDNR received in the early 2000s, although somewhat more than it received in the early 2010s.

Federal Funding

Federal dollars made up 21.7 percent of the IDNR's total budget in FY 2024–2025, totaling about \$432 million. Federal funds come from the Dingell-Johnson and Pittman-Robertson programs, the Land and Water Conservation Fund, the Recreational Trails Program, and other federal programs.

State-Dedicated Funding

User fees: Proceeds from hunting and fishing license sales make up a large percentage of the IDNR's revenue that is dedicated to natural resource management. Like many states, Illinois offers significant discounts on hunting and fishing licenses to people over 65, but in Illinois, a person over 80 can hunt deer for as little as \$1.50. Illinois does not charge admission fees for any state-owned land, including state parks. The exception is state-owned beaches, which charge \$1.00 per day. Other user fees, such as off-highway vehicle stamps and snowmobile registration fees, also contribute.

The following table outlines the user fee types, fee amounts, and revenue generated from each fee.

USER FEE	FEE AMOUNT (RESIDENT/NONRESIDENT)	APPLICATION	ANNUAL REVENUE
Fishing license	\$1.50–\$15/\$10.50–\$31.50, plus applicable stamps if needed (\$0.50–\$6.50)	Standard fishing license	\$8.3 million (\$7 million resident/\$1.3 million nonresident) *
Hunting license	\$1.50–\$12.50/\$12.50– \$57.75	Hunting for small game, waterfowl, turkey, and/or deer	\$33.6 million (\$14.5 million resident/\$19.1 million nonresident) *
Off-highway vehicle stamp	\$15	Operation of an off-highway vehicle anywhere but the user's own property	Estimated \$700,000– \$800,000 annually
Snowmobile registration or trail use sticker	Registration: \$45 Trail use sticker (out of state only): \$25	Operation of a snowmobile on public trails	Not available

* The revenue from these fees is based on sales that occurred in federal FY 2023, which ran from October 1, 2022, to September 30, 2023.

Vehicle registration fee: Enacted in 2013, Senate Bill 1566 added \$2 to the Illinois motor vehicle registration fee. That revenue was dedicated to state parks—specifically, to hire staff and maintain or build infrastructure. Shortly before the bill's passage, IDNR estimated that it would generate \$18–\$20 million annually. Illinois state parks had a \$750 million maintenance backlog at the time.

Real estate transfer tax: The real estate transfer tax funds two conservation programs: the Open Space Lands Acquisition and Development Program (OSLAD) and the Natural Areas Acquisition Fund (NAAF). Passed in 1986 and 1989, respectively, by Republican Governor Jim Thompson and a Democratic legislature, these two programs share half of the real estate transfer tax. OSLAD funds are used to match local governments' investments in acquiring and developing parks and forest preserves, with \$54 million in funding available in program year 2025. NAAF funds, comprising about 15 percent of real estate transfer tax dollars, are dedicated to the acquisition, preservation, and stewardship of natural areas. Ten percent of NAAF funds are set aside for stewardship projects annually. However, NAAF funding for both land acquisition and stewardship has frequently been redirected to general operational support and staffing for IDNR.

Michigan

	FY 2024–2025	FY 2018–2019
Overall state budget*	\$81.2 billion	\$58.1 billion
State budget dedicated to natural resource management	\$534.5 million (0.7%)	\$438.4 million (0.8%)
Total general fund dollars in budget	\$14.8 billion	\$10.4 billion
State general fund dedicated to natural resource management	\$76.7 million (0.5%)	\$49.1 million (0.5%)

* Michigan received an influx of one-time federal funding during the COVID-19 pandemic. Those dollars may still be present in the current budget, artificially inflating the budget trend. For comparison, we have included budget numbers from fiscal year (FY) 2018–2019, the year before the COVID-19 pandemic began, in addition to budget numbers for FY 2024–2025.

ACRES OF STATE LAND

4.6 million

POPULATION

10.1 million

MANAGED BY THE STATE

12.7% of state's total land area

STATE'S TOTAL LAND AREA

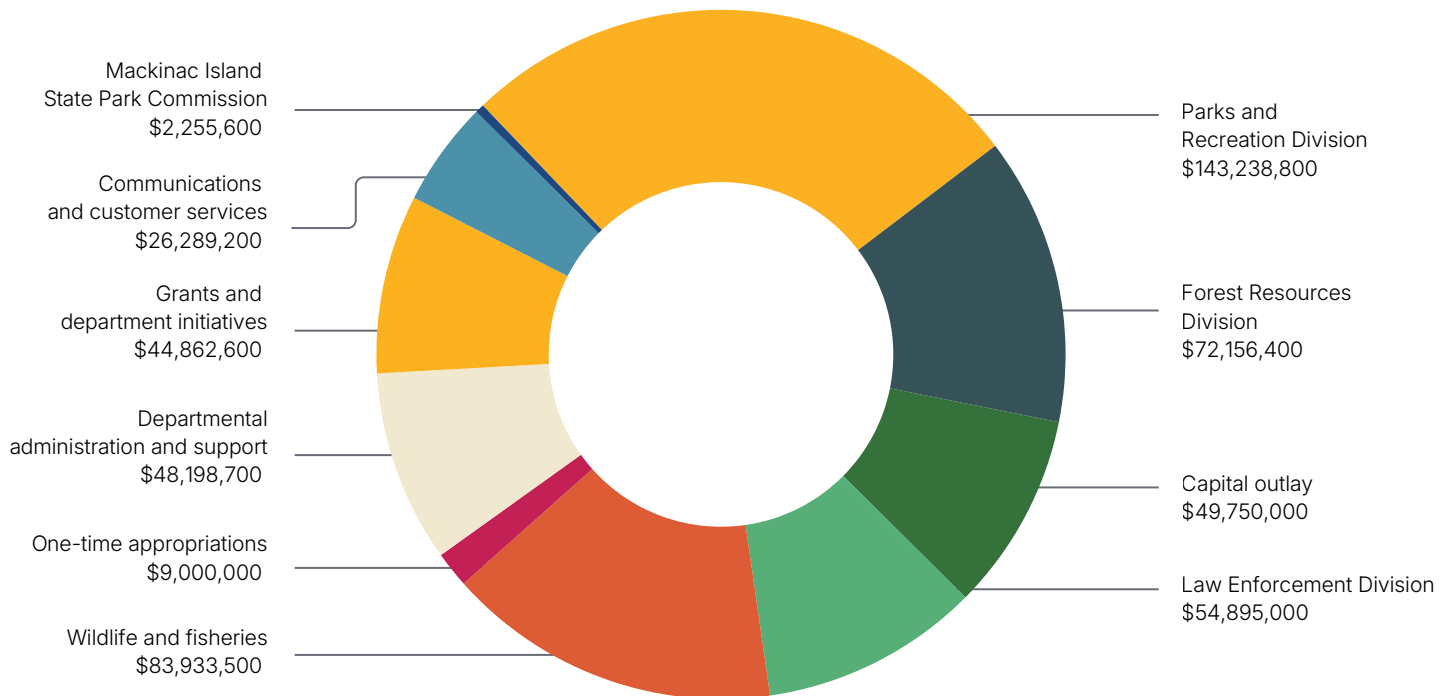
36.2 million acres

Michigan has an abundant supply of high-quality natural resources that support the state's economy and provide a wide range of recreational opportunities for its residents and visitors. The state has 3,300 miles of Great Lakes shoreline, nearly 11,000 inland lakes larger than five acres, over 52,000 miles of streams and rivers, and millions of acres of public land. In 2023, Michigan's outdoor recreation economy contributed \$13.9 billion to the state's economy, supported 118,000 jobs, and generated \$6.4 billion in compensation for employee households.

The Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR), the primary state agency responsible for managing the state's natural resources, oversees about 4.6 million acres of public land. This includes 3.9 million acres of state forests (the largest state forest system in the nation), 103 state parks and recreation areas, over 1,000 boating access sites, 178 state game and wildlife areas, and more than 13,400 miles of state-designated trails.

DNR programs are largely supported by user fees (e.g., hunting and fishing licenses) and other natural resource revenues (e.g., timber sales and royalties from oil, gas, and mineral extraction). Programs like the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund (MNRTF) and the Recreation Passport program are permanent state-dedicated funding mechanisms established to support the management of the state's natural resources. Federal funding programs such as the Pittman-Robertson and Dingell-Johnson programs are also key funding sources for the agency.

FY 2024–2025 DNR Appropriations



Funding Mechanisms

General Fund

Michigan's general fund (GF) revenue is generated primarily by taxes. GF revenue accounted for \$76.7 million, or 15.3 percent, of the DNR's total budget in 2025. However, \$9 million of that funding consisted of one-time appropriations for projects such as mass timber market development and development of the Huron Waterloo Pathways Initiative's Border-To-Border Trail.

Federal Funding

Federal dollars made up about 18 percent of the DNR's total budget for FY 2024–2025. These funds primarily came from the Dingell-Johnson and Pittman-Robertson programs, which support the fisheries and wildlife programs, respectively. The Land and Water Conservation Fund and the Recreational Trails Program are two other important federal funding programs used by the state to support its natural resources and recreation work.

State-Dedicated Funding

Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund (MNRTF): The MNRTF is a constitutionally created fund used to acquire recreation land and help develop public recreation facilities. The fund evolved from the Michigan Land Trust Fund (MLTF), which was established by statute in 1976 under Republican Governor William Milliken and a Democratic-majority legislature. In 1984, nearly two-thirds of Michigan voters approved a constitutional amendment that created the MNRTF using money from the MLTF. The new fund officially replaced the MLTF in 1985. The MNRTF accrues revenue from the sale of oil, gas, and mineral leases, as well as from royalties on oil, gas, and mineral extractions on state lands. Each year, a portion of the amount accumulated in the fund is distributed via grants to eligible entities, which include state and local units of government, school districts, and recreation authorities that are legally constituted to provide recreation. In 2023, the trust fund awarded \$27.3 million in grant awards. Over its 48-year history, the MNRTF has awarded more than \$1.3 billion to state and local units of government for projects in all 83 counties of the state.

Michigan State Parks Endowment Fund (MSPEF): Established in 1994, the MSPEF is a constitutionally protected fund used to help finance state parks. The MSPEF collects the majority of the proceeds from oil, gas, and mineral royalties on state lands and may also receive private contributions. In 2020, 84 percent of Michigan voters approved a ballot measure that, among other provisions, required at least 20 percent of the fund's annual spending to be used for state park improvements. Until the accumulated principal balance of the fund reaches \$800 million, no more than 50 percent of the annual royalty revenue may be appropriated for expenditure. However, the legislature may appropriate all other earnings (e.g., interest and private contributions). Amounts available for expenditure are used for capital improvements, operations and maintenance, acquisition of land for state parks, and administration of the fund. In FY 2022-2023, \$22.3 million was appropriated from the MSPEF.

Recreation Passport: The Recreation Passport is an annual pass that grants motorized vehicles access to state parks and recreation areas, state-managed boating access sites, and state forest campgrounds. Michigan drivers can voluntarily choose to purchase the passport (i.e., "opt in") when renewing the registration for their vehicle(s). The Recreation Passport program was established by statute in 2010 under Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm and a Republican-majority legislature. Michigan was the second state in the country (after Montana) to fund parks through optional license plate fees. Revenue generated from the sale of Recreation Passports is deposited into a state restricted fund that supports state park infrastructure, a local grant program for community recreation agencies, state forest recreation infrastructure (e.g., campgrounds and trails), state parks' cultural and historic resources, and marketing and promotion. The current price for a one-year Recreation Passport is \$15 for residents and \$42 for nonresidents. In FY 2022-2023, the Recreation Passport generated \$42.4 million.

Timber sales: Proceeds from the sale of timber on state forest land are deposited into the Forest Development Fund, which supports the management of Michigan's state forests. In FY 2022-2023, the DNR received an estimated \$48.1 million in revenue from state timber sales.

User fees: The Parks and Recreation Division is almost entirely funded by user fees, including camping and lodging fees, snowmobile and off-road vehicle (ORV) trail permits and stickers, and watercraft registration fees. Similarly, the Wildlife Division and Fisheries Division are dependent on hunting and fishing license fee revenues. Of note, the number of licensed hunters and anglers in the state has been decreasing in recent decades, which has resulted in declining revenue and program expenditures for the wildlife and fisheries programs.



The following table outlines the user fee types, fee amounts, and revenue generated from each fee.

USER FEE	FEE AMOUNT (RESIDENT/NONRESIDENT)	APPLICATION	ANNUAL REVENUE
Camping and lodging fees	\$26–\$236 per night, depending on the park and type of site	Camping and lodging in state parks and recreation area campgrounds	\$48.7 million (FY 2020–2021)
Fishing license	\$10–\$26/\$10–\$76	Fishing in public waters of the state	\$27.9 million (\$19.2 million resident/\$8.6 million nonresident)*
Fur harvester license	\$15 (in addition to base license: \$11 resident/\$151 nonresident)	Hunting and trapping furbearing animals	Not available
Hunting license	\$12–\$100/\$12–\$80 (in addition to base license: \$11 resident/\$151 nonresident)	Hunting for deer, bear, elk (Michigan residents only), small game, turkey, and waterfowl	\$35.8 million (\$30.2 million resident/\$5.6 million nonresident)*
ORV license	\$26.25	Riding eligible county roads, frozen surface of public waters, state forest roads (open to ORV use) and eligible national forest roads	\$7.9 million (FY 2021–2022)
ORV trail permit	\$10	Riding on state-designated ORV trails and scramble areas	\$2.5 million (FY 2021–2022)
Snowmobile permit	\$52	Riding on state-designated trails, public roads, and public lands (where authorized)	\$8.5 million (FY 2021–2022)
Watercraft registration	\$5–\$448, depending on type and length of watercraft	Boating (valid for three years)	\$9.8 million (FY 2021–2022)

* The revenue from these fees is based on sales that occurred in federal FY 2023, which ran from October 1, 2022, to September 30, 2023.

Other funding mechanisms: Other identified funding mechanisms that support the DNR include concession fees, leases, donations/gifts, and grants.

Minnesota

	FB 2025 (FYs 23–25)	FB 2019 (FYs 17–19)
Overall state budget*	\$128.8 billion	\$93.5 billion
State budget dedicated to natural resource management	\$2 billion (1.6%)	\$1.1 billion (1.2%)
Total general fund dollars in budget	\$69.5 billion	\$48.6 billion
State general fund dedicated to natural resource management	\$604.3 million (0.9%)	\$293.7 million (0.6%)

* Minnesota's government budgets and reports spending based on its biennial fiscal years; for comparison with other states, the numbers presented should be divided in half. The state received an influx of one-time federal funding during the COVID-19 pandemic. Those dollars may still be present in the current budget, artificially inflating the budget trend. For comparison, we have included budget numbers for fiscal biennium (FB) 2019, the period before the COVID-19 pandemic began, in addition to budget numbers for FB 2025.

ACRES OF STATE LAND

5.6 million

POPULATION

5.7 million

MANAGED BY THE STATE

**11% of state's total
land area**

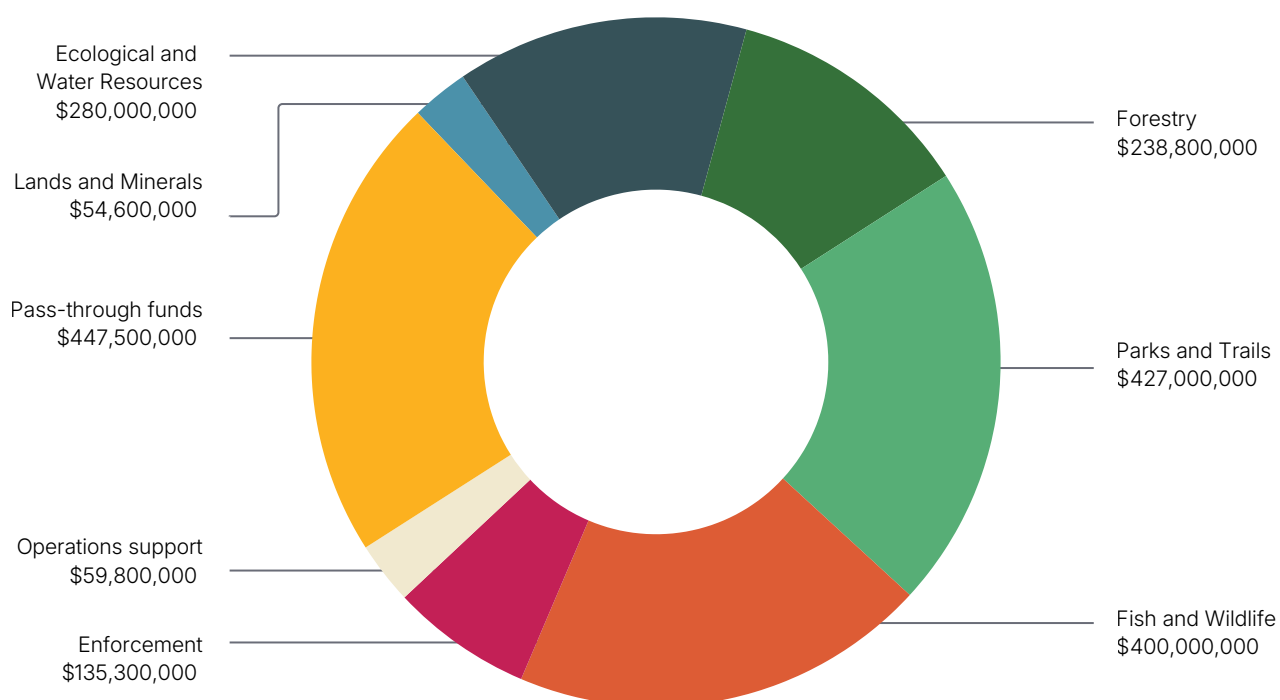
STATE'S TOTAL LAND AREA

50.9 million acres

The state of Minnesota is known as the "Land of 10,000 Lakes" due to its many inland lakes, which collectively cover about 2.9 million acres. Minnesota also has 190 miles of Lake Superior shoreline, known for its towering cliffs, rocky outcrops, and scenic vistas. About one-third of the state is covered by large-scale forests, which produce approximately 3.8 million cords of wood fiber and contribute more than \$7.3 billion annually to the state's economy. Minnesota's natural resources support a robust outdoor recreation industry, generating about \$13.5 billion in consumer spending and delivering \$5.9 billion in direct compensation each year, in addition to providing more than 95,000 jobs.

The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (MNDNR) administers 5.6 million acres of land, which is about 11 percent of the state's total land area. This land includes 75 state parks and recreation areas, more than 1,300 miles of trails, and 58 state forests. The state also manages over 1,500 water access sites and 4,500 miles of state-designated water trails. Similar to the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, the MNDNR is funded primarily by user fees (e.g., hunting and fishing licenses) and federal sources such as the Pittman-Robertson and Dingell-Johnson programs. The state also uses a portion of gasoline tax and state lottery revenue to fund natural resource management.

MNDNR Division Budgets, FB 2025 (FYs 23–25)



Funding Mechanisms

General Fund

The general fund (GF), which draws revenue primarily from taxes, is the state's main operating fund. GF dollars make up about 30.2 percent of the MNDNR's overall operating budget for FB 2025. The majority (73 percent) of those dollars are direct appropriations for specific purposes (e.g., managing state parks, trails, and forests, and enforcing natural resource laws). The remaining 27 percent are open appropriations available for making payments to tribal and other local governments based on treaties and statutes and for responding quickly to forest fires.

Federal Funding

The divisions of Fish and Wildlife (FAW) and Parks and Trails (PAT) receive federal dollars from several sources, including the Dingell-Johnson and Pittman-Robertson programs, the Land and Water Conservation Fund, and the Recreational Trails Program.

State-Dedicated Funding

Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund (ENRTF): The ENRTF was established in 1988 by a constitutional amendment that was approved by 77 percent of Minnesota's voters. Forty percent of the net proceeds from the Minnesota State Lottery are deposited into the ENRTF, which is managed and invested for continual growth by the Minnesota State Board of Investment. ENRTF money is made available each year for projects that "protect, conserve, preserve, and enhance Minnesota's environment and natural resources." Traditionally, up to 5.5 percent of the ENRTF's market value (about \$130 million on average) has been made available for appropriation each year, but beginning in 2025, up to 7 percent of the market value has been made available for appropriation annually. Every year, the Minnesota Legislature appropriates approximately 80 percent of the available funds for specific projects based on recommendations from the Legislative-Citizen Commission on Minnesota Resources. The remaining 20 percent of the available funds are appropriated to the MNDNR for a community grant program. Since 1991, the ENRTF has provided more than \$1 billion in funding for over 1,700 projects around the state.

Gasoline tax revenue: Twice a year, the Minnesota Department of Transportation transfers the estimated amount (approximately 2.98 percent) of the unrefunded gasoline tax used by boats, snowmobiles, and off-highway vehicles (OHVs) to the MNDNR. The revenue is deposited into the Natural Resources Fund and is used for the acquisition, maintenance, and development of public access and boating facilities on public waters; lake and river improvement; boat and water safety programs; and the maintenance and development of motorized trails. In fiscal year 2022–2023, about \$40.9 million in unrefunded gas tax revenue was transferred into the Natural Resources Fund.

Get Out MORE: Get Out MORE (Modernize Outdoor Recreation Experiences) is a \$150 million one-time investment provided to the MNDNR in Democratic Governor Tim Walz’s One Minnesota Budget, which was signed into law in 2023. The Get Out MORE investment centers on five key areas: enhancing access and welcoming new users to public lands and outdoor recreation facilities; modernizing camping and related infrastructure; enhancing fisheries and fishing infrastructure; modernizing boating access; and restoring streams and modernizing water-related infrastructure to support outdoor recreation. As of September 2025, 8 percent of Get Out MORE projects had been completed, 84 percent were in progress, and the remaining 8 percent were not yet started. Get Out MORE investments are expected to be fully implemented by the MNDNR by 2029.

State sales tax: In 2008, Minnesota voters approved a constitutional amendment—the Clean Water, Land, and Legacy Amendment (Legacy Amendment)—that raised the state sales tax by $\frac{3}{8}$ of 1 percent (from 6.5 percent to 6.875 percent) for 25 years. The additional sales tax revenue (approximately \$240 million per year) is directed into four separate dedicated funds as follows: the Parks and Trails Fund (14.25 percent), the Outdoor Heritage Fund (33 percent), the Clean Water Fund (33 percent), and the Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund (19.75 percent). The Legacy Amendment will expire in 2034 unless it is renewed or extended.



User fees: PAT and FAW both rely on revenue generated by user fees, including park entry fees, camping and lodging fees, hunting and fishing licenses, and recreational vehicle registrations.

The following table outlines the user fee types, fee amounts, and revenue generated from each fee.

USER FEE	FEE AMOUNT (RESIDENT/NONRESIDENT)	APPLICATION	ANNUAL REVENUE
Fishing license	\$5–\$87/\$5–\$68	Fishing in Minnesota	\$35.7 million (\$23.6 million resident/\$12.1 million nonresident)*
Great Minnesota Ski Pass	Daily: \$10 Yearly: \$25 Three-year: \$70	Skiing on groomed trails in Minnesota state parks or state forests, or on state or grant-in-aid (GIA) trails	Not available
Horse Pass	Daily: \$5 Yearly: \$21	Riding or driving horses on MNDNR-managed horse trails	From 2007–2024, the Horse Pass generated \$1.7 million
Hunting license	\$1.50–\$44/\$1.50–\$230	Hunting for bear, deer, elk, moose, small game, waterfowl, upland game birds, and furbearers	\$32.9 million (\$28.4 million resident/\$4.5 million nonresident)*
OHV registration	\$6–\$60/\$20–\$30	Operating OHVs on state or GIA trails	Not available
Snowmobile registration	\$45–\$115, depending on type of owner and use of snowmobile	Operating snowmobiles in Minnesota	Not available
Watercraft license and registration	\$8–\$209, depending on watercraft type and length	Operating watercraft greater than ten feet long	Not available
Wild rice harvest license	\$15–\$25/\$30	Harvesting wild rice	Not available

* The revenue from these fees is based on sales that occurred in federal FY 2023, which ran from October 1, 2022, to September 30, 2023.

Other funding mechanisms: Other identified funding mechanisms that support the MNDNR include fines (e.g., for hunting and fishing violations), mineral mining royalties, timber harvests on state land, and voluntary state income tax checkoffs.

Missouri

	FY 2024–2025	FY 2018–2019
Overall state budget*	\$51.8 billion	\$28.8 billion
State budget dedicated to natural resource management	\$1.1 billion (2.3%)	\$754.5 million (2.6%)
Total general fund dollars in budget	\$14.7 billion	\$9.8 billion
State general fund dedicated to natural resource management	\$80.6 million (0.5%)	\$12.2 million (0.1%)

* Missouri received an influx of one-time federal funding during the COVID-19 pandemic. Those dollars may still be present in the current budget, artificially inflating the budget trend. For comparison, we have included budget numbers from fiscal year (FY) 2018–2019, the year before the COVID-19 pandemic began, in addition to budget numbers for FY 2024–2025.

