

2015 Colorado Planning & Management Region Report

Region 11 – Garfield, Mesa, Moffat, Rio Blanco and Routt Counties

INTRODUCTION

Region 11 is located in Northwest Colorado, and is made up of the Counties of Mesa, Garfield, Moffat, Rio Blanco, and Routt. The region is a large geographic area with a relatively sparse population. Estimated 2014 population for the region is 249,269, a slight increase since 2010. Growth has continued to be sluggish in the region, which has taken longer than other parts of the state to recover from the downturn. New energy development is not occurring in the region to the extent that it is in northeast Colorado; however, there is a slight uptick in drilling activity, mostly in Garfield County, which is expected to have a small but positive impact. Colorado Mesa University continues to be a major economic and population driver for the region.

County	Census 2010	July 2014	% Change
Garfield	56,389	57,548	2.49%
Mesa	146,723	148,348	0.84%
Moffat	13,795	12,870	-6.78%
Rio Blanco	6,666	6,607	-0.15%
Routt	23,509	23,896	1.96%
Colorado	5,029,196	5,353,471	6.45%

Source: State Demography Office

JOBS AND THE ECONOMY

The region is characterized by a diverse economy, with mineral extraction and energy development, health care, and transportation being the key industries. Agriculture is also a main economic activity in the region, and is also diverse. The main agricultural activities in Region 11 include cattle and sheep ranching, grazing, and hay production, with fruit and wine production in Mesa County, along with limited cattle feeding and feed corn production, mostly in western Mesa County. Traditional base industries are supplemented by a robust tourism and recreation industry.

Energy development takes place in all of the region's counties, but is concentrated mainly in Garfield, Moffat, and Rio Blanco Counties. It consists of oil production in Rio Blanco County, natural gas drilling in Garfield, Mesa, and Moffat counties. Coal mining is a major industry in Moffat and Rio Blanco Counties. These mines feed electrical generation plants in Moffat and Routt counties, and in eastern Utah. Oil shale remains a large potential industry, but various factors have slowed oil shale research and development in Colorado over the past year, though some work is still being pursued.

Agriculture, predominantly cattle ranching and hay production, is strongest in Moffat and Rio Blanco Counties. Tourism is the main economic driver in Routt County, and remains significant in Mesa and south eastern Garfield Counties as well. Government services are also a major employer in all counties except Rio Blanco.

Grand Junction is the largest urban area in the region, and is the largest city between Denver and Salt Lake City, UT. As such, it serves as a regional hub for transportation, commerce, manufacturing, higher education, and health care. Grand Junction Regional Airport and St. Mary's Hospital are the largest facilities of their kind between Denver and Salt Lake City. Colorado Mesa University continues to expand and grow, and bring with it increased economic opportunities for the region. Manufacturing is an increasingly important industry in Mesa County, with inroads being made into the aerospace industry. A recently approved oil drilling project near Whitewater could see positive economic impacts as well. In addition, a new world-class shooting facility being planned for Cameo will bring benefits, mostly to the Palisade area.

Retirees also continue to make up a significant portion of the population, particularly in Mesa County. The Area Agency on Aging provides many services to seniors in the region.

The region's unemployment rate continues to drop slightly, with all counties seeing a modest reduction in unemployment to the lowest rate in the last two years. Routt County has the highest rate of unemployment in the region; Moffat and Garfield counties have the lowest.

AGRICULTURE

Agriculture is a significant industry and economic driver in Region 11. It is also a diverse industry, varying from traditional cattle and sheep ranching and grazing in all counties, predominantly Rio Blanco, Moffat, and Garfield, to fruit orchards and vineyards in parts of Mesa County. Hay is grown in every county in the region, and a limited amount of corn production and cattle feeding are carried out in western Mesa County.

CLEAN ENERGY

Region 11's commitment to clean energy development continues with various initiatives being undertaken. Garfield County began offering homeowners low interest loans for home energy efficiency improvements, through the "Garfield Clean Energy Revolving Loan" program. As well, Region 11 Counties continue with efforts towards establishing alternative energy fleets, and expanding the use of natural gas as a transportation fuel, including the development of infrastructure, although this has encountered some setbacks in the past year, with the closing of a CNG station in Rifle. Colorado Mesa University is also involved in various clean energy initiatives. Other clean energy programs include Routt County's "Vision 2030".

GOALS FOR THE UPCOMING YEAR

Garfield County

1. Encourage Growth of Existing Business and Industry
2. Create New Jobs

3. Diversify Garfield County's Economic Base
4. Revitalize downtown and Main street areas in municipalities

Mesa County

1. Become an Epicenter for Energy Innovation
2. Elevate the Community Profile
3. Support the Growth of Existing Business
4. Support growth of Colorado Mesa University, and GJ Regional Airport
5. Support activities of Business Incubator

Moffat County

1. Increase the number, size, and profitability of local businesses to maintain and create jobs.
2. Sustain or increase current levels of production in core (primary) industries to maintain or create jobs.
3. Ensure current generation broadband and cellular technology availability.
4. Ensure long-term viability of energy sector jobs and businesses to maintain and create jobs.
5. Ensure local control is recognized and honored by state and regional entities.

Rio Blanco County

1. Streamline regulatory and permitting processes, remove overlapping regulations, improve cross jurisdictional communication, improving "customer service" in all facets of government, customizing regulations to match the "rural" setting rather than "urban" setting
2. Create a mechanism to keep more Severance Tax and Federal Mineral Lease dollars in Rio Blanco County where the majority of the impacts from resource extraction occur
3. Provide more affordable housing options and entice the workforce to remain in Rio Blanco County
4. Diversify our economic base to reduce the boom/bust cycle, encourage business growth, create new jobs, reduce the amount of sales tax leakage into neighboring communities, allow businesses more access to capital and reduce the cost of doing business in our state
5. Allow more dollars for K-12 education

Routt County

1. Expansion of educational opportunities
2. Expansion of cellular coverage within the county
3. Expansion of broadband capabilities
4. Expand tourism by better utilization of existing resources
5. To maintain coal production to within 5% of the 5-year average 2006-2010
6. Increase energy efficiency