

2017 Colorado Planning & Management Region Report

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

INTRODUCTION

Region 11 is 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 2016 population for the region is 253,979 - a 0.5% annual 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.

Population:

County	Census 2010	July 2016	Annual Change
Garfield	56,389	58,984	0.8%
Mesa	146,723	150,731	0.5%
Moffat	13,795	13,088	-0.9%
Rio Blanco	6,666	6,497	-0.4%
Routt	23,509	24,679	0.8%
Region 11	247,082	253,979	0.5%
Colorado	5,029,196	5,538,180	1.6%

Source: State Demography Office

JOBS AND THE ECONOMY

The region is characterized by a diverse economy, with mineral extraction/energy development, health care, and transportation being the key industries. Agriculture is also a main economic activity in the region. 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.

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. Energy development is concentrated mainly in Garfield, Moffat, Routt, and Rio Blanco Counties. It consists of oil and natural gas production in Rio Blanco County, and natural gas drilling in Garfield, Mesa, and Moffat counties. Coal mining is a major industry in Routt, Moffat, and Rio Blanco Counties. These mines feed electrical generation plants in Moffat and Routt counties, as well as eastern Utah.

Agriculture, predominantly cattle and sheep ranching along with 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.

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 Medical Center](#) are the largest facilities of their kind between Denver and Salt Lake City. Grand Junction City Council recently approved a \$30 million business park and recreational development along the Colorado River and its first business, [Bonsai Design](#), is slated to move in next year. Grand Junction Regional airport is working to expand air service to major hubs and has been successful in the establishment of a non-stop, weekly flight to Los Angeles, CA on a trial basis during the summer of 2017.

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 and outdoor recreation manufacturing. A recently approved oil drilling project near Whitewater could see positive economic impacts as well. Palisade purchased 1,800 acres at the former Cameo power plant site for the development of a new world class shooting facility. Gov. Hickenlooper took the first shot at the outdoor shooting range in May 2017 and it is expected to be fully operational this fall.

Mesa County and the Grand Junction Economic Partnership have been successful in leveraging the [Rural Jump-Start tax credit program](#) passed by the General Assembly in 2015. The community has identified eight projects that have been qualified for the tax credit program, which will create over 600 new jobs by year 2020. Moffat County and the City of Craig, with support from Colorado Northwestern Community College and Craig/Moffat Economic Development Partnership, became Rural Jump-Start communities in first quarter 2017 and are currently seeking qualified businesses to take advantage of the program. Routt County was granted an exception on August 17, 2017, to participate in the program, albeit with the exclusion of Steamboat Springs from the program.

The City of Rifle, located in Garfield County, is home to the [Center of Excellence for Advanced Technology Aerial Firefighting \(CoE\)](#). The community is working regionally with the CoE, higher education resources, and regional economic development resources to identify opportunities to grow and expand the role of firefighting throughout the region. Natural Soda produces bicarbonate of soda in Rio Blanco County, with the load out facility in Rifle, and is in the process of doubling production of that resource. Demand for this product is international in nature and is expected to continue to grow substantially over the next several years.

Rio Blanco County's "[Building a Prosperous Rio Blanco County Plan](#)" focuses on strategies to benefit current businesses in the county and recruit new businesses. Broadband technology will infinitely increase the speed of data transfer for businesses and residents. The Rio Blanco County Broadband system includes double fiber rings to create redundancy and reliability, and are strategically located to support business. Currently, fiber is installed in Meeker and Rangely with many customers experiencing reliable service. It is expected the full broadband implementation providing service to rural citizens will be completed within 2017. The Towns of Rangely and Meeker offer grant programs to help existing businesses. Grants are available to assist with building improvements or site enhancements and business expansion. The [Meeker Adventure Center](#) has the potential to position Meeker as a premier destination for outdoor adventures like ATV/OHV riding, fishing, hunting, hiking, wildlife watching, horseback riding, and backpacking. On the manufacturing front, the current existence of bowstring manufacturers offers synergy with other shooting sports manufacturing, such as manufacturing bow-

limbs, archery sights and protective gear, specialty rifles, and new products being developed, establishing Meeker as a location for a successful Shooting Sport Cluster. Rangely is poised for growth in the aviation sector, capitalizing on the tremendous success of the Colorado Northwestern Community College aviation program.

Health care costs continue to be among the highest in the nation for this region. The rezoning that included all Western Colorado counties, except Mesa County, resulted in slight decreases for “resort” areas and increases in the remainder of the region. Insurance premiums are increasing substantially throughout Western Colorado, essentially negating any relief obtained through the rezoning.