ACRES OF STATE LAND

1.2 million

POPULATION

6.2 million

MANAGED BY THE STATE

2.7% of state's total land area

STATE'S TOTAL LAND AREA

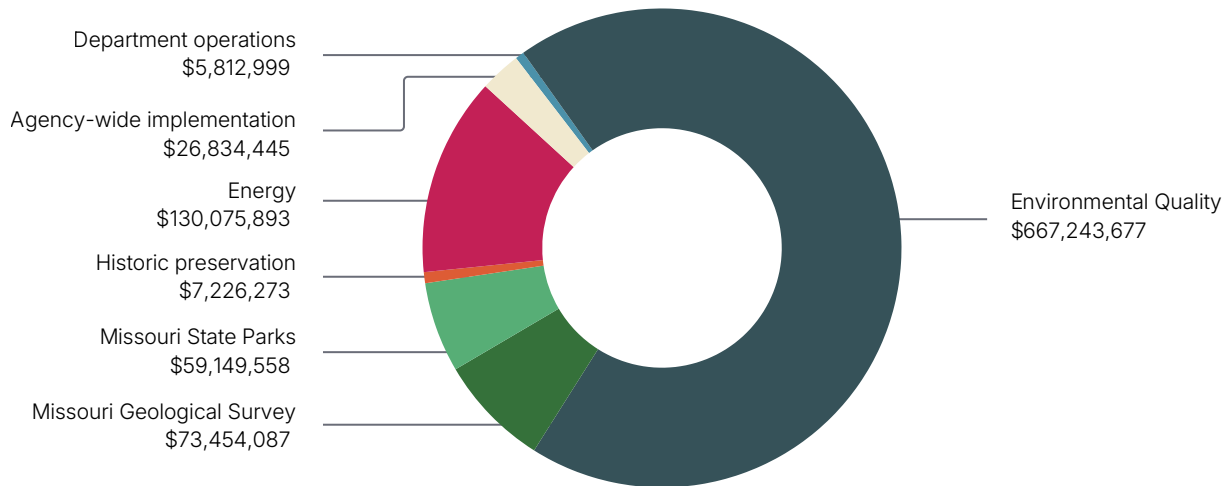
43.9 million acres

Missouri is a state with diverse landscapes that provide a variety of outdoor recreational opportunities. The state's landscape includes iconic tallgrass prairies, vast forests, two major rivers (the Mississippi River and Missouri River), the Ozark Mountains, over 1,100 natural springs, hundreds of inland lakes, and one of the most extensive cave systems in the country. Missouri's outdoor recreation industry generates more than \$15.3 billion in spending annually and supports over 111,000 jobs.

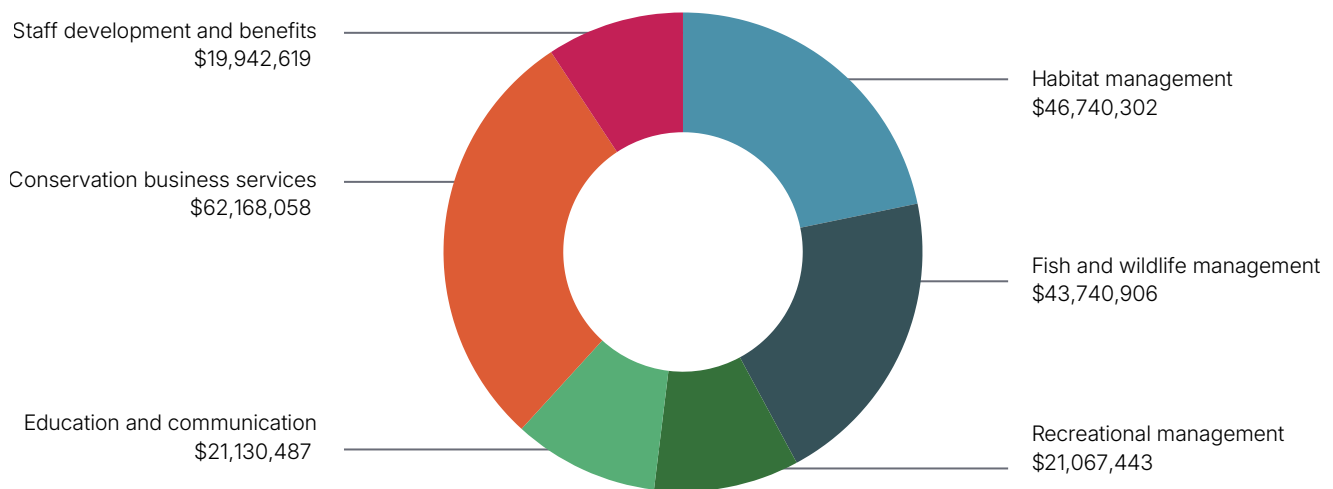
The Missouri Department of Natural Resources (MoDNR) and the Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC) are the two primary state agencies responsible for managing Missouri's public lands. The MDC oversees the state's fish, forests, and wildlife, while the MoDNR administers the state park system. The MoDNR is also tasked with environmental quality (including air, land, and water) and the management of the state's energy resources. Together, the two agencies supervise about 1.2 million acres of land. Of that, the MDC is responsible for about 975,000 acres of land, the majority of which is forest, and the MoDNR presides over about 212,000 acres of public land, including 56 state parks, 36 historic sites, and 12 state-designated wild areas.

Missouri uses two separate sales taxes to support its natural resources work. The MoDNR is funded primarily by the Parks, Soils, and Water Sales Tax; the MDC is funded primarily by the Conservation Sales Tax. Together, the taxes generate more than \$200 million each year and provide a consistent, reliable source of funding for both agencies. Like Michigan, Missouri also utilizes hunting and fishing licenses and federal funding sources to support its natural resources management, though Missouri is less dependent on these sources than Michigan.

MoDNR Division and Category Budgets



MDC Functional Category Budgets



Funding Mechanisms

General Revenue

Missouri's general revenue (GR) fund is supported primarily by taxes. GR accounted for 8.3 percent of the MoDNR's total budget in FY 2024–2025, totaling \$80.6 million. However, the amount of GR allocated to natural resource management programs within the MoDNR is difficult to quantify due to overlap between the agency's environmental, energy, and natural resource programs (for example, in administrative costs). The MDC does not receive any GR dollars as part of its annual operating budget.

Federal Funding

Federal funds, including stimulus funds, made up 30.6 percent of the MoDNR's total budget and about 16 percent of the MDC's total budget in FY 2024–2025. These funds primarily came from the Pittman-Robertson and Dingell-Johnson programs, which support fish and wildlife management. The Land and Water Conservation Fund and the Recreational Trails Program are two other federal funding programs used by the state to support its natural resources and recreation efforts.

State-Dedicated Funding

Conservation Sales Tax: In 1976, Missouri voters approved a ballot measure authorizing a permanent Conservation Sales Tax of one-eighth of one cent. For every \$8 spent on taxable items in the state, one penny goes to conservation. Revenues generated from the tax are deposited into the Conservation Commission Fund, which is used to support the MDC’s fish, forest, and wildlife conservation efforts. The MDC receives the majority of its funding (about 60 percent) from the Conservation Sales Tax (\$174.8 million in FY 2024–2025). Missouri’s Conservation Sales Tax has been lauded as “one of the great stories in fish and wildlife history” because of its success in providing a long-term, stable, and significant source of conservation funding for the state.

Parks, Soils, and Water Sales Tax: This sales tax of one-tenth of one cent was first approved by voters in 1984 to support the state park system and soil and water conservation efforts. Half of the revenue from the tax goes to the state’s soil and water conservation districts, and the other half supports Missouri’s state parks. The tax is placed on the ballot every ten years to reaffirm voters’ support and has passed by a two-to-one margin or more each time. The tax was most recently reapproved in 2016 by 80 percent of voters. If not approved by voters in 2026, it will expire in 2028. The majority of the Missouri State Parks system budget (about 75 percent) consists of revenues from the Parks, Soils, and Waters Sales Tax.

User fees: In FY 2024–2025, revenue from hunting and fishing permit sales made up 16.2 percent of the MDC’s annual budget. Missouri is one of only seven states with no state park entrance or parking fees. The state charges modest fees for camping in state parks.

The following table outlines the user fee types, fee amounts, and revenue generated by each fee.

USER FEE	FEE AMOUNT (RESIDENT/NONRESIDENT)	APPLICATION	ANNUAL REVENUE
Camping fees	\$10–\$64, depending on the park, time of year, and type of site	Camping in state parks	Not available
Fishing permits	\$8–\$13/\$8–\$51	Fishing in lakes, streams, large reservoirs, and trout areas	\$13.8 million (\$9.5 million resident/\$4.3 million nonresident)*
Furbearer hunting and trapping permit	\$200.50 (nonresidents only)	Allows nonresidents to hunt, trap, and sell furbearers	Not available
Hunting permits	\$5.50–\$50/\$10.50–\$276.50	Hunting for elk, deer, bear, geese, turkey, duck, migratory birds, and small game	\$27.8 million (\$13.6 million resident/\$14.2 million nonresident)*

* The revenue from these fees is based on sales that occurred in federal FY 2023, which ran from October 1, 2022, to September 30, 2023.

Other funding mechanisms: Other identified funding mechanisms that support the MoDNR and MDC include bonds, sales and rentals, interest earnings, grants, and gifts/donations.

Montana

	FB 2025 (FYs 23–25)	FB 2019 (FYs 17–19)
Overall state budget*	\$14.4 billion	\$10.3 billion
State budget dedicated to natural resource management	\$429 million (2.8%)	\$325 million (3.2%)
Total general fund dollars in budget	\$4.3 billion	\$4.0 billion
State general fund dedicated to natural resource management	\$64.1 million (1.4%)	\$54.2 million (1.4%)

* Montana's government budgets and reports spending based on its biennial fiscal years; for comparison with other states, the numbers presented should be divided in half. The state received an influx of one-time federal funding during the COVID-19 pandemic. Those dollars may still be present in the current budget, artificially inflating the budget trend. For comparison, we have included budget numbers from fiscal biennium (FB) 2019 (FYs 2017–2019), the period before the COVID-19 pandemic began, in addition to budget numbers for FB 2025 (FYs 2023–2025).

ACRES OF STATE LAND

4.7 million acres

POPULATION

1.08 million

MANAGED BY THE STATE

5% of state's total land area

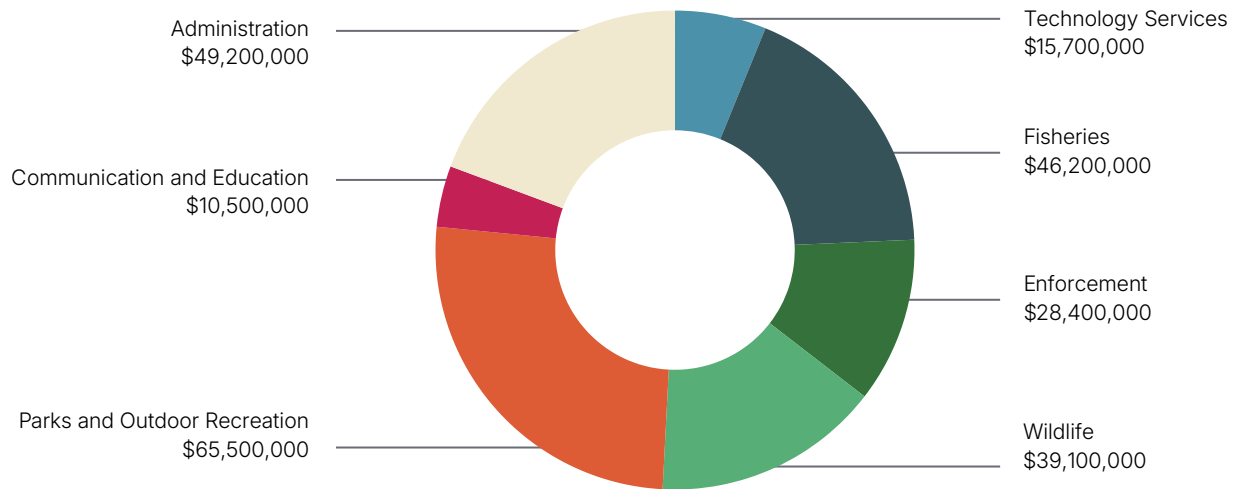
STATE'S TOTAL LAND AREA

94.1 million acres

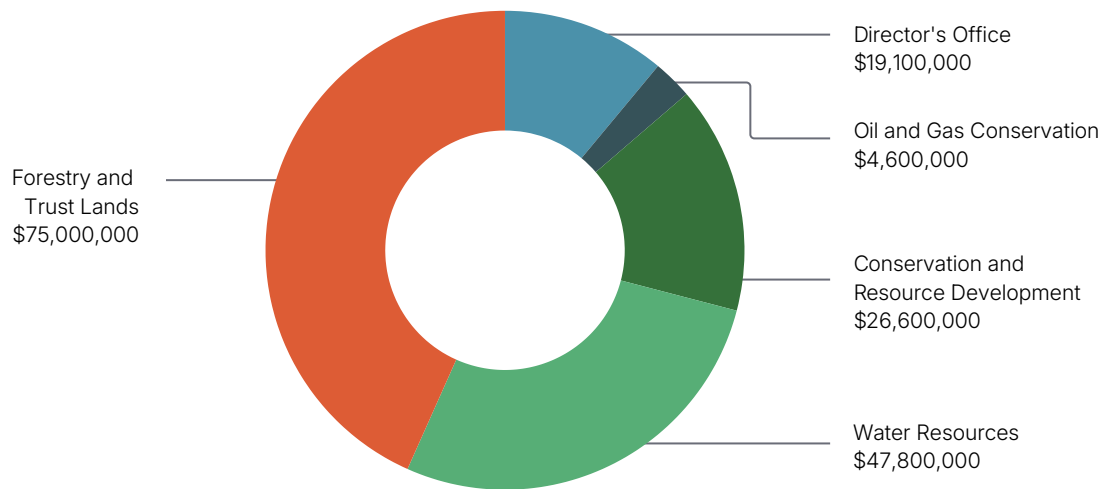
The largest state by area included in this analysis, Montana, is known for its open spaces. With about 30 percent of its land in federal ownership and another 5 percent owned by the state, Montana's public lands support a robust outdoor recreation industry that generates approximately \$7.1 billion in consumer spending annually. Montana's landscape has a long history of hunting, especially big-game hunting, and is also well suited to a variety of other outdoor activities, such as fishing, hiking, mountain biking, and rock climbing. However, the mechanisms that fund its natural resources management are disproportionately dependent on hunters and anglers. Contrary to national and Michigan trends, the number of hunters and anglers in this state may actually be increasing. As in Michigan, Montana residents can buy a parks pass with their vehicle registration, but Montana's pass is sold on an opt-out rather than an opt-in basis.

The Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (MDFWP) and the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) are responsible for managing natural resources in the state, including water resources, forestry, oil and gas, wildlife, fisheries, and public lands. The two departments are primarily funded through user fees, the state marijuana tax, and federal funds.

MDFWP Spending by Division, FB 2025 (FYs 23-25)



Montana DNRC Spending by Division, FB 2025 (FYs 23-25)



Funding Mechanisms

General Fund

The MDFWP received no general funding in FB 2025; the DNRC received \$64.1 million in general funds, most of which was allocated to the Water Resources and Forestry divisions, with the Director's Office and the Conservation and Resource Development divisions receiving smaller amounts.

Federal Funding

Federal dollars made up about a quarter of the MDFWP budget in FB 2025. In the same biennium, the DNRC received only 2.7 percent of its funding from federal sources. Federal funds come from the Dingell-Johnson and Pittman-Robertson programs, the Land and Water Conservation Fund, the Recreational Trails Program, and other federal programs.

State-Dedicated Funding

User Fees: More than half of the MDFWP's funding comes from sales of fishing and hunting licenses and camping fees. Other user fees, such as off-highway vehicle permits, the opt-out parks pass (paid for as part of vehicle registration), and snowmobile trail passes, also contribute. Nonresident hunting license fees are adjusted annually for inflation, and the legislature automatically requests a report on other states' hunting and fishing license fees every four years to help them consider license fee increases.

The following table outlines the user fee types, fee amounts, and revenue generated from each fee.

USER FEE	FEE AMOUNT (RESIDENT/NONRESIDENT)	APPLICATION	ANNUAL REVENUE
Conservation license	\$8/\$10	Access to state lands	Not available
Fishing license (Base fishing license, aquatic invasive species prevention pass, and conservation license are all required to fish in Montana)	\$31/\$117.50 (costs reflect total from all three permit types)	General fishing license	\$19.1 million (\$4.7 million resident/\$14.4 million nonresident)*
Hunting license	\$10–\$125/\$15–\$1,250	Hunting for small game, waterfowl, deer, elk, moose, bear, bison, turkey, sheep, and/or mountain goat	\$24.7 million (\$15.1 million resident/\$9.6 million nonresident)*
Off-highway vehicle trails pass	\$20/\$35	Use of motorized trails on public land	Not available
Snowmobile registration or trail pass	\$20/\$35	Use of snowmobile trails on public land	Not available
State parks vehicle admission pass	Annual \$9/\$50 Daily \$8/\$8	Entry into any state park	Number not available; comprised 40 percent of state parks operating funds in 2019

* The revenue from these fees is based on sales that occurred in federal FY 2023, which ran from October 1, 2022, to September 30, 2023.

State parks vehicle registration pass: This \$9 add-on is included with every vehicle registration in the state unless the vehicle owner opts out. In place since 2003 (at an initial cost of \$4 annually), with all revenues going to state park management, the initiative replaced the previous \$30 annual entrance pass for Montanans to enter their state parks and also replaced general fund money that had been allocated to the state parks program.

Habitat Montana: This program, established by the state legislature in 1987, was initially funded by hunting license fees and provides money to protect important wildlife habitat, either through the outright purchase of land or through conservation easements and leases. Currently, Habitat Montana is still mostly funded by hunting license fees but has expanded its revenue sources to include the marijuana tax (see below). The program generates about \$6 to \$7 million per year.

Marijuana taxes: In 2021, Montana established a sales tax on marijuana products (4 percent on medical marijuana and 20 percent on recreational marijuana). Thirty-two percent of the revenue generated from these taxes is allocated to the MDFWP (after the first \$6 million). The 32 percent is distributed as follows: 20 percent to fund wildlife habitat, and 4 percent each to fund state parks, trails and recreational facilities, and nongame wildlife. In fiscal year 2024, the MDFWP received \$15.2 million from marijuana tax revenue.

Lodging taxes: Of the state's lodging tax revenue, 6.5 percent goes to the MDFWP for the maintenance of state park facilities used by both residents and nonresidents. In fiscal year 2025, this amounted to about \$4.2 million.

Other funding mechanisms: Other identified funding mechanisms that support Montana's natural resource management functions include timber sales, taxes levied on oil and gas production, special permits and fees (e.g., for camping, cabin rentals, day use, guided tours, and other miscellaneous services), merchandise sales, and bonds.





New Jersey

	FY 2024–2025	FY 2018–2019
Overall state budget*	\$84.1 billion	\$53.9 billion
State budget dedicated to natural resource management	\$1.5 billion (1.9%)	\$465.2 million (0.9%)
Total general fund dollars in budget	Not available [†]	Not available [†]
State general fund dedicated to natural resource management	Not available [†]	Not available [†]

* New Jersey received an influx of one-time federal funding during the COVID-19 pandemic. Those dollars may still be present in the current budget, artificially inflating the budget trend. For comparison, we have included budget numbers from fiscal year (FY) 2018–2019, the year before the COVID-19 pandemic began, in addition to budget numbers for FY 2024–2025.

[†] Refer to the “General Fund” section below.

ACRES OF STATE LAND

800,000 acres

POPULATION

9.3 million

MANAGED BY THE STATE

17% of state’s total land area

STATE’S TOTAL LAND AREA

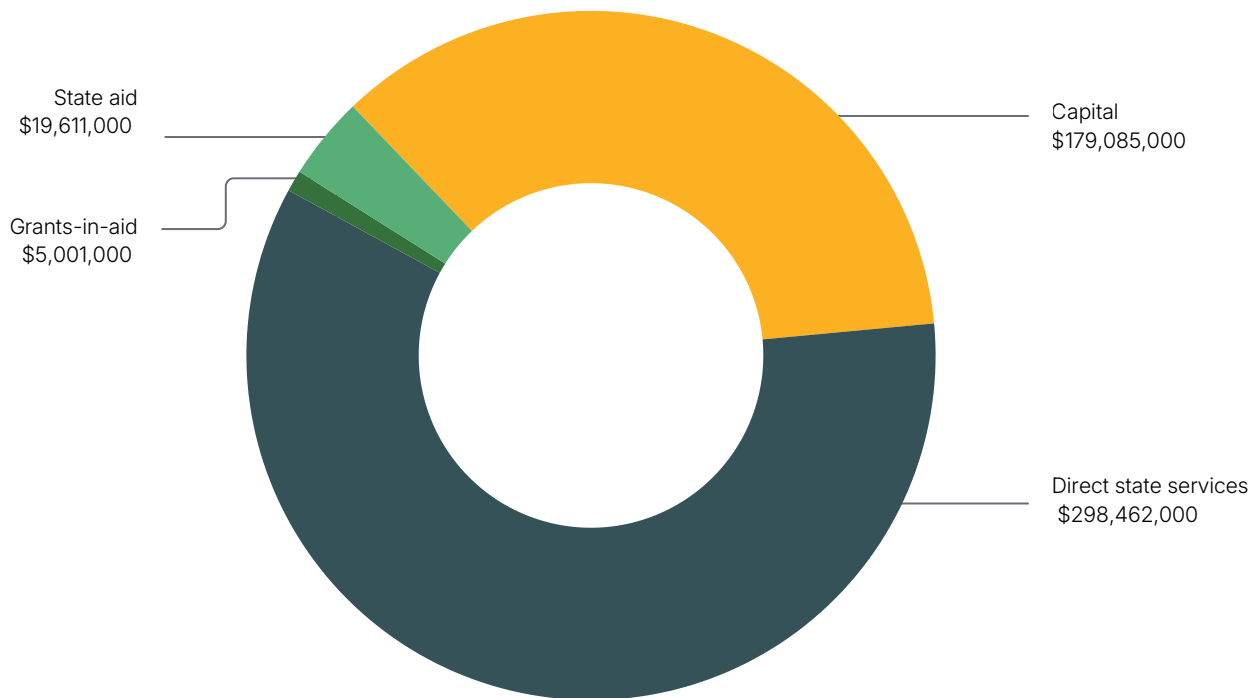
4.7 million acres

Even though New Jersey is one of the most densely populated states in the nation, it is a national leader in open-space preservation, with nearly 34 percent of the state consisting of preserved land (both public and private). About half of that is managed by the state. The state’s natural resources are varied and include more than 1.5 million acres of forest, nearly one million acres of wetlands, 47,000 acres of inland lakes, 19,000 miles of rivers and streams, and 127 miles of Atlantic Ocean coastline. New Jersey’s public lands support a vibrant outdoor recreation industry that generates \$14.5 billion in consumer spending and \$7.3 billion in wages and salaries annually, and directly supports 122,000 jobs.

The New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) is the agency responsible for managing the state’s natural resources and protecting the environment, including air and water quality. The Division of Fish and Wildlife and the Division of State Parks, Forests, and Historic Sites are the two main divisions within NJDEP that manage the state’s natural resources. The New Jersey Division of State Parks, Forests, and Historic Sites administers over 452,000 acres of land, including state parks and forests, historic sites, marinas, and other recreation areas. These sites receive more than 17 million visitors each year. The Division of Fish and Wildlife manages all wildlife species (game and nongame) in New Jersey and oversees 122 Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs) covering more than 358,000 acres.

Similar to Michigan, New Jersey funds its work through user fees (e.g., park entry fees and hunting and fishing licenses) and federal funds from the Pittman-Robertson and Dingell-Johnson programs. Unlike Michigan, the NJDEP also uses a corporation business tax (CBT) to support its natural resource management (NRM) activities.

NJDEP State Appropriations by Category, FY 2024–2025



Funding Mechanisms

General Fund

In FY 2024–2025, the NJDEP received \$489.3 million in general fund (GF) revenue. However, it is unclear how much of that supported NRM due to overlaps in program budgets (e.g., in administration). Stakeholders interviewed reported that the parks and wildlife divisions both receive some GF, but most of their budgets are supported by user fees, federal programs, and CBT revenues.

Federal Funding

In FY 2024–2025, the NJDEP received \$1 billion in federal funding. However, because the department also has environmental protection responsibilities, it is difficult to quantify how much of that was dedicated to natural resource management functions. The parks and wildlife divisions receive federal funds from several sources, including the Dingell-Johnson and Pittman-Robertson programs, the Land and Water Conservation Fund, and the Recreational Trails Program.

State-Dedicated Funding

Corporation Business Tax: New Jersey's CBT imposes a franchise tax on corporations that operate in the state, with a few exceptions. In 2014, nearly two-thirds of New Jersey voters approved an Open Space constitutional amendment that permanently dedicated a portion of the revenue generated by the CBT (4 percent from FY 2015–2016 to FY 2018–2019, and 6 percent from FY 2019–2020 into perpetuity) to environmental, conservation, and preservation programs. Seventy-eight percent of the revenue collected is deposited into the Garden State Preservation Trust (GSPT); of that, 62 percent is distributed to the NJDEP for the Green Acres Program, and the remaining 38 percent is used for farmland and historic preservation. The Open Space CBT dedication generates an estimated \$200 million per year.

Green Acres Program: The Green Acres Program was established in 1961 by the Green Acres Bond Act, which was passed by a Democratic majority legislature and signed into law by Democratic Governor Robert B. Meyner. The program was initially funded by a \$60 million bond issue approved by 59 percent of New Jersey voters. The program provides grants and low-interest loans to eligible applicants (state and local government entities and nonprofits) for land acquisition, park development, and stewardship activities. Between 1971 and 1995, New Jersey voters approved eight additional Green Acres bond issues, totaling \$1.4 billion. In 1998, more than two-thirds of New Jersey voters approved a constitutional amendment that ensured 30 years of funding for the program through the GSPT, and in 2014, voters passed the Open Space amendment that permanently dedicated a portion of the state's CBT to the Green Acres program. Over the past 60 years, the Green Acres program has protected more than 681,000 acres of open space and parkland and has funded more than 1,250 local and nonprofit park-development and stewardship projects.

User fees: Similar to many other states, New Jersey collects user fees to support the operations of its state parks and fish and wildlife programs. State parks visitation fees were waived for all visitors during 2022 and 2023 as part of a "tax holiday." In 2021, visitors who signed up for free passes during the state's "vaxed and visit" campaign also got free entrance. The waivers are estimated to have cost the state approximately \$2.7 million in lost revenue. The table on the next page outlines the user fee types, fee amounts, and revenue generated from each fee.



USER FEE	FEE AMOUNT (RESIDENT/NONRESIDENT)	APPLICATION	ANNUAL REVENUE
Annual State Park Pass	\$50/\$75	Entrance to state parks and forests that charge a daily walk-in or parking fee	Not available
Camping fee	\$3–\$175/\$5–\$185 per night, depending on the type and location of site	Camping at state parks and forests	Not available
Boat ramp permit	\$15	Required to launch a vessel or water conveyance on certain WMAs if not in possession of a current hunting, fishing, or trapping license	Not available
Freshwater fishing license	\$12.50–\$22.50/\$20–\$34	Base license required to fish the fresh waters of New Jersey (including privately owned waters with a handline, reel, or bow)	\$4.9 million (\$4.1 million resident/\$0.8 million nonresident)*
Trout stamp	\$10.50/\$20	Fishing for trout or salmon	
Horseback riding permit	\$25	Horseback riding on designated WMAs	
Hunting license	\$12.50–\$31.50/ \$12.50–\$135.50	Base license required to hunt or trap in New Jersey	\$7.5 million (\$6.3 million resident/\$1.2 million nonresident)*
Hunting permits and stamps	\$2–\$56	Hunting for deer, turkey, coyote, fox, upland game birds, and waterfowl; special permit required for rifle hunting	
Mobile Sport Fishing Vehicle Permit	\$150–\$195/\$175–\$225	All-wheel drive access to drive onto certain beaches for the sole purpose of fishing	Not available
Trapping license	\$32.50/\$200.50	Furbearer trapping	Not available
Walk-in entrance fees	\$2	Entering select state parks on foot or bicycle (if not in possession of an Annual State Park Pass)	Not available

* The revenue from these fees is based on sales that occurred in federal FY 2023, which ran from October 1, 2022, to September 30, 2023.

Other funding mechanisms: Other identified funding mechanisms that support the NJDEP's natural resource management functions include special permits (e.g., for facility rentals, commercial photography or videos, construction staging, field trials, or group horseback riding), fee revenue (e.g., from hunting and fishing violations), and a state income tax checkoff.

New York

	FY 2024–2025	FY 2018–2019
Overall state budget*	\$236.8 billion	\$168.3 billion
State budget dedicated to natural resource management	\$1.1 billion (0.5%)	\$794.2 million (0.5%)
Total general fund dollars in budget	\$110.3 billion	\$75.5 billion
State general fund dedicated to natural resource management	\$370.1 million (0.3%)	\$234 million (0.3%)

* New York received an influx of one-time federal funding during the COVID-19 pandemic. Those dollars may still be present in the current budget, artificially inflating the budget trend. For comparison, we have included budget numbers from fiscal year (FY) 2018–2019, the year before the COVID-19 pandemic began, in addition to budget numbers for FY 2024–2025.

ACRES OF STATE LAND

5.3 million acres

POPULATION

20.2 million

MANAGED BY THE STATE

17.5% of state's total land area

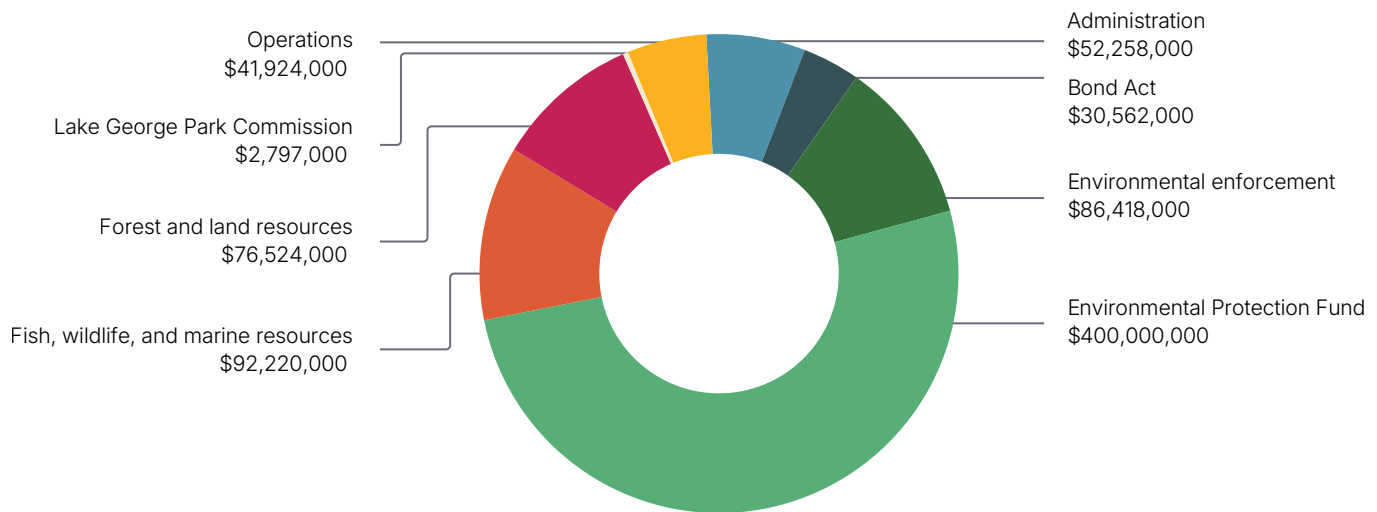
STATE'S TOTAL LAND AREA

30.2 million acres

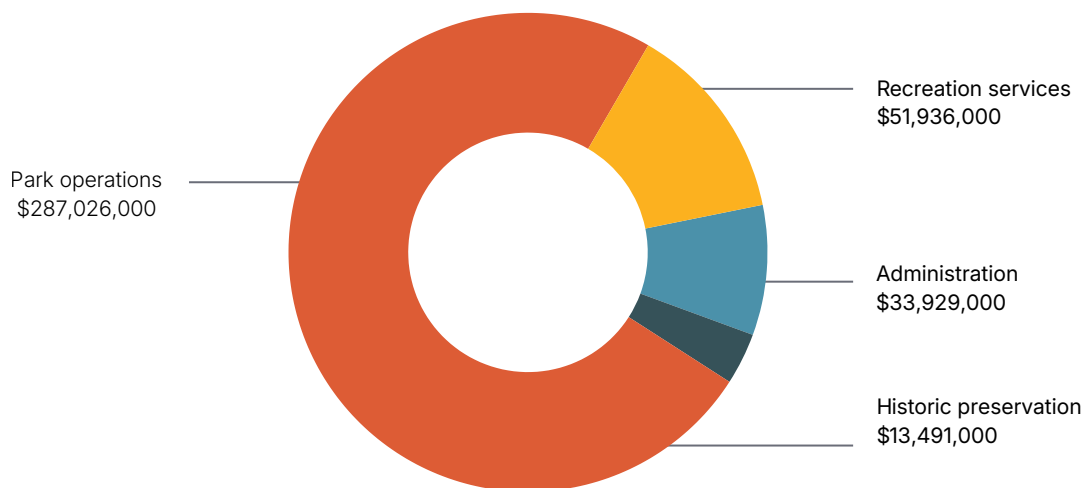
The most populous state in our analysis, New York is better known for its cities than its forests. Even so, it is home to millions of acres of public lands, including the 6-million-acre Adirondack Park, about half of which is managed by the state. New York has coastlines on both the Atlantic Ocean and the Great Lakes, 50,000 miles of rivers and streams, and is over 60 percent forested. Recreation in New York's state park system alone added \$3.7 billion to the state's gross domestic product in 2021.

Natural resources in New York are jointly managed by the Department of Environmental Conservation (NYDEC) and the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP). The NYDEC is broadly responsible for natural resources conservation, education, and enforcement, while the OPRHP operates New York's state park system, which includes over 250 recreational sites. Together, the NYDEC and OPRHP manage over 5.3 million acres of public land. Of note, the NYDEC is also responsible for air quality, drinking water, and waste management (these areas are not reflected in the budget numbers above, which account only for spending on programs similar to the responsibilities of the Michigan Department of Natural Resources). As in Michigan, user fees are an important part of New York's funding landscape. Uniquely, New York passed a \$4.2 billion Environmental Bond Act in 2022 dedicated to environmental and natural resources projects. The state also uses its real estate transfer tax to fund conservation and recreation projects.

NYDEC Natural Resources Management Budget by Program, FY 2024–2025



OPRHP Budget by Program, FY 2024–2025



Funding Mechanisms

General Fund

General funding is primarily generated through taxes. The NYDEC received about 25.3 percent of its natural resources dollars (\$198 million) and the OPRHP received about 44.5 percent of its funding (\$172 million) from the general fund in FY 2024–2025. All of the NYDEC's programs received some general funding in that year, although some programs are more dependent on it than others; for example, the Fish, Wildlife, and Marine Resources program received about 19 percent of its budget from the general fund, while the Environmental Enforcement program received more than half of its budget from the general fund. Excluding Recreation Services, all of the OPRHP's programs received general fund dollars in FY 2024–2025.

Federal Funding

In FY 2024–2025, the NYDEC’s natural resources programs received \$33 million, and the OPRHP received \$8.7 million in federal funding. Federal funds for natural resources management are provided by the Dingell-Johnson and Pittman-Robertson programs, the Land and Water Conservation Fund, the Recreational Trails Program, and other federal programs.

State-Dedicated Funding

User Fees: Fish and wildlife management in New York is funded largely by user fees, and the state parks program receives revenue from park pass sales. The OPRHP offers annual, multiyear, and lifetime park passes. Lifetime passes can be purchased by out-of-state users for the same price as residents, but nonresidents pay more for state park camping and shelter reservations.

The following table outlines the user fee types, fee amounts, and revenue generated from each fee.

USER FEE	FEE AMOUNT (RESIDENT/NONRESIDENT)	APPLICATION	ANNUAL REVENUE
ATV/UTV registration	\$12.50 per year (residents and nonresidents whose states of residence do not require ATV/UTV registration)	Operation of an ATV/UTV anywhere in New York, including the owner's property	\$1.5 million (2016)
Fishing license	Annual \$5–\$25/\$50	Great Lakes or inland waters fishing	\$18.1 million (2023–2024 license year)
Hunting license	\$5–\$22/\$5–\$100 plus additional fees for archery hunting, antlerless deer, and turkey permits	Archery or firearm hunting for small game, deer, bear, or turkey	\$25.2 million (2023–2024 license year)
Snowmobile registration	\$135 (residents and nonresidents); \$65 if the applicant is a member of a snowmobile club	Use of public snowmobile trails	\$7.6 million (2024–2025 license year)
State parks vehicle admission sticker	Annual \$72–\$80 (resident only) Daily \$6–\$10 Lifetime \$750	Entry into any state park	Not available
Trapping license	\$5–\$20/\$5–\$275	Furbearer trapping	\$275,000 (2023–2024 license year)

2022 Bond Act: Almost 68 percent of New York voters supported the referendum on the Clean Water, Clean Air, and Green Jobs Environmental Bond Act, which provides \$4.2 billion in funding for projects that safeguard drinking water sources, reduce pollution, and protect communities and natural resources from climate change. The funding is allocated as follows: \$1.5 billion for climate change mitigation, \$1.1 billion for restoration and flood risk reduction, \$650 million for water quality improvement and resilient infrastructure, \$650 million for open-space land conservation and recreation, and \$300 million for general projects. At least 35 percent of the funds must be spent on disadvantaged communities. Debt service payments are slated to come from the state's general fund.

Real property transfer tax: Part of the real estate transfer tax in New York goes to the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF). This fund provides money for capital projects "that protect the environment and enhance communities." Examples of projects include purchasing land for the New York forest preserve, restoring habitat, conserving farmland, controlling invasive species, upgrading municipal sewage treatment plants, and cleaning up waterfront property to develop a public park. Created by statute in 1993 (during an economic recession) as a permanent fund, the amount of funding appropriated for the EPF varies each year. The EPF received an allocation of \$400 million in 2025, a significant increase from the 2010s.



Ohio

	FY 2024–2025	FY 2018–2019
Overall state budget*	\$97.4 billion	\$71 billion
State budget dedicated to natural resource management	\$626.4 million (0.6%)	\$344.9 million (0.5%)
Total general fund dollars in budget	\$43.5 billion	\$22.8 billion
State general fund dedicated to natural resource management	\$162.8 million (0.4%)	\$109.5 million (0.5%)

* Ohio received an influx of one-time federal funding during the COVID-19 pandemic. Those dollars may still be present in the current budget, artificially inflating the budget trend. For comparison, we have included budget numbers from fiscal year (FY) 2018–2019, the year before the COVID-19 pandemic began, in addition to budget numbers for FY 2024–2025.

ACRES OF STATE LAND

524,442 acres

MANAGED BY THE STATE

2% of state's total land area

POPULATION

11.8 million

STATE'S TOTAL LAND AREA

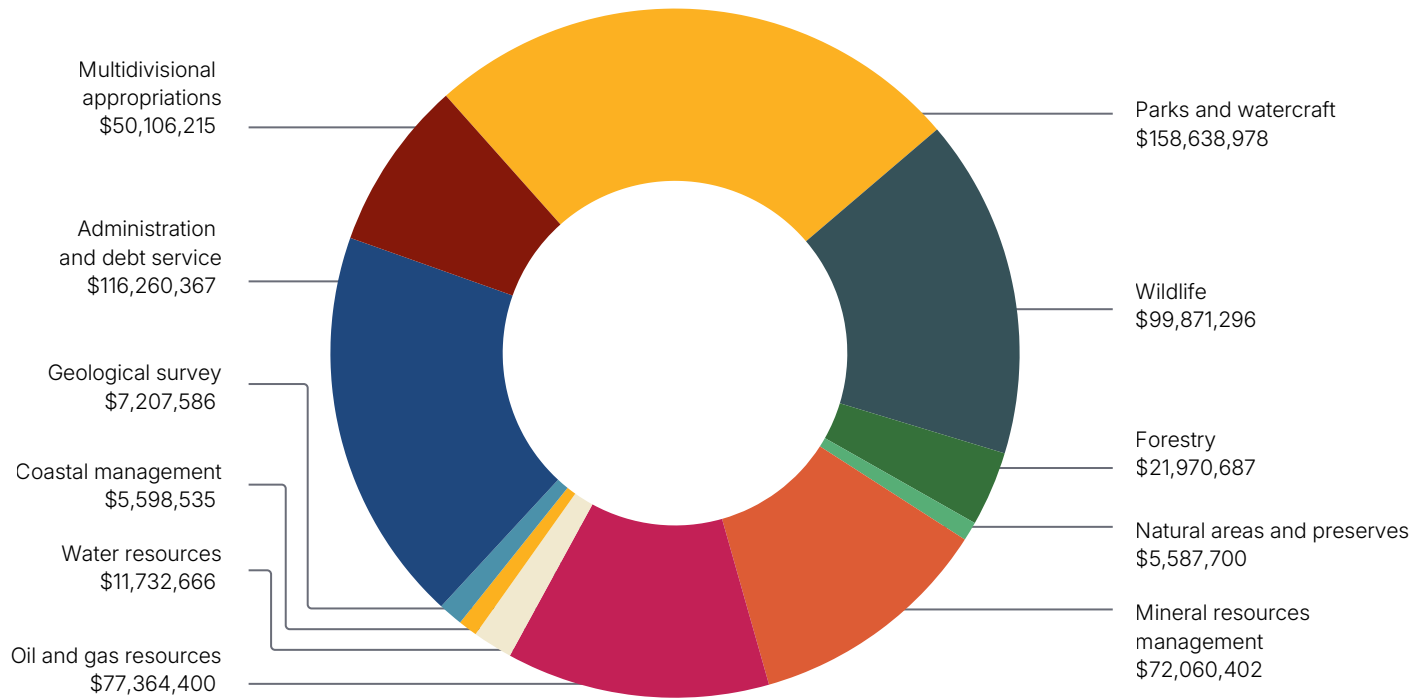
26 million acres

The state of Ohio, with its Great Lakes shoreline, fertile plains, rolling hills, and winding rivers, provides abundant natural resources and outdoor experiences. In 2019, the outdoor recreation industry in Ohio was estimated to contribute \$5.9 billion in spending to the state's economy. As in Michigan, tourism in Ohio is heavily tied to the natural environment and the Great Lakes shoreline. The discovery of shale formations in eastern Ohio has led to a boom in natural gas production, with oil production in 2023 being 13 times greater than in 2013. The presence of shale has made Ohio the largest oil and gas producing state east of the Mississippi River.

The Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR) oversees the management of and access to Ohio's wildlife, forests and other natural areas, state parks, inland lakes and waterways, geological and mineral resources, and the Lake Erie coastline. The ODNR also regulates hunting and fishing licenses and watercraft registrations and enforces provisions of state law related to natural resources and conservation. The ODNR's 2,300 employees are responsible for 76 state parks, 24 state forests, 141 state nature preserves, and 150 wildlife areas.

Funding is provided through a mix of fees, general fund revenue, and federal dollars. The H2Ohio program, funded through general fund revenue, is unique to Ohio. H2Ohio is an initiative managed cooperatively by the ODNR, the Ohio Department of Agriculture, and the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency to improve water quality.

ODNR Appropriations by Functional Category, FY 2024–2025



Funding Mechanisms

General Fund

The ODNR receives approximately 25 percent of its operating funds from general revenue funds (GRF). For FY 2024–2025, this amounted to about \$163 million. GRF contributions have steadily increased as the state has invested more in the H2Ohio Fund, which supports projects to ensure clean drinking water. GRF funding generally supports the Division of Parks and Wildlife (\$55 million), bond and debt service, and personnel costs across all divisions.

Federal Funding

The ODNR received approximately \$106 million in federal funds in the FY 2024–2025 budget. This was a significant increase from FY 2022–2023, which had just \$30 million in federal funds. A large portion of the available federal funds in FY 2024–2025 comes from the 2021 Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, which provided up to \$696 million to Ohio through 2036 for the restoration of legacy abandoned coal mine sites and significant investments in plugging abandoned wells (\$25 million). The remaining federal funds consist of a mix of federal grants and loan programs, pass-through funds for local government projects, and Pittman-Robertson and Dingell-Johnson funding.

State-Dedicated Funding

With over half of its budget supported by dedicated funding, the ODNR is heavily reliant on fees and other revenue-generating sources within the agency. It currently has statutory authority to assess fees for over 300 activities, including boat mooring, camping, oil and gas exploration on state land, and bait dealing.

Severance taxes: Ohio imposes a tax on minerals removed from the state's soil or waters. Over 15 extractable resources have a severance tax, and the amount of severance tax varies by mineral; for example, 1 cent per ton for gypsum and clay, 2.5 cents per 1,000 cubic feet for natural gas, 10 cents per barrel for oil, 4 cents per ton for salt, and 10 cents per ton for coal. In FY 2022–2023, severance tax collections totaled \$61.6 million.

User fees: To bring more stability to its fish and wildlife programs and ensure there is enough match money to fully capture federal dollars, the ODNR has begun offering multiyear and lifetime hunting and fishing licenses for every license type except deer hunting. Youth hunters and anglers can purchase a lifetime license for \$430 for each sport. Adults can purchase three-year, five-year, ten-year, or lifetime hunting and fishing licenses (ranging from \$72 to \$599), and seniors can purchase three-year, five-year, or lifetime licenses (ranging from \$27 to \$84). First introduced in 2018, more than 7 percent of over 200,000 hunting licenses and 470,000 fishing licenses sold each year in Ohio are now multiyear.

Registrations are required for every recreational boat in Ohio, including powerboats, sailboats, canoes, kayaks, pedal boats, and inflatable boats. In 2020, nonmotorized boats were added to the list of watercraft required to obtain registrations.

Registrations are valid for three years. In 2024, there were 644,000 watercraft registered in Ohio. Ohio does not charge an entrance fee for its state parks to residents or visitors. However, facilities rentals, camping, and concessions bring in over \$38 million to the state park system per year.

The following table outlines the user fee types, fee amounts, and revenue generated from each fee.

USER FEE	FEE AMOUNT (RESIDENT/NONRESIDENT)	APPLICATION	ANNUAL REVENUE
All-purpose vehicle/snowmobile permits	\$36.25/ \$16.25 for temporary operator permit for nonresidents	Required to use an all-purpose vehicle on designated access roads; in-state permit lasts for three years	Not available
Boat registration	\$20–\$98	Three-year permit, fee dependent on size of boat; includes canoes and kayaks	Not available
Camping	April 1–October 31: \$21–\$53 November 1–March 31: \$17–\$35	Camping in state parks	Not available
Hunting license	\$10–\$19/\$10–\$181	Base hunting license; allows user to hunt small game	\$26.7 million (\$16.1 million resident/\$10.6 million nonresident)*
Hunting permits and stamps	\$12–\$31/\$16–\$77	Hunting for deer, turkey, migratory birds, and waterfowl	
Fishing license	\$10–\$25/\$37 (one-year license)	Fishing for all species	\$17.6 million (\$13.8 million resident/\$3.4 million nonresident)*
Shooting range permit	\$24	Permits are required for shooters age 18 or older for admission to ranges operated by the Ohio Division of Wildlife	Not available
Trapping (fur taker) license	\$8–\$15 (resident and nonresident)	Furbearer hunting or trapping	Not available

* The revenue from these fees is based on sales that occurred in federal FY 2023, which ran from October 1, 2022, to September 30, 2023.

Other funding mechanisms: Other identified funding mechanisms that support the ODNR include bond funds, timber revenue, oil and gas revenues, mineral mining, and fee revenue (e.g., from hunting and fishing violations).

Pennsylvania

	FY 2024–2025	FY 2018–2019
Overall state budget*	\$125.2 billion	\$84.7 billion
State budget dedicated to natural resource management	\$1 billion (0.8%)	\$600.1 million (0.7%)
Total general fund dollars in budget	\$48.3 billion	\$32.9 billion
State general fund dedicated to natural resource management	\$196.3 million (0.4%)	\$121.2 million (0.4%)

* Pennsylvania received an influx of one-time federal funding during the COVID-19 pandemic. Those dollars may still be present in the current budget, artificially inflating the budget trend. For comparison, we have included budget numbers from fiscal year (FY) 2018–2019, the year before the COVID-19 pandemic began, in addition to budget numbers for FY 2024–2025

ACRES OF STATE LAND

4 million acres

POPULATION

13 million

MANAGED BY THE STATE

13.9% of state's total land area

STATE'S TOTAL LAND AREA

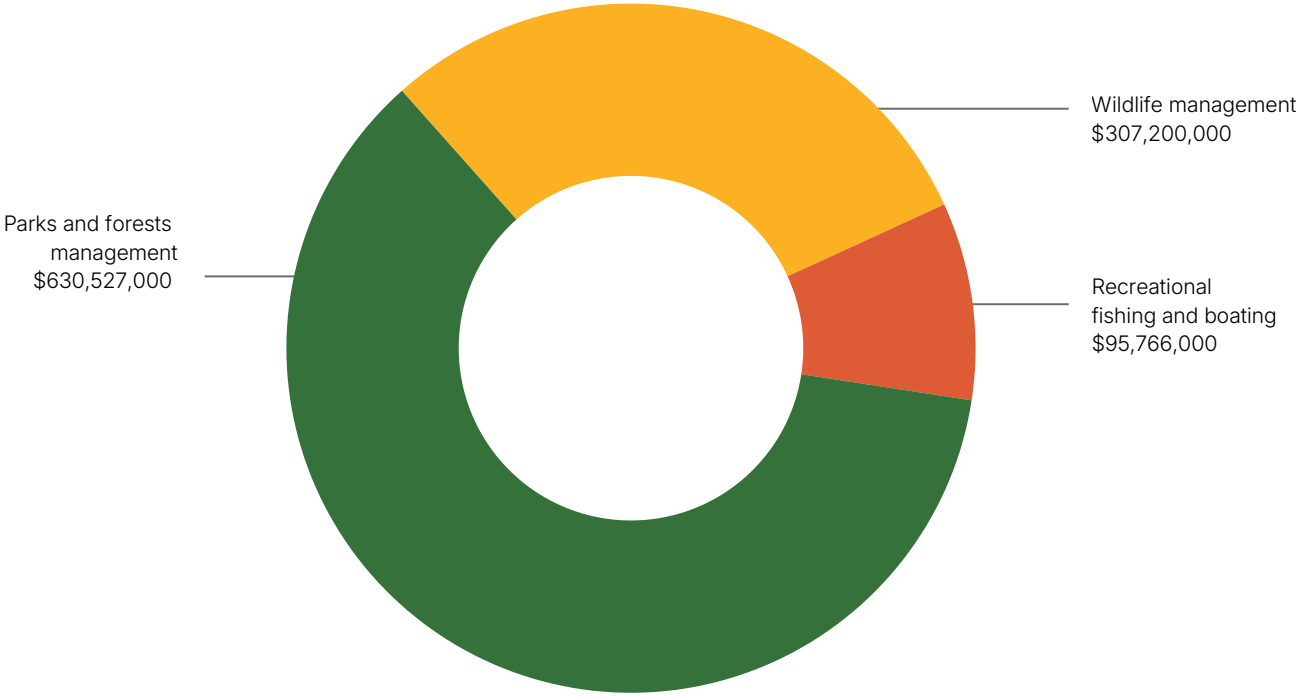
28.6 million acres

Pennsylvania, a state with ties to the Northeastern U.S. and the Great Lakes, is known for its Appalachian and Allegheny Mountains, diverse geography, and postindustrial cities. With close to 60 percent of the state covered in forest, 300,000 acres of state parks, and a sliver of Lake Erie shoreline, Pennsylvanians have ample opportunities for outdoor recreation—an industry that added \$18.9 billion in gross domestic product to the state's economy in 2023. Most of the public land in Pennsylvania is owned by the state and managed by the Pennsylvania Game Commission and the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR).