Unemployment Rates:

County	August 2016	August 2017	% Change
Garfield	3.1%	2.1%	-1.0%
Mesa	5.1%	3.0%	-2.1%
Moffat	3.5%	2.3%	-1.2%
Rio Blanco	4.7%	2.8%	-1.8%
Routt	2.5%	1.8%	-0.7%
Colorado	3.2%	2.2%	-1.0%

Source: Labor Market Information

The unemployment rates within the region reflect improved employment prospects throughout the State. Routt (1.8%) and Garfield (2.1%) Counties had a lower unemployment rate than the State (2.2%) between August 2016 and August 2017, while Moffat County’s unemployment rate (2.3%) was nominally higher. Rio Blanco (2.8%) and Mesa (3.0%) Counties had higher unemployment than other counties in the region, but also saw the greatest reduction in unemployment over the year (1.8% and 2.1%, respectively).

AGRICULTURE

Agriculture is a diverse industry in Region 11, ranging from traditional cattle/sheep ranching and grazing in 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. Region 11 Counties continue with efforts toward establishing alternative energy fleets and expanding the use of natural gas as a transportation fuel - including the development of infrastructure. 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. Work with economic development partners to grow existing business and industry, create new jobs and diversify Garfield County's economic base.
2. Revitalize downtown and Main street areas in municipalities.
3. Capitalize on the presence of the Center for Excellence in Aerial Firefighting to develop an industry cluster and continue to expand business in and around the Rifle/Garfield County Airport.
4. Pursue an "all of the above" energy policy, to support clean energy, in particular, solar, while increasing energy extraction on public lands and supporting the Jordan Cove, Oregon CNG export terminal.
5. Expand broadband capabilities.
6. Support educational opportunities, including the Denver University Masters in Social Work program, Colorado Mountain College four-year degrees, and school choice in pre-K through 12th grades.
7. Support the health care industry through senior services, support for the local hospitals and collaboration on lowering regional health insurance costs.
8. Support senior citizens through health care, housing and transportation.
9. Continue the County infrastructure programs, including road and bridge, facilities, fairgrounds, landfill and the Rifle-Garfield County Airport.
10. Collaborate with the other counties in Region 11 to become designated as an Economic Development District

Mesa County

1. Develop a 2030 visioning plan that strategically supports local community initiatives for long-term economic growth and improved quality of life
2. Create a thriving outdoor recreation industry hub, with a focus on populating the new business park in Grand Junction and Fruita's light industrial park with outdoor recreation manufacturers and related businesses
3. Grow the overall manufacturing industry
4. Support infrastructure improvements and talent attraction to grow the West Slope tech community.
5. Develop a Foreign Trade Zone in support of international trade
6. Engage community in Colorado Mesa University growth and expansion to create a true "university town".
7. Support School District 51 on efforts to improve K-12 education in the county.
8. Support GJ Regional Airport efforts to expand and provide more direct destination flights
9. Capitalize on relationships and joint initiatives with the Business Incubator, Grand Junction Chamber and other local/regional economic development partners to grow economic opportunities in Western Colorado.
10. Continue to utilize the "Jump Start" program to facilitate job growth and development of high-tech and advanced manufacturing companies

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.
6. Explore the creation of an incubator to help local manufacturer's and coal company support industries to identify new markets for products.

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 the 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
6. An economic development assessment has been completed in conjunction with Better Cities and Rio Blanco County is working on implementation of the strategic economic diversification action plan which focuses on outdoor recreation and aviation industry growth.
7. Capitalize on unique tourist opportunities, like the Tank in Rangely and the International Hang Gliding competition near Dinosaur National Monument, to market Rio Blanco County across the nation.

Routt County

1. Establish a business retention and expansion program that serves businesses by identifying restraints to business and job growth and then find solutions.
2. Establish a data-driven industry cluster strategy targeting key sectors such as outdoor manufacturing companies, as well as location neutral businesses and employees, among others.
3. Establish a business attraction program that provides businesses looking to relocate to Routt County a full-service liaison that provides data, asset tours, site location support, community introductions and any other support needed to make their relocation decision.
4. Implement a partnership and support program that identifies gaps in business services and then provides in-kind and financial support to organizations that are best positioned to fill the gap and serve our business community.
5. Elevate economic understanding across Routt County with the annual Economic Summit that focuses on critical economic issues: healthcare, workforce, financing, real estate, infrastructure, tax policy, transportation, housing, etc.