As in Michigan, deer hunting in Pennsylvania is a popular sport and an important source of revenue for natural resources management. Chronic wasting disease (CWD) is widespread in Pennsylvania's deer herd; about 40 percent of the state's area has infected deer. Although the long-term effects of the disease on hunter numbers are not yet known, Pennsylvania may serve as a preview for Michigan wildlife managers of what is to come if CWD continues to spread.

Pennsylvania is unique in the United States in that its fish and wildlife are managed by different agencies: fish by the Fish and Boat Commission and wildlife by the Game Commission. The DCNR manages state parks and forestlands, outdoor recreation, and the state geological survey. Because the DCNR does not manage fish and game, it does not receive the substantial revenue from hunting and fishing license fees and matching funds through the federal Dingell-Johnson and Pittman-Robertson programs; those dollars go to the Fish and Boat Commission and the Game Commission. The DCNR is funded via other user fees, real estate transfer taxes, impact fees from oil and gas, and municipal waste tipping fees.

Pennsylvania Natural Resources Management Budget by Program, FY 2024–2025



Funding Mechanisms

General Fund

The DCNR received \$196.3 million in general funding in FY 2024–2025, which is about a third of its budget. Neither the Fish and Boat Commission nor the Game Commission received any general funding that year or in any year going back to at least 2021. Most general funding within the DCNR was allocated to state park and state forest management.

Federal Funding

Federal dollars made up 23.3 percent of the DCNR’s total budget in FY 2024–2025. The Game Fund and Fish Fund, the accounts from which the Game Commission and Fish and Boat Commission, respectively, are funded, together received about \$30 million in federal funding for natural resources management in the same year, representing 10 percent of their overall funding. Federal funds come from the Dingell-Johnson and Pittman-Robertson programs, the Land and Water Conservation Fund, the Recreational Trails Program, and other federal programs.

State-Dedicated Funding

User fees: The Fish Fund and the Game Fund both receive most of their money from user fees, primarily fishing and hunting licenses. State parks in Pennsylvania do not charge admission fees, but revenue from specific activities in state parks, such as camping, cabin rentals, boat mooring, and swimming in pools, goes to the DCNR. The Fish and Boat Commission sets fishing license fees, and the Pennsylvania legislature sets hunting license fees. A bill to allow the Game Commission to set hunting license fees was introduced in the legislature in 2023 but was not advanced. License prices in the state do not automatically adjust for inflation.

The following table outlines the user fee types, fee amounts, and revenue generated from each fee.

USER FEE	FEE AMOUNT (RESIDENT/NONRESIDENT)	APPLICATION	ANNUAL REVENUE
Cabin rental	\$225–\$816/\$279–\$897 (weekly)	Rental of a cottage, cabin, or yurt on state park property	Not available
Fishing license	\$2.97–\$27.97/ \$31.97–\$60.97	Standard fishing license	\$27 million (\$22.7 million resident/\$4.3 million nonresident)*
Hunting license	\$2.97–\$20.97/\$41.97– \$101.97	Firearm hunting for small game or deer (archery, muzzleloader, and other species require add-on licenses)	\$42 million (\$34.6 million resident/\$7.4 million nonresident)*
Northcentral Regional ATV Trail pass	Annual \$40/\$60	Use of motorized trails and township roads within a designated area	\$430,000 (2021–2023, pilot program)
Snowmobile registration	Biennial \$20	Operation of a snowmobile off the owner's property	Not available

* The revenue from these fees is based on sales that occurred in federal FY 2023, which ran from October 1, 2022, to September 30, 2023.

Realty transfer tax: Fifteen percent of the real estate transfer tax goes to fund the Keystone Recreation, Park, and Conservation Fund, totaling about \$105 million in 2020. Of the money allocated to the Keystone Fund, 30 percent goes to the Bureau of State Parks and the Bureau of Forestry within the DCNR, 25 percent is distributed as grants for local recreation, and 10 percent goes to land trusts. The remaining 35 percent is split among education agencies and the Historical and Museum Commission. Legislation creating the Keystone Fund passed the Pennsylvania legislature in 1993 with strong bipartisan support. In November of that year, a measure to add \$50 million in bond funding to the fund's permanent revenue source passed with 67 percent of the vote. Money from the Keystone Fund goes toward rehabilitating and upgrading state park and forestry infrastructure, funding rails-to-trails projects, and protecting rivers.

Waste tipping fees: The Environmental Stewardship Fund (ESF) receives its money from several sources, including waste tipping fees. The total ESF funding in FY 2022–2023 was approximately \$104 million. Twenty-three percent of this funding is allocated to the DCNR for watershed conservation, rehabilitation of state parks and forests, open-space protection, and recreational improvements. The ESF was created as a five-year bond fund in 1999 by Republican Governor Tom Ridge, working with a Republican legislature, and was reauthorized with dedicated and permanent funding by Republican Governor Mark Schweiker (again working with a Republican legislature) in 2022. Funding from the ESF is used to service debt on expired bond programs. Since 2020, lawmakers have made appropriations from personal income tax revenues to offset the debt service payments from the ESF.

Oil and gas royalties: The Game Commission leases oil and gas rights on some of its lands and collects royalties from oil and gas production. This revenue depends on oil prices, but in FY 2019–2020, revenue from natural resources and rights-of-way accounted for 45 percent of the Game Commission's total funding. As the price of oil has increased in recent years, so has the funding available to the Game Commission; in 2024, the commission reported a \$500 million surplus.

Vermont

	FY 2024–2025	FY 2018–2019
Overall state budget*	\$8.8 billion	\$7.7 billion
State budget dedicated to natural resource management	\$78 million (0.9%)	\$58 million (0.8%)
Total general fund dollars in budget	\$2.3 billion	\$1.3 billion
State general fund dedicated to natural resource management	\$20.3 million (0.9%)	\$18.8 million (1.4%)

* Vermont received an influx of one-time federal funding during the COVID-19 pandemic. Those dollars may still be present in the current budget, artificially inflating the budget trend. For comparison, we have included budget numbers from FY 2018–2019, the year before the COVID-19 pandemic began, in addition to budget numbers for FY 2024–2025.

ACRES OF STATE LAND

360,000

POPULATION

643,077

MANAGED BY THE STATE

**6.1% of state's total
land area**

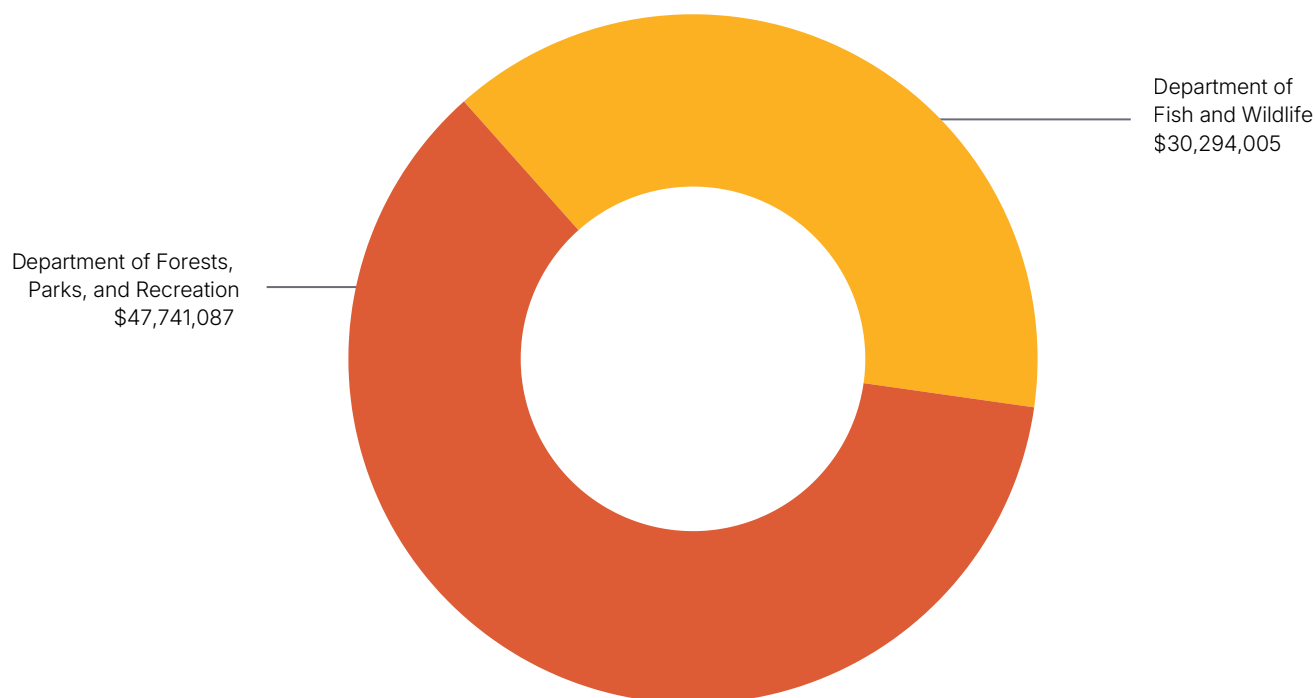
STATE'S TOTAL LAND AREA

5.9 million acres

The small Northeastern state of Vermont has a long history of conservation and outdoor recreation that remains important today. Vermont is known for its hiking and skiing opportunities, and nearly two-thirds of Vermonters indicate that outdoor recreation is either essential or very important to them. About 14 percent of the state's land is in public (state, federal, or local) ownership, and the outdoor industry contributes 4.6 percent of the state's gross domestic product, a percentage second only to Hawaii in terms of the economic impact of the outdoors. Vermont also has a large percentage of hunters and anglers (one in five Vermonters held a fishing license in 2018), but hunter numbers, especially, are declining as the popularity of "silent sports" like birdwatching is increasing.

The Vermont Agency of Natural Resources (ANR) is the state agency responsible for managing natural resources in Vermont, including state lands and waters, fish and wildlife, and parks. The ANR also has a regulatory division, the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC), which is responsible for regulating air and water quality. The budget numbers in the budget table above do not include funding for the DEC, since environmental quality work is not included under the umbrella of natural resources management for the purposes of this analysis. The ANR's natural resource management functions are funded primarily through user fees for hunting, fishing, and park use. The Vermont Housing and Conservation Trust Fund also provides funding to conserve natural areas, farmland, and recreational land.

Vermont ANR Natural Resources Budget by Department, FY 2024–2025



Funding Mechanisms

General Fund

General funds are primarily generated from taxes. General fund dollars made up about 26 percent of the ANR's total natural resources management budget in FY 2024–2025, totaling about \$20.3 million. Both natural resources-focused divisions of the ANR receive general funding, but within each division, some programs receive more general funds than others. For example, Vermont's state parks receive relatively little in general funding and are mostly funded by fees and leases. Information on the general funds received by all of the ANR's natural resource management programs was not readily available.

Federal Funding

Federal dollars made up nearly a third (\$23.9 million) of ANR's natural resource budget in FY 2024–2025 and are an important source of funding for natural resources management in the state. Federal funds for land, wildlife, and fisheries management come from the Dingell-Johnson and Pittman-Robertson programs, the Land and Water Conservation Fund, the Recreational Trails Program, and other federal programs.

State-Dedicated Funding

User fees: The ANR's Department of Fish and Wildlife is funded largely through hunting and fishing licenses. Similarly, the Department of Forests, Parks, and Recreation receives much of its funding from state park entry fees, passes, and camping fees. No pass is required to access Vermont's state forest system.

The following table outlines the user fee types, fee amounts, and revenue generated from each fee.

USER FEE	FEE AMOUNT (RESIDENT/NONRESIDENT)	APPLICATION	ANNUAL REVENUE
ATV/UTV trails pass	\$80/\$125	Use of ATV/UTV trail network; includes cost to join an ATV/UTV club that maintains landowner permissions and trail access	Not available
Fishing license	\$28/\$54	General fishing license; only required for residents over 15 years of age	\$4 million (\$2.3 million resident/\$1.7 million nonresident)*
Hunting license	\$5–\$51/\$10–\$102	Hunting for small game, waterfowl, deer, or bear	\$4.2 million (\$3.1 million resident/\$1.1 million nonresident)*
Snowmobile trail pass/registration	\$155/\$185	Use of snowmobile trail network; includes cost to join a snowmobile club that maintains landowner permissions and trail access	At least \$2.8 million (Vermont registered snowmobiles only; undated information)
State parks vehicle admission pass	\$90/\$90	Entry into any state park	Not available
Trapping license	\$10–\$23/\$300–\$305	Furbearer trapping	Not available

* The revenue from these fees is based on sales that occurred in federal FY 2023, which ran from October 1, 2022, to September 30, 2023.

Property transfer tax: Fifty percent of the real estate transfer tax in Vermont funds the Vermont Housing and Conservation Trust Fund, which ties together affordable housing, farmland protection, and land conservation. Managed by the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board, half of the funding goes to housing development and the other half to conservation projects. Legislation authorizing the fund was established in 1987 by Democratic Governor Madeleine Kunin, working with a Democratic legislature. The fund received \$52.8 million in funding in FY 2023–2024.

Ski leases: Vermont leases state land to companies that operate seven major ski areas. Revenue from these leases, about \$2.5 million annually, goes to fund state park operations.

Other funding mechanisms: Other identified funding mechanisms that support the Vermont ANR’s natural resource management functions include special permits (e.g., for facility rentals, special events, and dog sledding), timber sales, and fee revenue (e.g., from concessions and boat rentals).

Washington

	FB 2027 (FYs 25–27)	FB 2021 (FYs 19–21)
Overall state budget*	\$150.4 billion	\$99.7 billion
State budget dedicated to natural resource management	\$2 billion (1.3%)	\$1.2 billion (1.2%)
Total general fund dollars in budget	\$77.8 billion	\$50.7 billion
State general fund dedicated to natural resource management	\$326.2 million (0.4%)	\$136.1 million (0.3%)

* Washington's government develops fiscal biennium (FB) budgets. For comparison with states reporting FY numbers, FB numbers should be divided in half. The state received an influx of one-time federal funding during the COVID-19 pandemic. Those dollars may still be present in the current budget, artificially inflating the budget trend. For comparison, we have included budget numbers from the FB 2019–2021 budget, the period before the COVID-19 pandemic began, in addition to budget numbers for FB 2025–2027

ACRES OF STATE LAND

6.7 million acres

POPULATION

7.7 million

MANAGED BY THE STATE

15.8% of state's total land area

STATE'S TOTAL LAND AREA

42.5 million acres

Washington, known as "The Evergreen State," is a state of great geographic diversity, with vast stretches of natural beauty. Some of the state's iconic natural areas include the Olympic and Cascade mountain ranges, Puget Sound, the Columbia River, and the Columbia Plateau. Washington has some of the largest contiguous forests in the country, which include state and national forests and cover more than half of the state. In Washington, public lands are estimated to provide economic benefits of between \$249 billion and \$298 billion per year.

There are three natural resource agencies that are primarily responsible for the ownership and management of Washington's natural resources: the Washington Department of Natural Resources (WDNR), the Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW), and the State Parks and Recreation Commission (Washington State Parks). The numbers reported above are based on the combined operating budgets of the three agencies. The WDNR is the largest state land manager and oversees approximately 5.6 million acres, including state trust lands, state-owned aquatic lands, and state natural areas. The WDFW owns and manages about one million acres of land, including wildlife areas and water access sites. Washington State Parks owns and manages about 138,000 acres of land, including 124 state parks and properties and over 400 miles of trails.

As in Michigan, user fees and timber sales are important components of Washington's natural resources management funding landscape. Uniquely, the state uses personalized license plates to fund nongame species management.

Total Agency Operating Budgets, Fiscal Biennium 2025–2027



Funding Mechanisms

General Fund

Washington's general fund (GF) revenue is generated primarily by taxes. Nearly half of the WDFW's budget consists of GF revenue. The WDNR and Washington State Parks are less reliant on GF revenue; GF funding makes up about one-third and one-quarter of their overall operating budgets, respectively.

Federal Funding

Washington's natural resource agencies receive funding from several federal sources, including the Dingell-Johnson and Pittman-Robertson programs, the Land and Water Conservation Fund, and the Recreational Trails Program.

State-Dedicated Funding

Discover Pass: The Discover Pass grants motorized vehicles access to state recreation lands in Washington, including state parks, campgrounds, water access points, state-designated trails, natural areas, and wildlife areas. Purchase of the pass is automatically added to vehicle registration fees unless vehicle owners opt out. The Discover Pass was established by statute in 2011 under Democratic Governor Christine Gregoire and a Democratic-majority legislature. Eighty-four percent of the revenue generated by Discover Pass sales is distributed to Washington State Parks, 8 percent goes to the WDNR, and 8 percent goes to the WDFW. The current price for a one-year Discover Pass is \$30. In the calendar year 2023, the Discover Pass generated \$26.2 million.

Personalized license plates: All revenue from personalized license plates goes to the WDFW to be used for nongame species management. Washington's personalized license plate program was established in 1973 by a referendum supported by nearly two-thirds of Washington voters. Plates cost \$52 to purchase initially and \$42 to renew. The Wildlife Rehabilitation Account receives \$2 from the purchase and renewal of plates to support the care and rehabilitation of sick, injured, or orphaned wildlife, and the rest goes into the Limited Fish and Wildlife Account to fund the "preservation, protection, perpetuation, and enhancement of nongame species." In FY 2022–2023, 9,300 personalized license plates were sold, and 79,735 were renewed, generating about \$7.6 million.

Timber sales: A large portion (about half) of the WDNR’s budget is generated by timber sales on approximately 2.4 million acres of forested state trust lands. Timber sales and timber sale–related activities generated about \$250 million of revenue in FY 2023–2024.

User fees: Much of the operating budgets for both the WDFW and Washington State Parks are generated by user fees, including camping and boating fees, hunting and fishing licenses, and recreational permits.

The following table outlines the user fee types, fee amounts, and revenue generated from each fee.

USER FEE	FEE AMOUNT (RESIDENT/NONRESIDENT)	APPLICATION	ANNUAL REVENUE
Boating fees	Marina sites: \$12 Buoys: \$23 Docks and linear moorage: \$1 per foot of vessel length, \$23 minimum	Mooring, docking, and using buoys for watercraft in state parks	Not available
Camping fees	\$12–\$56, depending on type of site and time of year	Camping in state parks	Not available
Field trial permits	\$94 (\$70 application fee + \$24 permit fee)	Participating in field trials for hunting dogs	Not available
Fishing licenses	\$14.10–\$69.55/\$21.80– \$124.65	Fishing in freshwater and saltwater, and harvesting shellfish (including razor clams) and seaweed	\$36.4 million (\$31.6 million resident/\$4.8 million nonresident)*
Hunting licenses	\$24–\$332/\$222–\$1,652	Hunting for small game and big game	\$17.4 million (\$15.9 million resident/\$1.5 million nonresident)*
ORV use permits	\$15.75–\$18.00	Operating ORVs	Not available
Sno-Park permits	Daily: \$25 Seasonal: \$50–\$120, depending on location and use	Parking at Sno-Parks	\$1.9 million (FY 2021–2022)
Snowmobile permits	\$12–\$50	Operating snowmobiles	Not available

* The revenue from these fees is based on sales that occurred in federal FY 2023, which ran from October 1, 2022, to September 30, 2023.

Other funding mechanisms: Other identified funding mechanisms include bonds, grants, donations, interest income, leases (e.g., for agriculture, commercial real estate, and rights-of-way), fines, unrefunded gasoline taxes, and harvest rights.

Wisconsin

	FY 2024–2025	FY 2018–2019
Overall state budget*	\$48.2 billion	\$38.4 billion
State budget dedicated to natural resource management	\$580.9 million (1.2%)	\$546.8 million (1.4%)
Total general fund dollars in budget	\$21 billion	\$17.6 billion
State general fund dedicated to natural resource management	\$96.7 million (0.5%)	\$111.5 million in (0.6%)

* Wisconsin received an influx of one-time federal funding during the COVID-19 pandemic. Those dollars may still be present in the current budget, artificially inflating the budget trend. For comparison, we have included budget numbers from 2019, the year before the COVID-19 pandemic began, in addition to budget numbers for fiscal year 2024–2025.

ACRES OF STATE LAND

1.6 million acres

POPULATION

5.9 million

MANAGED BY THE STATE

4.6% of state's total land area

STATE'S TOTAL LAND AREA

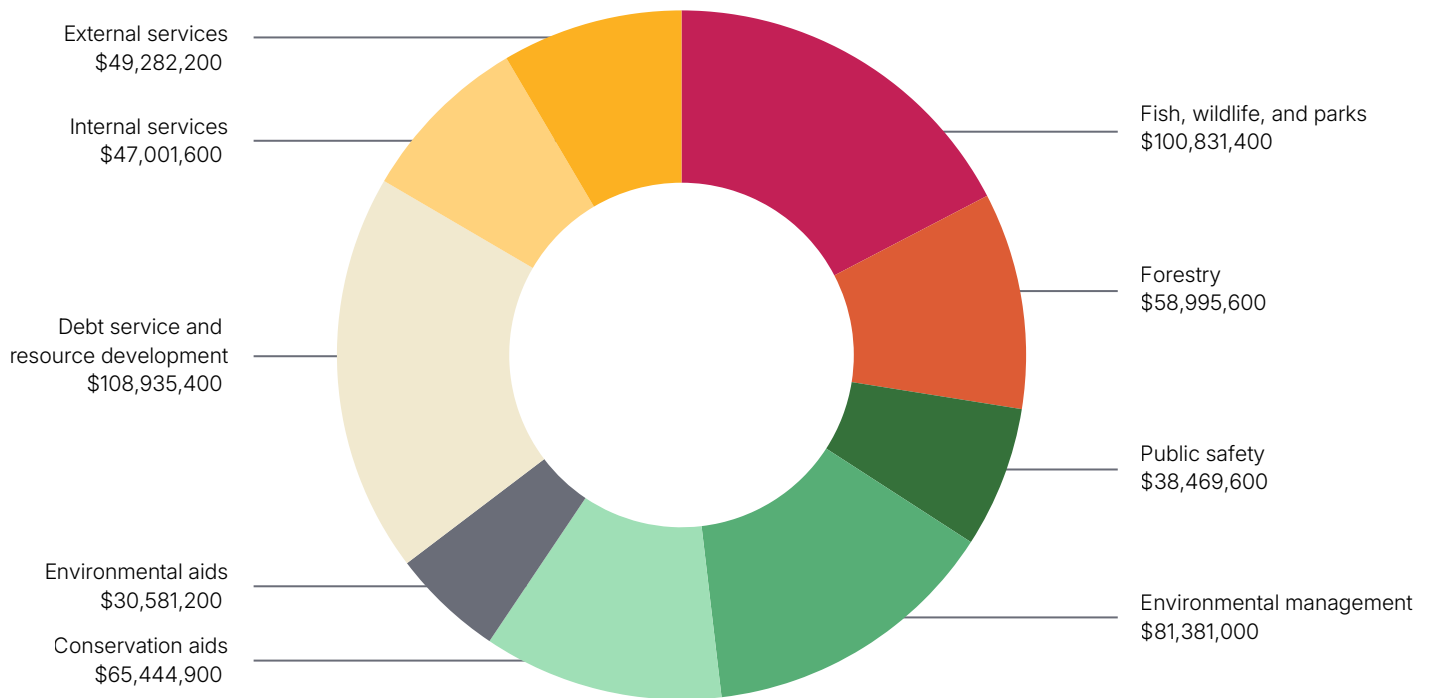
34.6 million acres

The State of Wisconsin mirrors Michigan's outdoor heritage in many ways. The state has over 800 miles of Great Lakes shoreline, 1.2 million acres of inland lakes, 86,000 miles of rivers, and millions of acres of state land, much of which is part of the state forest system. State parks, forests, trails, and recreation areas see more than 20 million visits a year.

Wisconsin also has a large but decreasing number of hunters and anglers, and outdoor recreation is an important part of the state's economy. In 2022, the outdoor recreation industry contributed \$9.8 billion to the state's gross domestic product and supported over 94,000 jobs.

The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR) is the state agency responsible for managing natural resources in Wisconsin, including state lands and waters, fish and wildlife, and parks. The WDNR is also tasked with environmental management, including air and water quality. Like Michigan, WDNR's natural resources work is funded primarily via user fees and federal funding sources. A key difference between the two states is that Wisconsin uses a bond-funded program, the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program, to fund public land acquisition and capital improvement projects on state properties, whereas Michigan uses the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund, which is not bond funded, for similar purposes.

WDNR Budget by Purpose, FY 2024–2025



Funding Mechanisms

General Fund

General purpose revenue (GPR) is primarily generated from taxes. GPR made up about 16.7 percent of the WDNR's total budget in FY 2024–2025, totaling \$96.7 million. This is a significant decrease since the mid 1990s, when the WDNR received about \$334 million in GPR. Most of the WDNR's divisions receive GPR as part of their funding, but the Division of Forestry, along with the Bureau of Wildlife Management and the State Parks System (both part of the Division of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks) did not receive any GPR in 2024. Parks support through GPR was eliminated in the 2015–2017 budget, leaving the State Parks System to support itself via user fees, resulting in the lowest average state spending on parks in the country at just \$1.08 per visit.

Federal Funding

According to data provided through a personal communication by budget analyst Eric Hepler, federal dollars made up about 7.3 percent of the WDNR's total budget in FY 2024–2025. Federal funds for wildlife and fisheries management come from the Dingell-Johnson and Pittman-Robertson programs, the Land and Water Conservation Fund, the Recreational Trails Program, and other federal programs.

State-Dedicated Funding

User fees: WDNR's Division of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks is primarily funded via user fees—hunting, fishing, and trapping licenses; state park entry and camping fees; ATV/UTV registration fees; and similar charges. This division includes the wildlife management and state parks programs, which do not receive any GPR. In addition, approximately 70 percent of the fisheries management program is funded through user fees. Notably, the cost of in-state hunting, fishing, and trapping licenses has not increased since 2005.

The following table outlines the user fee types, fee amounts, and revenue generated from each fee.

USER FEE	FEE AMOUNT (RESIDENT/NONRESIDENT)	APPLICATION	ANNUAL REVENUE
ATV/UTV trails pass	Nonresident annual \$35 Nonresident five-day pass \$20	Use of public ATV/UTV trails for vehicles not registered in Wisconsin	\$914,000 (2021)
Fishing license	\$7–\$20/\$14–\$70	Great Lakes or inland waters fishing	\$28.2 million (2019–2020)
Hunting license	\$3–\$49/\$3–\$251	Archery or gun hunting for deer, small game, bear, turkey, wolf, or goose	\$28.5 million (2019–2020)
Snowmobile trail pass	Annual \$30/\$50 (Wisconsin snowmobile trail pass for Wisconsin snowmobile club members \$10)	Use of public snowmobile trails	\$4.1 million (2022–2023)
State parks vehicle admission sticker	Annual \$28/\$38 Daily \$8–\$13/\$11–\$16	Entry into any state park or forest	\$12.1 million (2023)
State trail pass	\$25 resident or nonresident	A state trail pass is required for all people age 16 or older who bike, cross-country ski, horseback ride, or inline skate on certain trails; a state trail pass is not required for walking or hiking	\$1.4 million (2019)
Trapping license	\$10–\$20/\$20–\$150	Furbearer trapping	\$386,000 (only resident data available; 2019)

Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program: This bond-funded program allocates funding to land acquisition, primarily through grants to local governments and nonprofits. Stewardship program dollars can also be used to build or improve recreational infrastructure on state properties. The stewardship program was created in 1989 by Republican Governor Tommy Thompson, working with a Democratic-majority legislature. The legislature has the authority to revise, reauthorize, and appropriate funds to the program. Funding for the stewardship program has fluctuated over the years, from \$23.1 million at its inception to \$86 million in 2010 to \$32 million in 2024. Begun as a ten-year program, Knowles-Nelson has been reauthorized several times and is now set to expire on June 30, 2026, unless legislators take action.

Appendix E

MRG Polling Results



Marketing Resource Group

Integrating Collaboration, Results

Next generation market research

NATURE CONSERVANCY SURVEY

Final report | March 2026

powered by

 **response:AI**

USA | Japan | Europe



Marketing Resource Group

Integrating Collaboration, Results

GOALS & METHODOLOGY





PROJECT SPECIFICATION



Research Problem

- ...



Target group

- Registered voters
- Age 18+
- Weighted results to get sample structure representative of Gender, Region, Political affiliation and Ideology.



Methodology

- Quantitative CAWI (Computer Administered Web Interviewing) survey
- Used online panel
- A total of **1021 respondents**
- Interviewed **26 February – 6 March 2026**



Marketing Resource Group

Integrity. Collaboration. Results.

DETAILED FINDINGS

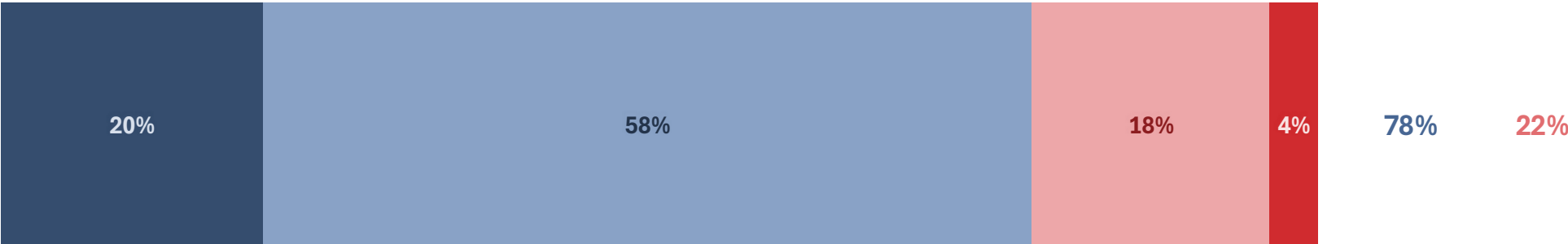




QUALITY OF LIFE

While Michigan voters generally consider the quality of life in their community to be “good” (58%), only 20% consider it to be excellent, and 22% rate it fair or poor. People ages 35-54 hold a more negative view of their quality of life than either younger or older residents. Interestingly, self-identified Republicans hold the most positive view (86% excellent or good), but only slightly outweigh Democrats (80%). Independents, on the other hand, are far more negative, with only 64% giving a positive rating.

■ Excellent ■ Good ■ Fair ■ Poor **T2B** **B2B**



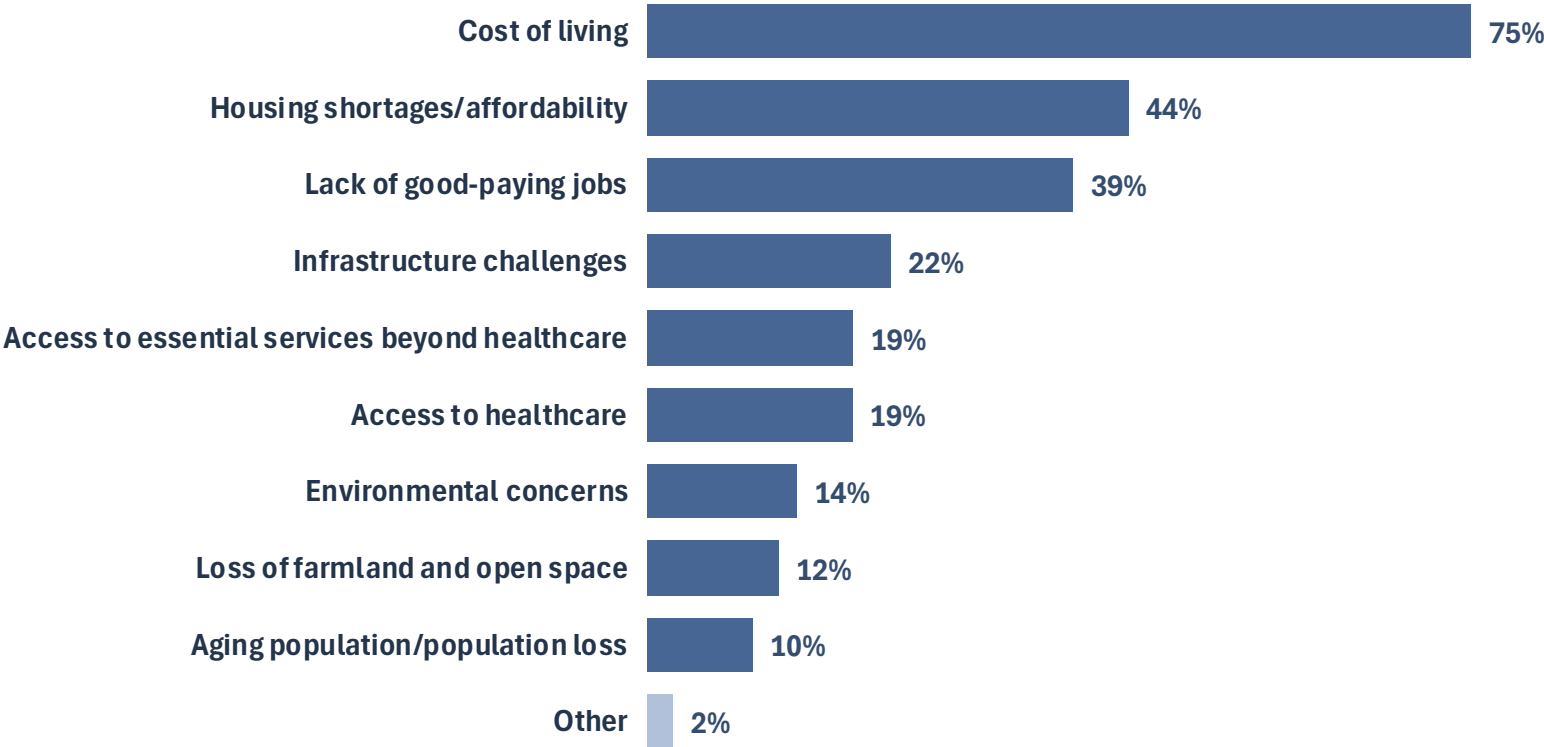
T2B = the sum of the two most positive options
B2B = the sum of the two most negative options

	TOTAL	GENDER		AGE			URBANICITY			VISITED		HUNT OR FISH		POLITICAL AFFILIATION			IDEOLOGY		
	TOTAL	Male	Female	18-34	35-54	55+	Urban	Suburban	Rural	Park/Trail	Lakes	Yes	No	Rep	Ind	Dem	Liberal	Moderate	Cons
NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS	1021	463	558	248	366	407	433	436	152	990	967	478	543	322	232	453	277	464	246
T2B	78%	82%	75%	85%	67%	84%	78%	78%	81%	79%	79%	79%	77%	86%	64%	80%	77%	81%	80%
B2B	22%	18%	25%	15%	33%	16%	22%	22%	19%	21%	21%	21%	23%	14%	36%	20%	23%	19%	20%



BIGGEST CHALLENGE

Cost of living is clearly seen as the biggest challenge facing their local community today. This holds regardless of gender, age or political affiliation. Rural residents place somewhat less emphasis than those in urban or suburban areas on the cost of living, and more emphasis on housing shortages and the lack of good-paying jobs.

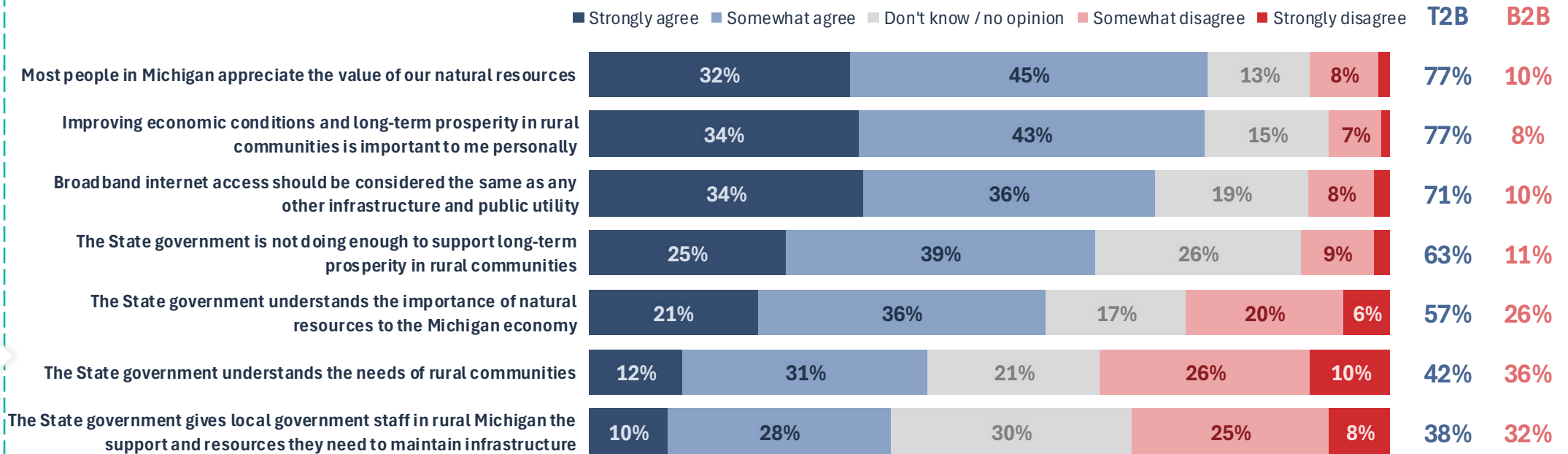


TOP 3	TOTAL	GENDER		AGE			URBANICITY			VISITED		HUNT OR FISH		POLITICAL AFFILIATION			IDEOLOGY		
	TOTAL	Male	Female	18-34	35-54	55+	Urban	Suburban	Rural	Park/Trail	Lakes	Yes	No	Rep	Ind	Dem	Liberal	Moderate	Cons
NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS	1021	463	558	248	366	407	433	436	152	990	967	478	543	322	232	453	277	464	246
Cost of living	75%	72%	79%	74%	76%	76%	76%	77%	70%	75%	75%	73%	78%	74%	80%	74%	72%	79%	75%
Housing shortages/affordability	44%	41%	47%	42%	49%	41%	41%	43%	55%	44%	44%	46%	42%	39%	44%	47%	47%	47%	39%
Lack of good-paying jobs	39%	40%	38%	50%	44%	29%	38%	36%	50%	39%	39%	44%	34%	38%	44%	39%	36%	47%	35%



STATEMENTS ABOUT NATURAL RESOURCES AND RURAL COMMUNITIES

Large shares of Michiganders agree that most people appreciate the value of our natural resources, that improving economic conditions and long-term prosperity in rural communities is important to them personally, and that broadband internet should be considered the same as any other infrastructure or public utility. Only 38% agree (and 32% disagree) that the State government gives local governments in rural Michigan the support they need to maintain infrastructure. These views largely hold across the political spectrum. Rural residents, as expected, give more emphasis to the statement that improving economic conditions in rural communities matters to them, with 86% agreeing with that statement.



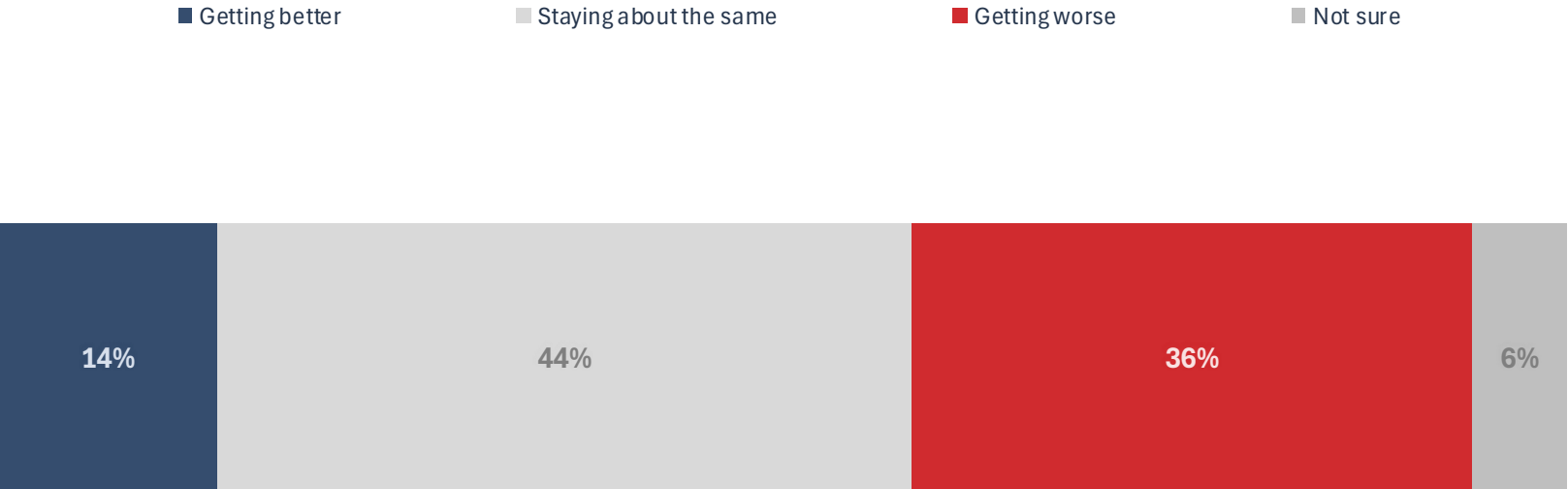
T2B = the sum of the two most positive options
B2B = the sum of the two most negative options

T2B	TOTAL	GENDER		AGE			URBANICITY			VISITED		HUNT OR FISH		POLITICAL AFFILIATION			IDEOLOGY		
	TOTAL	Male	Female	18-34	35-54	55+	Urban	Suburban	Rural	Park/Trail	Lakes	Yes	No	Rep	Ind	Dem	Liberal	Moderate	Cons
NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS	1021	463	558	248	366	407	433	436	152	990	967	478	543	322	232	453	277	464	246
Most people in Michigan appreciate the value ...	77%	80%	75%	72%	76%	81%	76%	78%	76%	77%	78%	79%	75%	76%	74%	80%	74%	82%	78%
Improving economic conditions and long-term ...	77%	78%	76%	82%	79%	72%	76%	74%	86%	77%	77%	81%	73%	78%	63%	82%	81%	78%	74%
Broadband internet access should be consider ...	71%	75%	67%	70%	72%	70%	70%	72%	68%	71%	71%	69%	72%	69%	54%	80%	79%	79%	61%
The State government is not doing enough to ...	63%	65%	61%	72%	67%	55%	65%	58%	71%	64%	63%	69%	58%	70%	60%	58%	55%	62%	69%
The State government understands the importa ...	57%	61%	53%	62%	54%	57%	59%	56%	54%	57%	58%	56%	58%	47%	43%	78%	78%	64%	45%
The State government understands the needs o ...	42%	46%	38%	58%	40%	35%	49%	40%	32%	42%	43%	44%	41%	34%	28%	58%	54%	53%	27%
The State government gives local government ...	38%	42%	34%	55%	37%	29%	45%	36%	25%	38%	38%	44%	32%	31%	24%	51%	51%	43%	26%



ECONOMIC CONDITIONS IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

Only 14% of Michigan voters believe economic conditions in rural communities are getting better. Fully 36% believe they are getting worse. This holds regardless of political affiliation or ideology. Women are somewhat more negative than men on this measure. As expected, responses vary tremendously depending on where the respondent lives. 20% of urban residents feel economic conditions in rural communities are getting better, but only 8% of rural residents feel that way.



	TOTAL	GENDER		AGE			URBANICITY			VISITED		HUNT OR FISH		POLITICAL AFFILIATION			IDEOLOGY		
	TOTAL	Male	Female	18-34	35-54	55+	Urban	Suburban	Rural	Park/Trail	Lakes	Yes	No	Rep	Ind	Dem	Liberal	Moderate	Cons
NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS	1021	463	558	248	366	407	433	436	152	990	967	478	543	322	232	453	277	464	246
Getting better	14%	18%	10%	27%	13%	8%	20%	11%	8%	14%	14%	19%	9%	16%	6%	16%	15%	15%	14%
Staying about the same	44%	46%	43%	40%	40%	50%	40%	48%	47%	45%	45%	40%	48%	49%	38%	44%	41%	48%	44%
Getting worse	36%	31%	40%	30%	42%	34%	33%	37%	40%	36%	35%	38%	34%	30%	44%	35%	36%	33%	36%
Not sure	6%	4%	8%	3%	5%	8%	8%	5%	5%	6%	6%	3%	9%	5%	12%	5%	8%	5%	6%

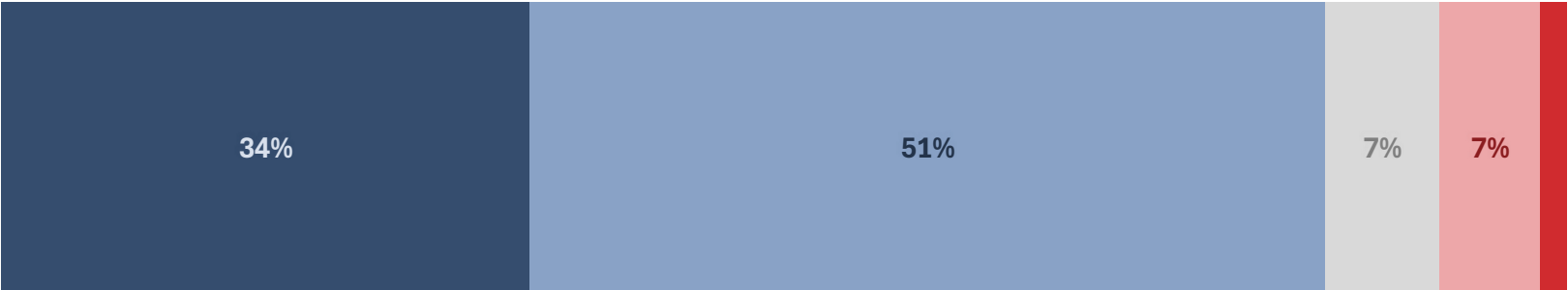


INFRASTRUCTURE CONDITION

85% of Michigan voters are concerned about the condition of infrastructure in their community, with 34% very concerned. This measure is consistent across gender, age and political views.

Very concerned Somewhat concerned Don't know / no opinion Somewhat not concerned Not concerned at all

T2B B2B



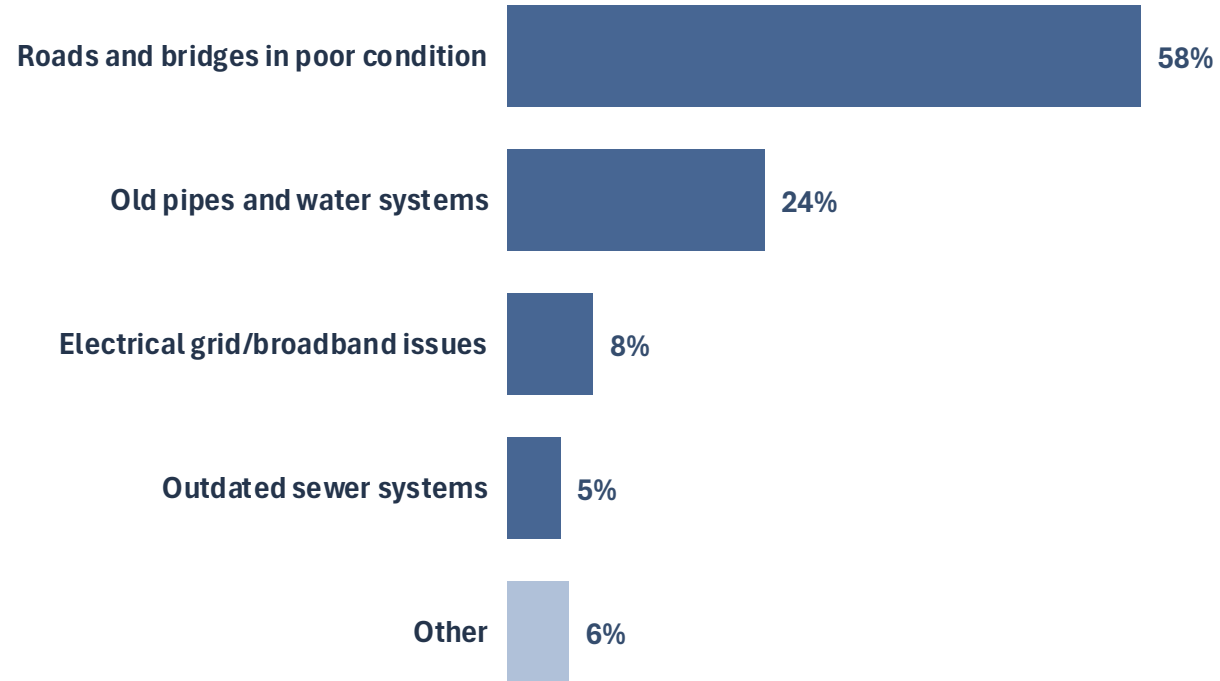
T2B = the sum of the two most positive options
B2B = the sum of the two most negative options

	TOTAL	GENDER		AGE			URBANICITY			VISITED		HUNT OR FISH		POLITICAL AFFILIATION			IDEOLOGY		
	TOTAL	Male	Female	18-34	35-54	55+	Urban	Suburban	Rural	Park/Trail	Lakes	Yes	No	Rep	Ind	Dem	Liberal	Moderate	Cons
NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS	1021	463	558	248	366	407	433	436	152	990	967	478	543	322	232	453	277	464	246
T2B	85%	85%	84%	81%	86%	85%	85%	86%	81%	85%	85%	87%	82%	85%	81%	86%	86%	88%	83%
B2B	8%	9%	8%	7%	6%	11%	8%	8%	10%	8%	8%	7%	9%	8%	8%	8%	9%	5%	9%



“AGING INFRASTRUCTURE” UNDERSTANDING

Aging infrastructure generally connotes roads and bridges in poor condition. To a much lesser extent it also means old pipes and water systems. Electrical grid / broadband issues and outdated sewer system are much less likely to be mentioned. Identifying this issue with old pipes and water systems is more likely in urban areas (30%) than suburban (21%) or rural areas (13%).



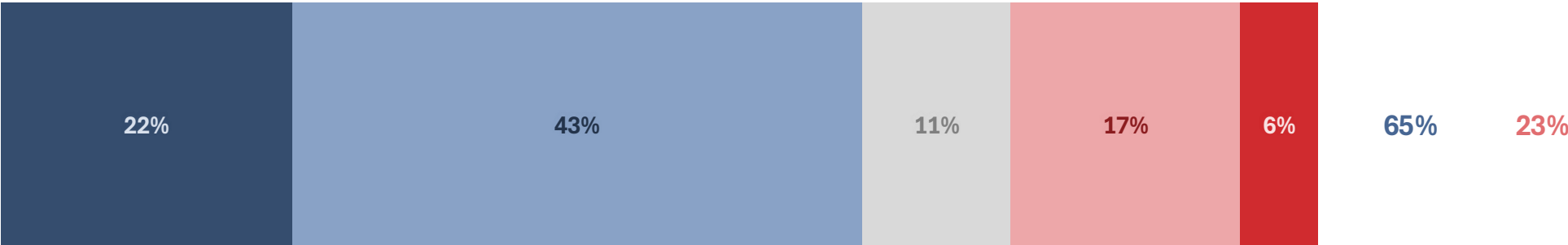
	TOTAL	GENDER		AGE			URBANICITY			VISITED		HUNT OR FISH		POLITICAL AFFILIATION			IDEOLOGY		
	TOTAL	Male	Female	18-34	35-54	55+	Urban	Suburban	Rural	Park/Trail	Lakes	Yes	No	Rep	Ind	Dem	Liberal	Moderate	Cons
NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS	1021	463	558	248	366	407	433	436	152	990	967	478	543	322	232	453	277	464	246
Roads and bridges in poor condition	58%	59%	57%	53%	60%	40%	52%	59%	69%	58%	58%	55%	61%	61%	57%	59%	57%	56%	62%
Old pipes and water systems	24%	22%	25%	29%	24%	20%	30%	21%	13%	24%	23%	26%	22%	18%	23%	24%	25%	27%	18%
Electrical grid/broadband issues	8%	9%	7%	7%	7%	9%	6%	10%	8%	8%	8%	9%	7%	9%	8%	7%	8%	8%	8%
Outdated sewer systems	5%	4%	5%	6%	6%	3%	6%	5%	3%	5%	5%	5%	5%	5%	5%	5%	5%	6%	4%
Other	6%	6%	6%	4%	3%	9%	6%	5%	8%	6%	6%	6%	5%	7%	7%	5%	6%	3%	8%



WATER SAFETY

Most Michiganders are confident in the safety of their tap water, although 23% express concern. Confidence is much lower among Independents (39% not confident) and women (29% not confident).

Very confident Somewhat confident Neutral - no opinion Not too confident Not confident at all T2B B2B



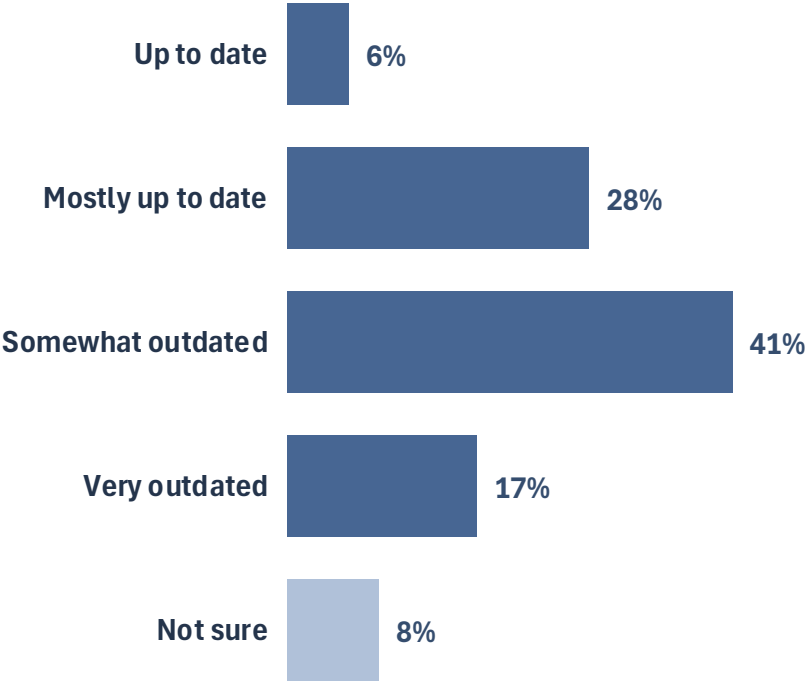
T2B = the sum of the two most positive options
B2B = the sum of the two most negative options

	TOTAL	GENDER		AGE			URBANICITY			VISITED		HUNT OR FISH		POLITICAL AFFILIATION			IDEOLOGY		
	TOTAL	Male	Female	18-34	35-54	55+	Urban	Suburban	Rural	Park/Trail	Lakes	Yes	No	Rep	Ind	Dem	Liberal	Moderate	Cons
NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS	1021	463	558	248	366	407	433	436	152	990	967	478	543	322	232	453	277	464	246
T2B	65%	72%	59%	65%	58%	72%	66%	67%	61%	66%	66%	66%	65%	67%	50%	70%	63%	64%	67%
B2B	23%	18%	29%	25%	27%	19%	24%	23%	23%	23%	23%	24%	23%	22%	39%	18%	27%	23%	24%



WATER INFRASTRUCTURE

A plurality (41%) consider Michigan’s water infrastructure to be somewhat outdated. 28% feel it is mostly up to date and 6% fully up to date. At the same time, 17% feel the water infrastructure is very outdated, and 8% are unsure. Independent voters, again, hold more negative views than either Republicans or Democrats.



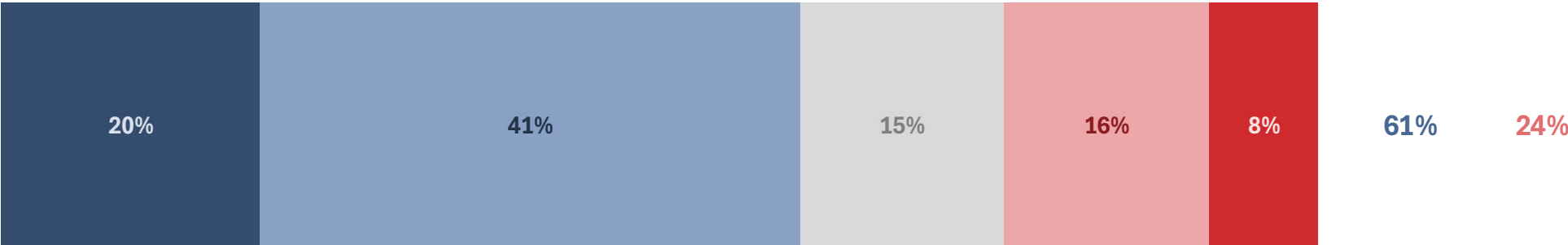
	TOTAL	GENDER		AGE			URBANICITY			VISITED		HUNT OR FISH		POLITICAL AFFILIATION			IDEOLOGY		
	TOTAL	Male	Female	18-34	35-54	55+	Urban	Suburban	Rural	Park/Trail	Lakes	Yes	No	Rep	Ind	Dem	Liberal	Moderate	Cons
NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS	1021	463	558	248	366	407	433	436	152	990	967	478	543	322	232	453	277	464	246
Up to date	6%	7%	5%	14%	5%	2%	8%	5%	3%	6%	5%	8%	4%	7%	2%	6%	7%	7%	5%
Mostly up to date	28%	31%	25%	38%	23%	26%	28%	28%	25%	28%	28%	30%	26%	28%	21%	32%	30%	30%	25%
Somewhat outdated	41%	40%	41%	29%	42%	46%	37%	41%	48%	41%	42%	36%	45%	40%	45%	43%	41%	40%	43%
Very outdated	17%	16%	19%	15%	20%	17%	20%	17%	13%	17%	17%	20%	15%	18%	21%	12%	17%	17%	18%
Not sure	8%	7%	10%	4%	11%	9%	7%	9%	11%	8%	8%	6%	11%	8%	10%	7%	5%	7%	9%



SATISFACTION WITH BROADBAND AND INTERNET SERVICES

Michigan voters express mixed views on their satisfaction with broadband and internet services. While 61% are satisfied overall, only 20% are very satisfied. 24% are dissatisfied (with 8% very dissatisfied) and 15% have no opinion. Women and people ages 35-54 are less likely to be satisfied with their broadband access.

Very satisfied Somewhat satisfied Neutral / no opinion Somewhat dissatisfied Very dissatisfied **T2B** **B2B**



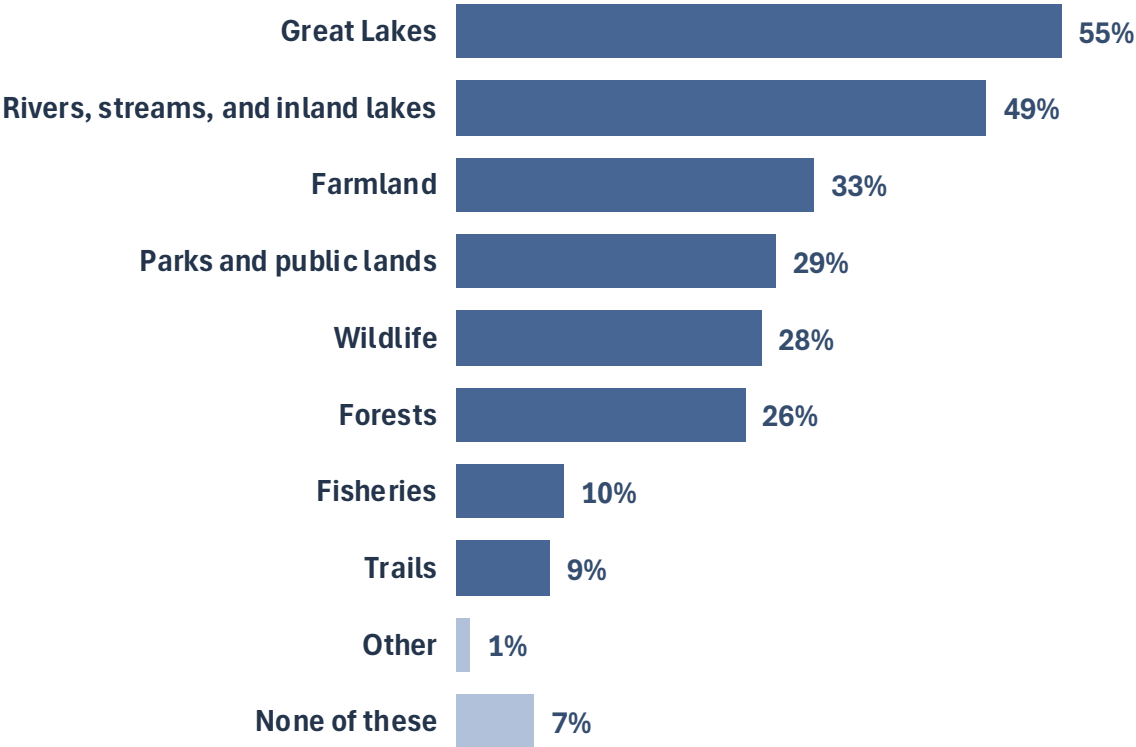
T2B = the sum of the two most positive options
B2B = the sum of the two most negative options

	TOTAL	GENDER		AGE			URBANICITY			VISITED		HUNT OR FISH		POLITICAL AFFILIATION			IDEOLOGY		
	TOTAL	Male	Female	18-34	35-54	55+	Urban	Suburban	Rural	Park/Trail	Lakes	Yes	No	Rep	Ind	Dem	Liberal	Moderate	Cons
NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS	1021	463	558	248	366	407	433	436	152	990	967	478	543	322	232	453	277	464	246
T2B	61%	66%	56%	60%	52%	68%	61%	61%	59%	61%	62%	59%	62%	63%	58%	63%	59%	64%	62%
B2B	24%	20%	27%	22%	32%	18%	22%	25%	27%	24%	23%	26%	22%	23%	21%	23%	28%	23%	23%



NATURAL RESOURCES IN NEED OF INVESTMENT AND PROTECTION

Respondents see broad needs for greater investment and protection from the State government across an array of natural resources. 55% see a need for greater protection of the Great Lakes, and 49% of rivers, streams and inland lakes. But farmland, parks and public lands, wildlife and forests all are also seen as needing more investment and protection by at least one-quarter of respondents. Democrats place slightly more emphasis on protecting rivers, streams and inland lakes, while Republicans have a greater focus on protecting farmland. Older voters (ages 55+) are more likely to say that the Great Lakes and inland waterways need greater investment and protection. Rural voters are more likely to check the box for farmland (38%, versus 30% of urban voters).

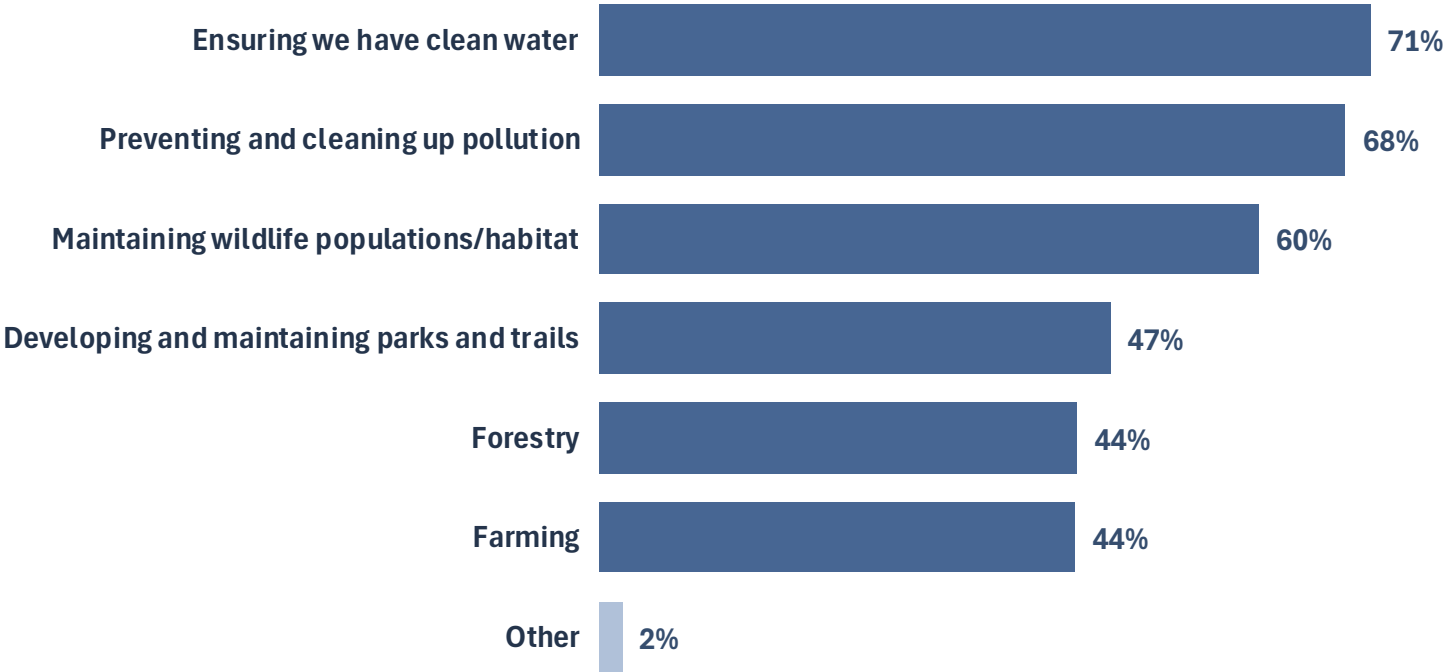


TOP 3	TOTAL	GENDER		AGE			URBANICITY			VISITED		HUNT OR FISH		POLITICAL AFFILIATION			IDEOLOGY		
	TOTAL	Male	Female	18-34	35-54	55+	Urban	Suburban	Rural	Park/Trail	Lakes	Yes	No	Rep	Ind	Dem	Liberal	Moderate	Cons
NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS	1021	463	558	248	366	407	433	436	152	990	967	478	543	322	232	453	277	464	246
Great Lakes	55%	56%	54%	52%	51%	61%	52%	58%	58%	56%	57%	58%	53%	53%	60%	58%	58%	56%	56%
Rivers, streams, and inland lakes	49%	54%	43%	49%	41%	54%	44%	50%	56%	49%	50%	49%	48%	47%	43%	55%	51%	49%	47%
Farmland	33%	31%	35%	31%	37%	31%	30%	34%	38%	33%	33%	35%	31%	39%	31%	27%	24%	35%	39%



MANAGING NATURAL RESOURCES

In terms of managing natural resources, survey respondents most associate this with ensuring we have clean water (71%) and preventing and cleaning up pollution (68%). Fewer see managing natural resources in terms of forestry and farming, although 44% do identify the term with these areas. Democrats tend to be more focused on clean water and pollution abatement than either Republicans or Independents. Rural voters are more likely to include forestry and farming and less likely to select developing and maintaining parks and trails.

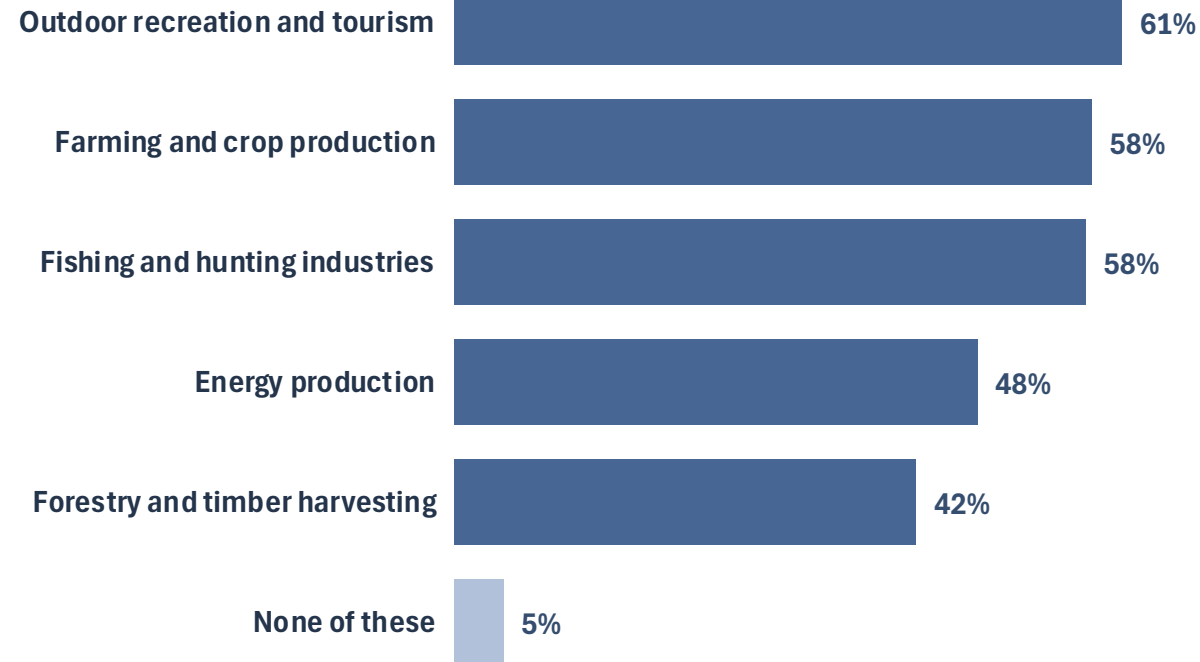


	TOTAL	GENDER		AGE			URBANICITY			VISITED		HUNT OR FISH		POLITICAL AFFILIATION			IDEOLOGY		
	TOTAL	Male	Female	18-34	35-54	55+	Urban	Suburban	Rural	Park/Trail	Lakes	Yes	No	Rep	Ind	Dem	Liberal	Moderate	Cons
NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS	1021	463	558	248	366	407	433	436	152	990	967	478	543	322	232	453	277	464	246
Ensuring we have clean water	71%	69%	72%	63%	63%	81%	66%	75%	72%	71%	71%	69%	72%	66%	71%	76%	76%	72%	68%
Preventing and cleaning up pollution	68%	68%	69%	60%	69%	72%	67%	69%	69%	69%	68%	63%	73%	60%	65%	75%	71%	75%	60%
Maintaining wildlife populations/habitat	60%	61%	60%	57%	58%	64%	59%	63%	58%	61%	61%	61%	59%	56%	65%	60%	59%	66%	58%
Developing and maintaining parks and trails	47%	44%	50%	44%	46%	49%	49%	48%	37%	47%	47%	47%	46%	40%	43%	54%	47%	55%	40%
Forestry	44%	47%	41%	31%	39%	55%	37%	47%	52%	44%	45%	43%	44%	42%	43%	47%	42%	43%	48%
Farming	44%	41%	46%	41%	40%	48%	36%	47%	52%	44%	44%	48%	40%	43%	43%	45%	39%	47%	45%



NATURAL RESOURCES USAGE

Michigan voters are most likely to associate the use of natural resources with outdoor recreation and tourism (61%), followed closely by both farming (58%) and fishing/hunting (58%). Democrats are more likely to associate the term with outdoor recreation and tourism, as well as with energy production. Younger voters are also far more likely to associate this term with energy production (61% of those ages 18-34). People in rural areas are much more likely to cite forestry, outdoor recreation and fishing/hunting and less likely to cite energy production.

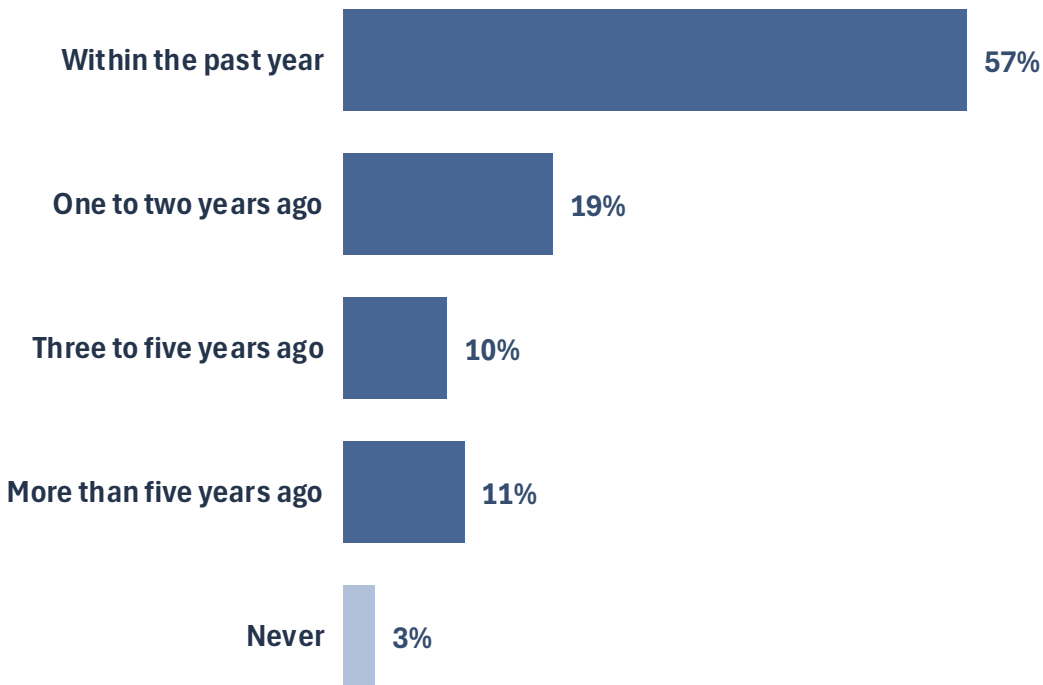


	TOTAL	GENDER		AGE			URBANICITY			VISITED		HUNT OR FISH		POLITICAL AFFILIATION			IDEOLOGY		
	TOTAL	Male	Female	18-34	35-54	55+	Urban	Suburban	Rural	Park/Trail	Lakes	Yes	No	Rep	Ind	Dem	Liberal	Moderate	Cons
NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS	1021	463	558	248	366	407	433	436	152	990	967	478	543	322	232	453	277	464	246
Outdoor recreation and tourism	61%	64%	59%	52%	55%	72%	60%	58%	72%	62%	63%	63%	60%	58%	60%	66%	61%	69%	58%
Farming and crop production	58%	59%	58%	58%	57%	60%	57%	59%	59%	59%	60%	62%	55%	54%	61%	60%	60%	67%	52%
Fishing and hunting industries	58%	62%	54%	50%	53%	67%	53%	59%	68%	58%	59%	64%	52%	57%	58%	60%	52%	62%	61%
Energy production	48%	47%	49%	61%	49%	40%	52%	48%	39%	48%	47%	46%	50%	41%	44%	57%	56%	51%	41%
Forestry and timber harvesting	42%	44%	40%	39%	39%	47%	39%	41%	55%	43%	44%	45%	40%	42%	38%	43%	34%	47%	44%



MICHIGAN PARK OR TRAIL VISITORS

Over half of Michigan voters say they have visited a park or trail over the past year. This is consistent across the political spectrum. Fully 62% of those who live in rural areas have visited a park or trail in the past year, versus only 55% of urban residents and 57% of those in suburban areas.

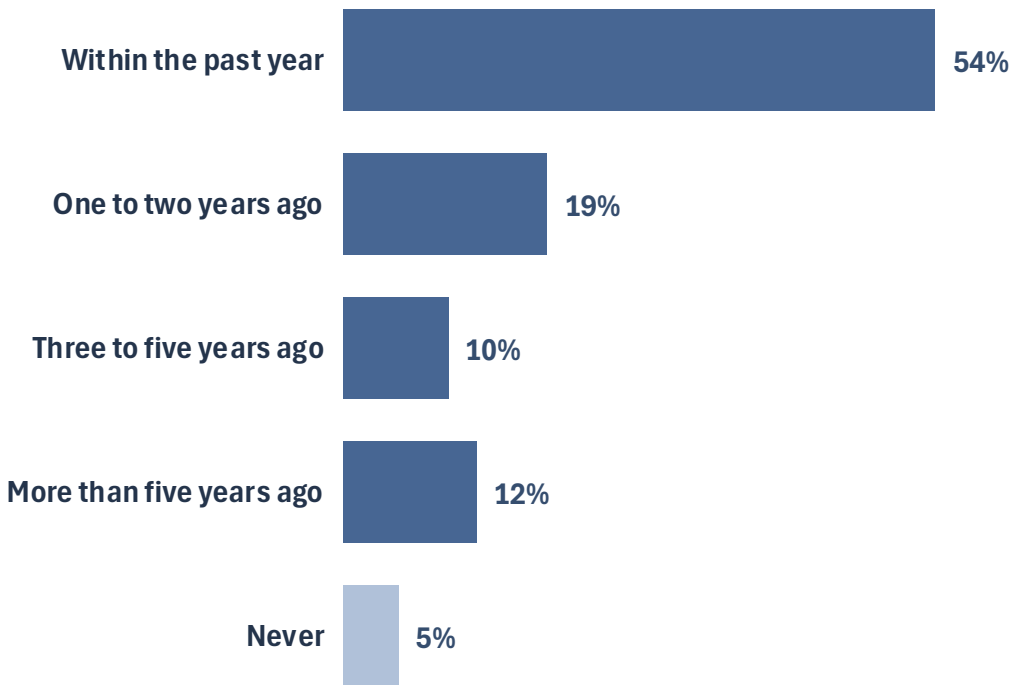


	TOTAL	GENDER		AGE			URBANICITY			VISITED		HUNT OR FISH		POLITICAL AFFILIATION			IDEOLOGY		
	TOTAL	Male	Female	18-34	35-54	55+	Urban	Suburban	Rural	Park/Trail	Lakes	Yes	No	Rep	Ind	Dem	Liberal	Moderate	Cons
NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS	1021	463	558	248	366	407	433	436	152	990	967	478	543	322	232	453	277	464	246
Within the past year	57%	58%	56%	58%	61%	53%	55%	57%	62%	59%	59%	67%	48%	58%	54%	55%	56%	64%	53%
One to two years ago	19%	21%	18%	26%	18%	17%	20%	19%	16%	20%	19%	20%	18%	21%	19%	19%	19%	14%	23%
Three to five years ago	10%	10%	10%	10%	10%	9%	10%	9%	8%	10%	10%	8%	11%	10%	10%	11%	9%	9%	11%
More than five years ago	11%	9%	13%	4%	8%	18%	11%	10%	13%	11%	11%	3%	19%	9%	11%	12%	15%	9%	11%
Never	3%	3%	3%	2%	3%	3%	3%	4%	1%	0%	2%	1%	5%	2%	5%	2%	3%	3%	2%



GREAT LAKES VISITORS

Likewise, 54% of Michigan voters say they have visited one of the Great Lakes within the past year. Republicans are more likely than either Democrats or Independents to have done so. As with visiting a park or trail, rural residents are also more likely to have visited the Great Lakes within the past year.

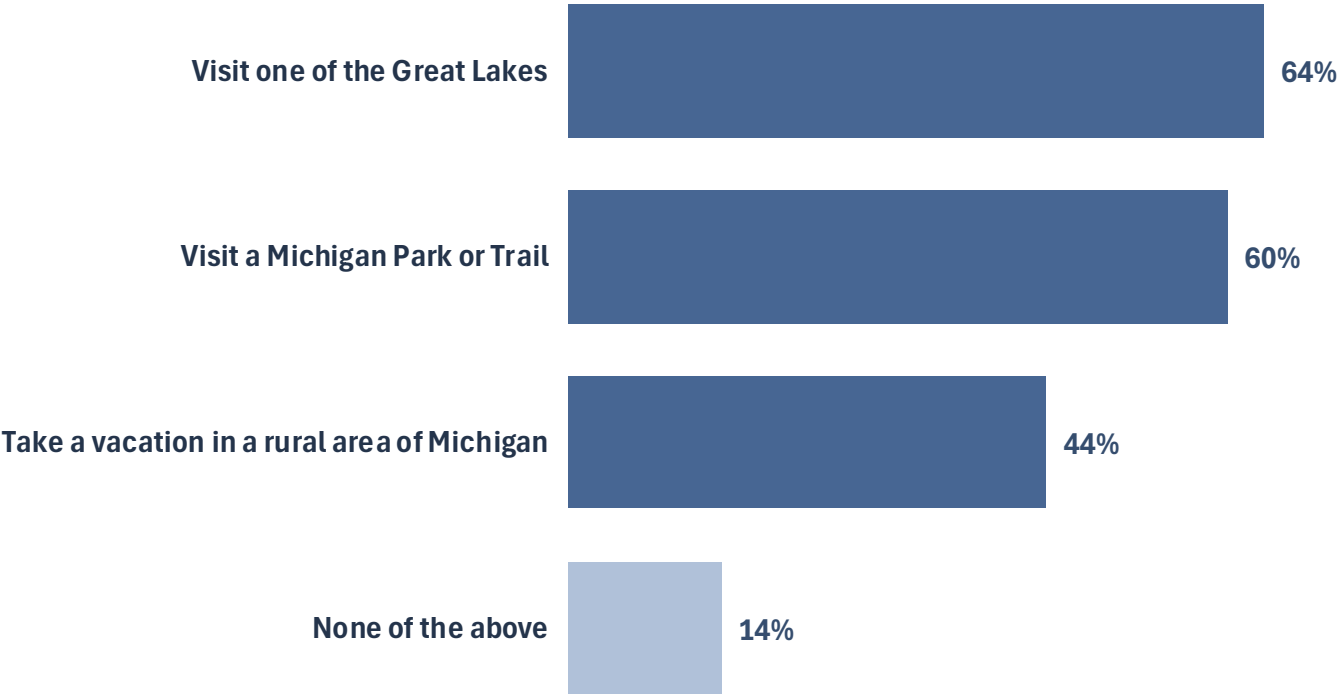


	TOTAL	GENDER		AGE			URBANICITY			VISITED		HUNT OR FISH		POLITICAL AFFILIATION			IDEOLOGY		
	TOTAL	Male	Female	18-34	35-54	55+	Urban	Suburban	Rural	Park/Trail	Lakes	Yes	No	Rep	Ind	Dem	Liberal	Moderate	Cons
NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS	1021	463	558	248	366	407	433	436	152	990	967	478	543	322	232	453	277	464	246
Within the past year	54%	57%	52%	54%	54%	55%	48%	56%	66%	56%	57%	66%	43%	61%	54%	49%	48%	55%	60%
One to two years ago	19%	18%	19%	25%	21%	14%	19%	19%	16%	19%	20%	19%	18%	16%	20%	23%	22%	21%	16%
Three to five years ago	10%	11%	9%	8%	10%	11%	12%	9%	6%	9%	10%	10%	9%	8%	12%	10%	8%	11%	11%
More than five years ago	12%	10%	14%	5%	9%	19%	12%	13%	11%	12%	13%	4%	20%	12%	10%	12%	15%	10%	11%
Never	5%	4%	6%	8%	7%	2%	8%	4%	0%	4%	0%	2%	8%	3%	4%	6%	8%	4%	2%



PLAN TO VISIT IN 2026

Well over half of Michiganders say they plan to either visit one of the Great Lakes or a Michigan Park or Trail in the coming year. 44% plan to take a vacation in a rural area of Michigan.

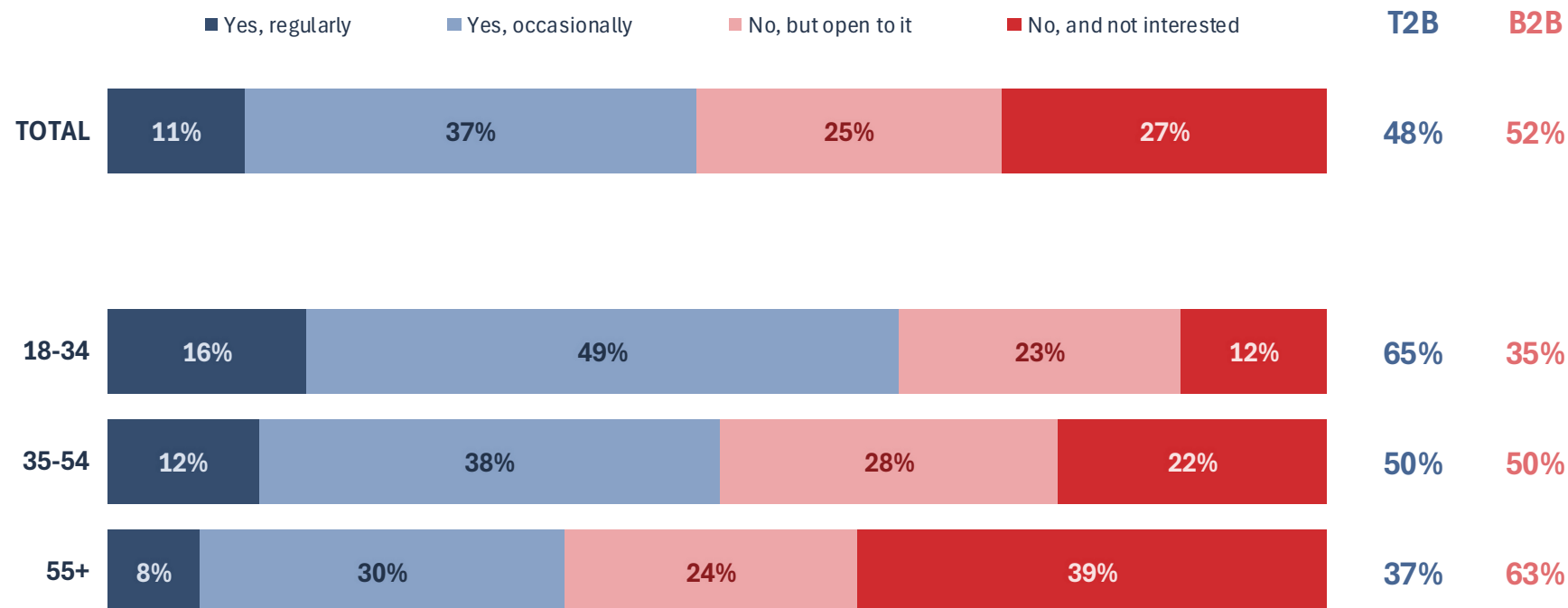


	TOTAL	GENDER		AGE			URBANICITY			VISITED		HUNT OR FISH		POLITICAL AFFILIATION			IDEOLOGY		
	TOTAL	Male	Female	18-34	35-54	55+	Urban	Suburban	Rural	Park/Trail	Lakes	Yes	No	Rep	Ind	Dem	Liberal	Moderate	Cons
NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS	1021	463	558	248	366	407	433	436	152	990	967	478	543	322	232	453	277	464	246
Visit one of the Great Lakes	64%	67%	61%	68%	63%	61%	62%	64%	68%	65%	66%	74%	54%	67%	69%	61%	59%	65%	67%
Visit a Michigan Park or Trail	60%	59%	62%	66%	63%	55%	60%	61%	59%	61%	62%	69%	52%	60%	63%	63%	59%	62%	63%
Take a vacation in a rural area of Michigan	44%	47%	41%	55%	43%	38%	44%	42%	48%	44%	46%	58%	31%	46%	42%	46%	40%	48%	44%
None of the above	14%	13%	15%	7%	15%	17%	14%	14%	14%	13%	12%	3%	24%	9%	14%	14%	15%	13%	11%



HUNT OR FISH

Just under half of those surveyed say that they hunt or fish, with another 25% saying they don’t, but are open to it. Republicans are more likely to hunt or fish than either Democrats or Independents, and this rate also declines steadily with age, from 65% of those ages 18-34 saying they hunt and fish to 50% of those ages 35-54 and only 37% of those ages 55+. 39% of those ages 55+ say they are not interested in hunting or fishing.



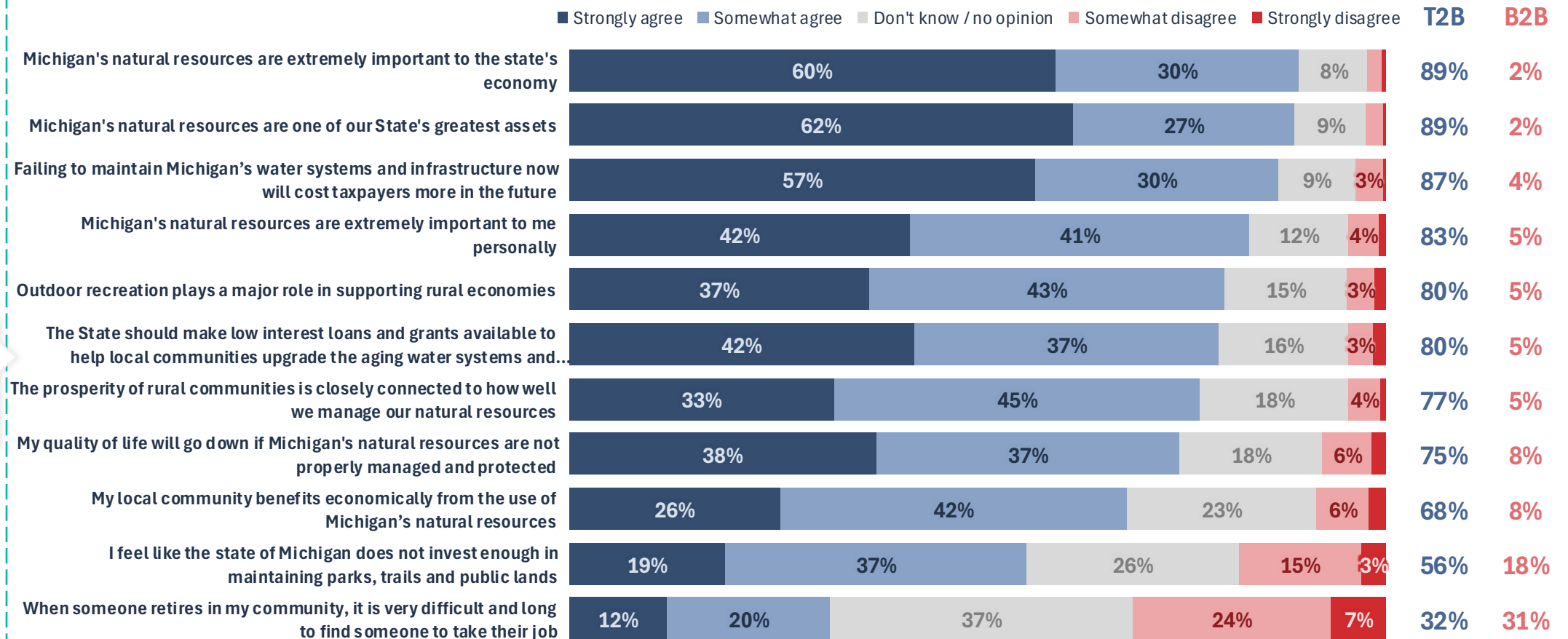
T2B = the sum of the two most positive options
B2B = the sum of the two most negative options

T2B	TOTAL	GENDER		AGE			URBANICITY			VISITED		HUNT OR FISH		POLITICAL AFFILIATION			IDEOLOGY		
	TOTAL	Male	Female	18-34	35-54	55+	Urban	Suburban	Rural	Park/Trail	Lakes	Yes	No	Rep	Ind	Dem	Liberal	Moderate	Cons
TOTAL	48%	57%	40%	65%	50%	37%	45%	49%	54%	49%	50%	100%	0%	56%	46%	41%	41%	51%	52%
18-34	65%	77%	53%	65%	0%	0%	68%	62%	62%	66%	68%	100%	0%	77%	58%	55%	55%	65%	74%
35-54	50%	54%	47%	0%	50%	0%	40%	56%	63%	51%	54%	100%	0%	62%	56%	43%	45%	52%	58%
55+	37%	49%	27%	0%	0%	37%	30%	38%	47%	38%	38%	100%	0%	44%	30%	30%	26%	40%	41%



NATURAL RESOURCES AND THE ECONOMY

Large majorities of Michigan voters agree with an array of statements regarding natural resources and the economy. In particular, respondents are most likely to agree that Michigan's natural resources are extremely important to the State's economy and that they are one of the State's greatest assets. The only statement that a majority did not agree with is that when someone retires in their community, it is difficult to find someone to take their job.



T2B = the sum of the two most positive options

B2B = the sum of the two most negative options



NATURAL RESOURCES AND THE ECONOMY

Details are provided below for how agreement with each statement breaks down across demographics and political views.

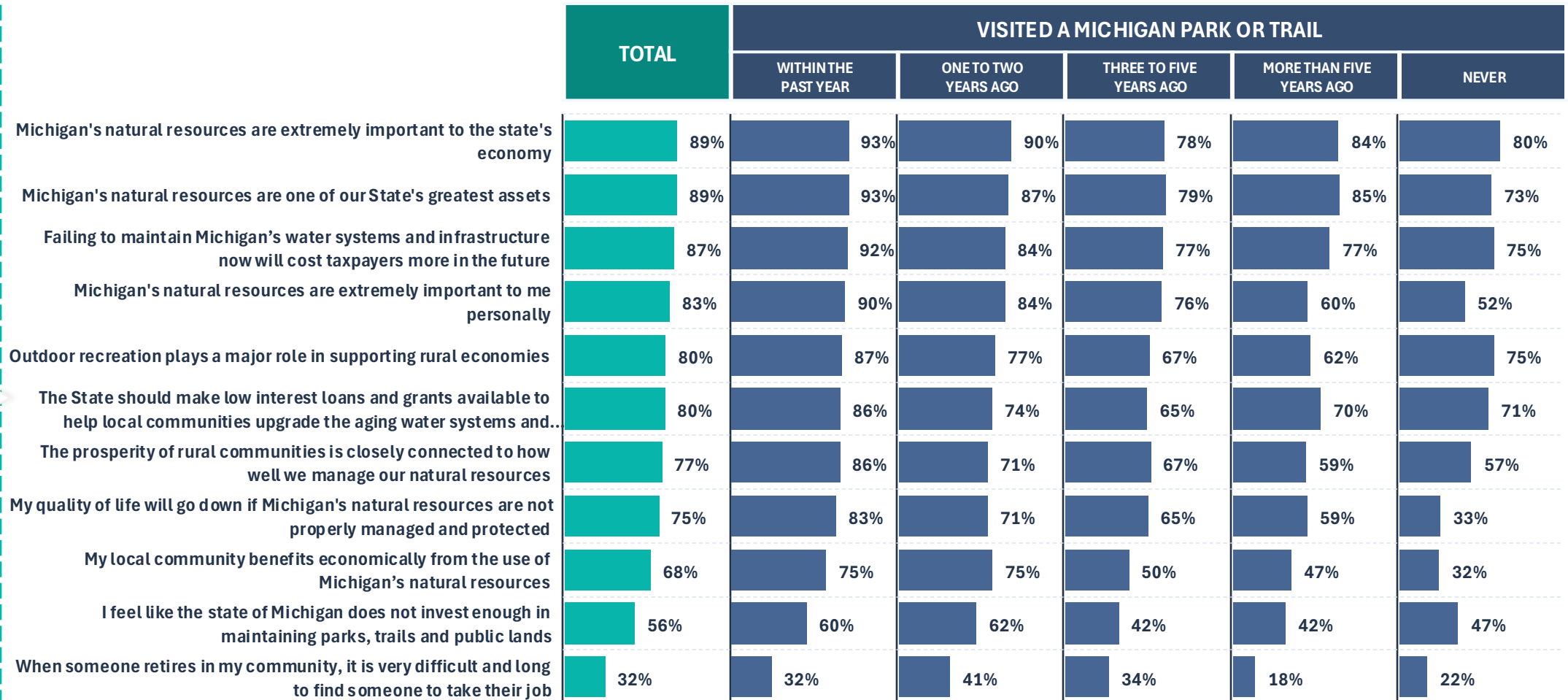
T2B	TOTAL	GENDER		AGE			URBANICITY			VISITED		HUNT OR FISH		POLITICAL AFFILIATION			IDEOLOGY		
	TOTAL	Male	Female	18-34	35-54	55+	Urban	Suburban	Rural	Park/Trail	Lakes	Yes	No	Rep	Ind	Dem	Liberal	Moderate	Cons
NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS	1021	463	558	248	366	407	433	436	152	990	967	478	543	322	232	453	277	464	246
Michigan's natural resources are extremely important to the state's economy	89%	91%	88%	85%	87%	94%	88%	90%	91%	90%	90%	91%	88%	89%	84%	93%	88%	93%	89%
Michigan's natural resources are one of our State's greatest assets	89%	91%	87%	86%	85%	94%	87%	90%	92%	89%	90%	90%	88%	91%	85%	90%	87%	87%	94%
Failing to maintain Michigan's water systems and infrastructure now will cost taxpayers more ...	87%	87%	87%	80%	85%	92%	85%	88%	90%	87%	88%	88%	86%	86%	88%	89%	87%	88%	89%
Michigan's natural resources are extremely important to me personally	83%	84%	83%	87%	79%	85%	84%	81%	87%	84%	84%	90%	77%	84%	77%	87%	89%	86%	81%
Outdoor recreation plays a major role in supporting rural economies	80%	82%	78%	80%	78%	83%	78%	80%	87%	80%	81%	85%	76%	82%	71%	82%	81%	85%	78%
The State should make low interest loans and grants available to help local communities upgr ...	80%	81%	78%	80%	76%	82%	81%	78%	78%	80%	80%	83%	76%	78%	72%	85%	86%	87%	73%
The prosperity of rural communities is closely connected to how well we manage our natural r ...	77%	80%	74%	82%	72%	79%	79%	76%	78%	78%	79%	81%	74%	82%	69%	79%	81%	80%	76%
My quality of life will go down if Michigan's natural resources are not properly managed and ...	75%	77%	72%	81%	73%	73%	76%	74%	74%	76%	75%	78%	71%	72%	73%	78%	78%	75%	74%
My local community benefits economically from the use of Michigan's natural resources	68%	71%	66%	79%	67%	63%	69%	67%	70%	69%	69%	77%	60%	67%	58%	74%	75%	72%	65%
I feel like the state of Michigan does not invest enough in maintaining parks, trails and pu ...	56%	57%	55%	64%	63%	46%	57%	56%	54%	56%	56%	62%	50%	56%	58%	55%	56%	61%	55%
When someone retires in my community, it is very difficult and long to find someone to take ...	32%	34%	30%	51%	34%	20%	38%	26%	33%	32%	32%	39%	25%	35%	18%	37%	37%	34%	29%

T2B = the sum of the two most positive options
B2B = the sum of the two most negative options



NATURAL RESOURCES AND THE ECONOMY BY PARK/TRAIL VISITORS

Looking further into the data, we see that those who have visited a park or trail in the past year are significantly more likely to agree with this series of statements (with the exception of the statement that it is difficult to find workers to replace those who retire). Likewise, those who have never visited a park or trail are significantly less likely to agree with any of the statements – in particular the statements that natural resources are important to them personally, that their quality of life will go down if Michigan’s natural resources are not protected, and that their local community benefits economically from natural resources.



T2B = the sum of the two most positive options



PRIORITIZE PROTECTING MICHIGAN’S NATURAL RESOURCES

Almost all Michigan voters see protecting Michigan’s natural resources as a priority for State leaders. 36% consider it a top priority. This holds regardless of political party, gender or age.

■ A top priority for state leaders ■ One of several important priorities ■ A lower priority ■ Not a priority **T2B** **B2B**



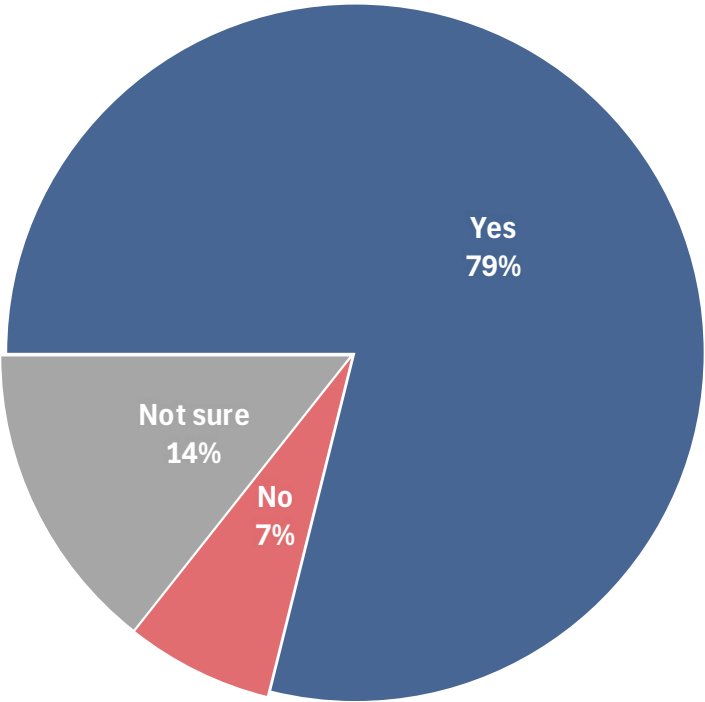
T2B = the sum of the two most positive options
B2B = the sum of the two most negative options

	TOTAL	GENDER		AGE			URBANICITY			VISITED		HUNT OR FISH		POLITICAL AFFILIATION			IDEOLOGY		
	TOTAL	Male	Female	18-34	35-54	55+	Urban	Suburban	Rural	Park/Trail	Lakes	Yes	No	Rep	Ind	Dem	Liberal	Moderate	Cons
NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS	1021	463	558	248	366	407	433	436	152	990	967	478	543	322	232	453	277	464	246
T2B	97%	98%	96%	95%	97%	98%	97%	97%	97%	97%	97%	96%	98%	96%	96%	99%	98%	98%	97%
B2B	3%	2%	4%	5%	3%	2%	3%	3%	3%	3%	3%	4%	2%	4%	4%	1%	2%	2%	3%



STATE FUNDS USAGE

79% of voters support using State funds to strengthen rural communities if it leads to long-term economic growth. Democrats, younger people and men are somewhat more likely to agree with this position.

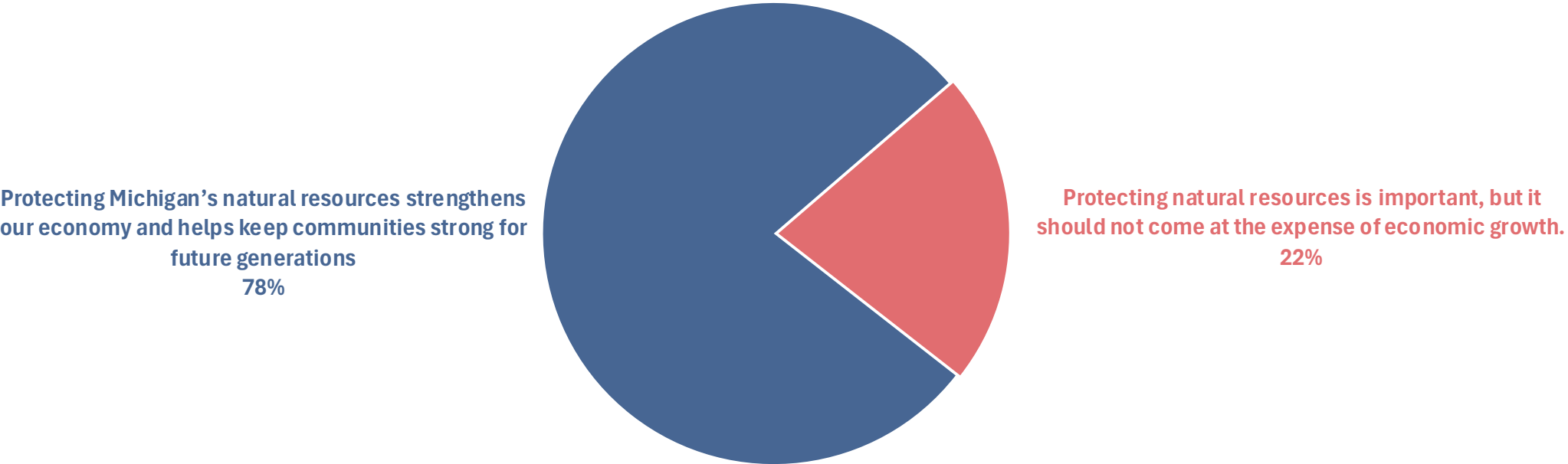


	TOTAL	GENDER		AGE			URBANICITY			VISITED		HUNT OR FISH		POLITICAL AFFILIATION			IDEOLOGY		
	TOTAL	Male	Female	18-34	35-54	55+	Urban	Suburban	Rural	Park/Trail	Lakes	Yes	No	Rep	Ind	Dem	Liberal	Moderate	Cons
NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS	1021	463	558	248	366	407	433	436	152	990	967	478	543	322	232	453	277	464	246
Yes	79%	83%	75%	83%	79%	76%	80%	77%	81%	79%	80%	85%	73%	79%	71%	84%	85%	82%	75%
No	7%	6%	7%	8%	7%	7%	8%	7%	2%	7%	7%	6%	8%	5%	10%	5%	8%	4%	7%
Not sure	14%	11%	18%	9%	15%	17%	13%	15%	17%	14%	13%	9%	20%	16%	19%	10%	7%	13%	18%



PROTECTING NATURAL RESOURCES VS. ECONOMIC GROWTH

A large majority also feel that protecting Michigan’s natural resources strengthens the economy and helps keep communities strong for future generations. Only 22% feel that it should not come at the expense of economic growth. There are only slight differences in this view between Republicans and Democrats. Rural voters are less likely than urban or suburban voters to say that protecting natural resources should not come at the expense of economic growth.



	TOTAL	GENDER		AGE			URBANICITY			VISITED		HUNT OR FISH		POLITICAL AFFILIATION			IDEOLOGY		
	TOTAL	Male	Female	18-34	35-54	55+	Urban	Suburban	Rural	Park/Trail	Lakes	Yes	No	Rep	Ind	Dem	Liberal	Moderate	Cons
NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS	1021	463	558	248	366	407	433	436	152	990	967	478	543	322	232	453	277	464	246
Protecting Michigan’s natural resources s ...	78%	77%	79%	71%	79%	81%	77%	76%	87%	78%	79%	78%	78%	77%	78%	81%	84%	79%	75%
Protecting natural resources is important ...	22%	23%	21%	29%	21%	19%	23%	24%	13%	22%	21%	22%	22%	23%	22%	19%	16%	21%	25%



SUPPORT OF INCREASED STATE INVESTMENT

84% of Michigan voters support increased State investment to protect natural resources and clean water.

Strongly support Somewhat support Neutral - neither support, nor oppose Somewhat oppose Strongly oppose

T2B B2B



T2B = the sum of the two most positive options
B2B = the sum of the two most negative options

	TOTAL	GENDER		AGE			URBANICITY			VISITED		HUNT OR FISH		POLITICAL AFFILIATION			IDEOLOGY		
	TOTAL	Male	Female	18-34	35-54	55+	Urban	Suburban	Rural	Park/Trail	Lakes	Yes	No	Rep	Ind	Dem	Liberal	Moderate	Cons
NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS	1021	463	558	248	366	407	433	436	152	990	967	478	543	322	232	453	277	464	246
T2B	84%	88%	81%	84%	84%	85%	84%	84%	86%	85%	85%	87%	82%	83%	78%	91%	91%	87%	82%
B2B	1%	1%	2%	2%	1%	2%	1%	2%	0%	1%	1%	1%	2%	2%	2%	0%	1%	1%	2%



SUPPORT OF CANDIDATE WHO PRIORITIZES PROTECTING NATURAL RESOURCES

87% of voters would be more likely to support a candidate for Governor who prioritizes protecting Michigan’s natural resources and rural prosperity. 44% would be much more likely to support such a candidate. Republicans, Democrats and Independent voters hold nearly identical views.

■ Much more likely ■ Somewhat more likely ■ No difference ■ Less likely **T2B** **B2B**



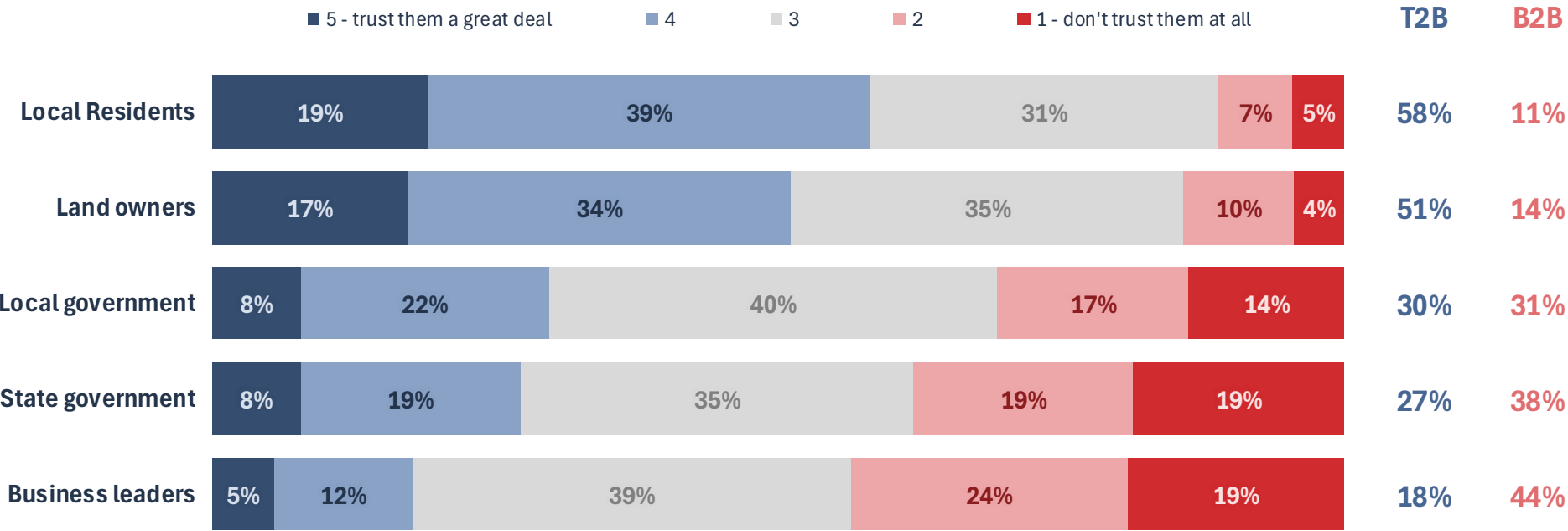
T2B = the sum of the two most positive options
B2B = the sum of the two most negative options

	TOTAL	GENDER		AGE			URBANICITY			VISITED		HUNT OR FISH		POLITICAL AFFILIATION			IDEOLOGY		
	TOTAL	Male	Female	18-34	35-54	55+	Urban	Suburban	Rural	Park/Trail	Lakes	Yes	No	Rep	Ind	Dem	Liberal	Moderate	Cons
NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS	1021	463	558	248	366	407	433	436	152	990	967	478	543	322	232	453	277	464	246
T2B	87%	90%	85%	91%	87%	85%	89%	87%	84%	87%	89%	93%	82%	86%	85%	90%	89%	88%	86%
B2B	1%	1%	1%	2%	1%	1%	1%	1%	0%	1%	1%	0%	2%	2%	1%	1%	0%	1%	1%



TRUST

Respondents are most likely to say they trust local residents (58%) and land owners (51%) to make decisions about natural resources. They are least likely to trust business leaders (44% do not trust them). Similarly, fewer voters trust State government (27%) than say they do not trust them (38%) to make decisions about and protect natural resources. Rural residents are much more likely to say they trust land owners than those in urban or suburban areas.



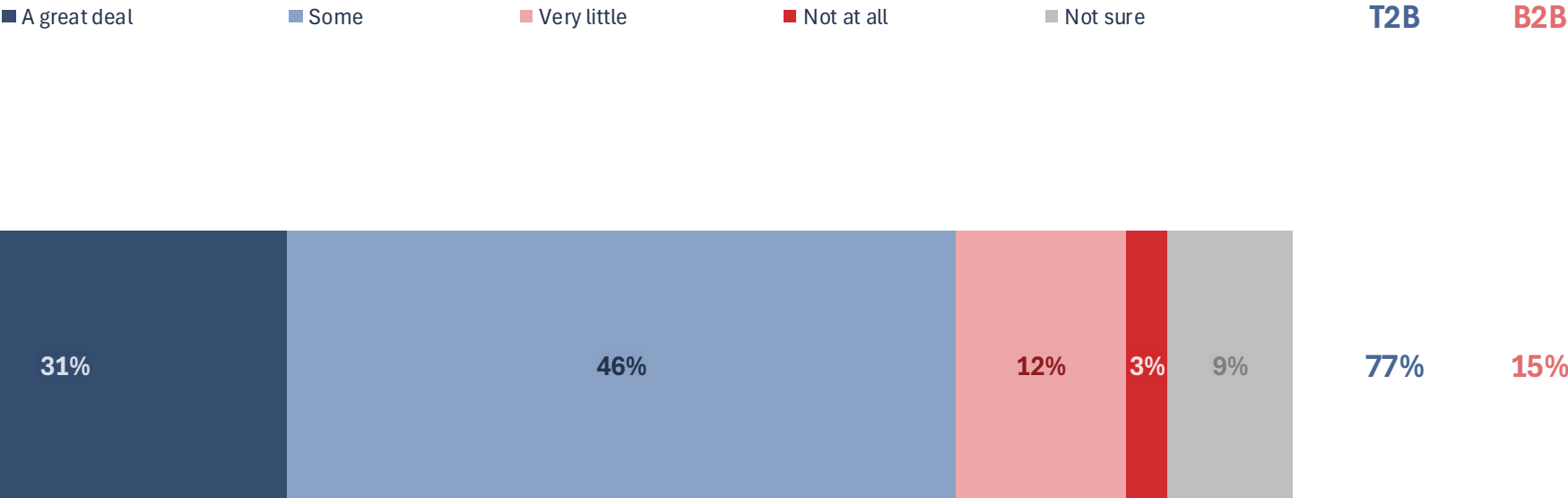
T2B = the sum of the two most positive options
B2B = the sum of the two most negative options

T2B	TOTAL	GENDER		AGE			URBANICITY			VISITED		HUNT OR FISH		POLITICAL AFFILIATION			IDEOLOGY		
	TOTAL	Male	Female	18-34	35-54	55+	Urban	Suburban	Rural	Park/Trail	Lakes	Yes	No	Rep	Ind	Dem	Liberal	Moderate	Cons
NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS	1021	463	558	248	366	407	433	436	152	990	967	478	543	322	232	453	277	464	246
Local Residents	58%	61%	56%	61%	57%	58%	58%	59%	58%	59%	59%	66%	51%	63%	52%	57%	54%	62%	62%
Land owners	51%	53%	50%	49%	51%	53%	46%	52%	61%	52%	52%	56%	47%	60%	43%	48%	48%	52%	56%
Local government	30%	33%	27%	33%	25%	32%	31%	29%	29%	30%	30%	29%	31%	25%	27%	39%	37%	34%	24%
State government	27%	29%	26%	31%	21%	30%	32%	24%	25%	27%	27%	26%	29%	19%	13%	43%	40%	30%	19%
Business leaders	18%	20%	15%	22%	15%	17%	19%	15%	21%	18%	18%	22%	14%	22%	10%	19%	18%	19%	18%



SUPPORT OF CREATING A DEDICATED STATE FUNDING SOURCE FOR MAINTAINING AND MANAGING NATURAL RESOURCES

77% of Michigan voters would support creating a new, dedicated state funding source for maintaining and managing natural resources that contribute to rural economic prosperity. 31% give this idea a great deal of support. Only 15% are opposed to the idea, with Independents most likely to be opposed (21%).



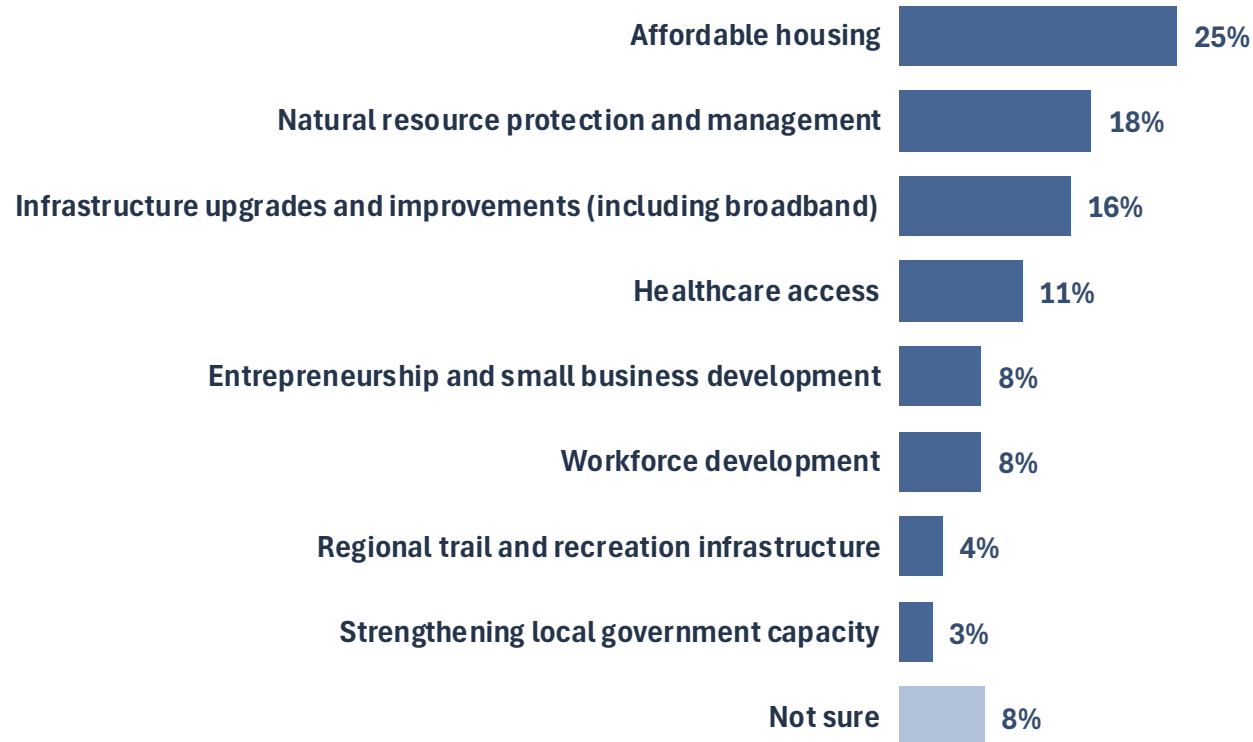
T2B = the sum of the two most positive options
B2B = the sum of the two most negative options

	TOTAL	GENDER		AGE			URBANICITY			VISITED		HUNT OR FISH		POLITICAL AFFILIATION			IDEOLOGY		
	TOTAL	Male	Female	18-34	35-54	55+	Urban	Suburban	Rural	Park/Trail	Lakes	Yes	No	Rep	Ind	Dem	Liberal	Moderate	Cons
NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS	1021	463	558	248	366	407	433	436	152	990	967	478	543	322	232	453	277	464	246
T2B	77%	78%	76%	79%	80%	73%	78%	75%	77%	77%	78%	79%	74%	75%	66%	85%	85%	81%	71%
B2B	15%	15%	14%	17%	13%	15%	14%	17%	10%	15%	14%	14%	16%	14%	21%	11%	12%	14%	17%



INVESTMENT IMPACT

In terms of rural prosperity in their area, voters are most focused on affordable housing, with 25% saying it would have the greatest impact. Natural resource protection and management follows at 18%, and infrastructure upgrades/improvements at 16%. Rural voters place somewhat more emphasis on affordable housing, while urban voters give greater weight to infrastructure upgrades and improvements.



TOP 3	TOTAL	GENDER		AGE			URBANICITY			VISITED		HUNT OR FISH		POLITICAL AFFILIATION			IDEOLOGY		
	TOTAL	Male	Female	18-34	35-54	55+	Urban	Suburban	Rural	Park/Trail	Lakes	Yes	No	Rep	Ind	Dem	Liberal	Moderate	Cons
NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS	1021	463	558	248	366	407	433	436	152	990	967	478	543	322	232	453	277	464	246
Affordable housing	25%	22%	28%	24%	30%	23%	23%	27%	29%	26%	25%	26%	25%	20%	27%	28%	30%	26%	21%
Natural resource protection and management	18%	17%	18%	19%	16%	19%	17%	17%	20%	18%	18%	19%	17%	18%	17%	17%	19%	17%	17%
Infrastructure upgrades and improvements ...	16%	18%	14%	11%	15%	19%	16%	17%	13%	15%	16%	15%	17%	20%	12%	14%	13%	17%	17%

Investment Impact: If you had to choose, which investment would have the greatest impact on rural prosperity in your area?



Marketing Resource Group

Integrating Collaboration, Results

SAMPLE STRUCTURE





POLITICAL STANDING

40% of respondents identify as conservative and 22% liberal, with 33% moderate or middle of the road. 5% do not know how to classify themselves.

Extremely conservative

Conservative

Slightly conservative

Moderate Or Middle of the Road

Slightly liberal

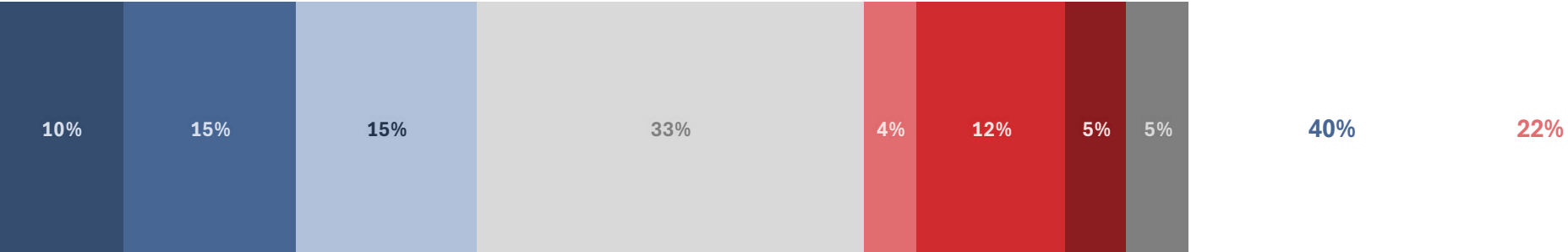
Liberal

Extremely liberal

None of the above

CONSERVATIVE

LIBERAL



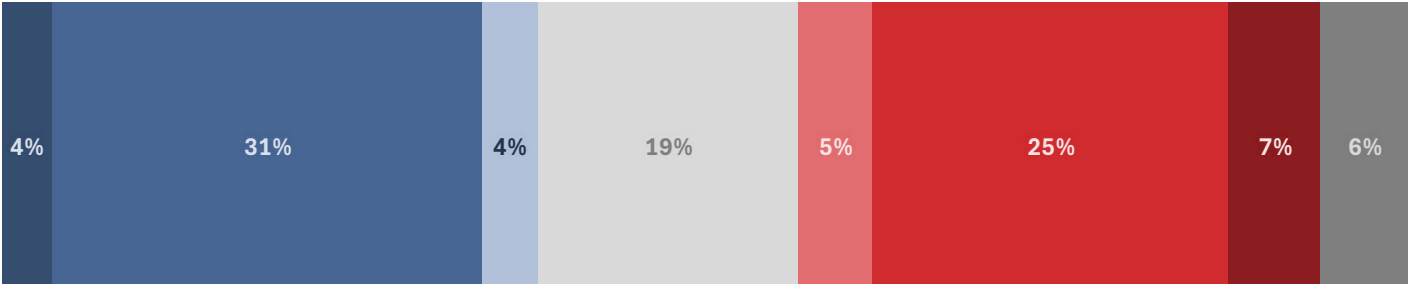
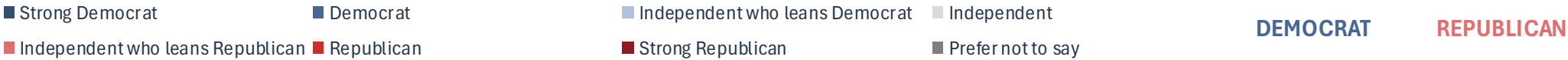
	TOTAL	GENDER		AGE			URBANICITY			VISITED		HUNT OR FISH		POLITICAL AFFILIATION			IDEOLOGY		
	TOTAL	Male	Female	18-34	35-54	55+	Urban	Suburban	Rural	Park/Trail	Lakes	Yes	No	Rep	Ind	Dem	Liberal	Moderate	Cons
NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS	1021	463	558	248	366	407	433	436	152	990	967	478	543	322	232	453	277	464	246
CONSERVATIVE	40%	43%	37%	32%	37%	48%	34%	41%	52%	40%	41%	43%	37%	69%	44%	16%	0%	0%	100%
LIBERAL	22%	22%	22%	28%	22%	19%	25%	21%	16%	22%	21%	19%	25%	7%	13%	45%	100%	0%	0%

Ideology: And thinking about your views toward politics and government, would you say you are ...



PARTY AFFILIATION

38% of respondents identify as Democrats, 37% as Republicans, and 19% fully Independent. 6% prefer not to say.



	TOTAL	GENDER		AGE			URBANICITY			VISITED		HUNT OR FISH		POLITICAL AFFILIATION			IDEOLOGY		
	TOTAL	Male	Female	18-34	35-54	55+	Urban	Suburban	Rural	Park/Trail	Lakes	Yes	No	Rep	Ind	Dem	Liberal	Moderate	Cons
NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS	1021	463	558	248	366	407	433	436	152	990	967	478	543	322	232	453	277	464	246
Democrat	38%	36%	40%	45%	38%	34%	43%	36%	31%	38%	38%	33%	43%	0%	0%	100%	77%	44%	16%
Independent	19%	16%	21%	18%	21%	17%	19%	18%	19%	18%	19%	18%	19%	0%	100%	0%	11%	21%	21%
Republican	37%	42%	32%	34%	31%	44%	32%	37%	49%	38%	38%	43%	31%	100%	0%	0%	12%	26%	64%



SAMPLE STRUCTURE

