

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Latah County Beliefs, Attitudes, and Values:  
A Survey of Latah County Property Owners

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### ***Overview***

*We find little support for the hypothesis that local and absentee property owners in Latah County have different perceptions of the county and its communities. Local and absentee property owners are similar in their beliefs and attitudes about the county as a whole, and no differences exist in the degree of satisfaction property owners have with their communities. Local owners do find community socioeconomic issues more important than absentees and exhibit higher levels of attachment to the county. However, locals and absentees show no difference in support or opposition for a number of resource management and land use scenarios. Property owners tend to lend support to active resource management and the designation of a recreational park on Moscow Mountain, while opposing increasing residential development on agricultural lands and land use regulation as a method for achieving environmental goals.*

### **Objectives**

The inland Northwest continues to undergo demographic and socioeconomic change as exemplified by rapid population growth and residential development in amenity rich regions. Our objective is to describe the beliefs, attitudes, and values of property owners related to three counties in northern Idaho and northeastern Oregon, their landscapes, and communities. In the context of residential development and socioeconomic change in the region, we test the hypothesis that local and absentee property owners have different perceptions of the meanings and significance of the counties. This summary and the associated technical report detail the results from Latah County, Idaho.

### **Methods**

We randomly selected a list of 500 property owners from a sample frame of property tax payers. Property owners were stratified by the zip code on their property tax bill mailing address in order to ensure that an adequate number of local and absentee property owners were contacted. A mail survey was developed and implemented following Dillman's (2000) Tailored Design Method. A total of 212 questionnaires were returned for a response rate of 52% when ineligible property owners and undeliverable questionnaires were factored out of the total sample. A check for non-response bias indicated that 212 respondents are reasonably representative of the overall population of property owners.

### **Results**

Results from the questionnaire were divided into five sections: demographics, the county, communities, natural resource value-orientations, and land use and management scenarios. Demographically, locals and absentees differ only in their life history in Latah County. Locals tend to be year round residents who have spent on average nearly 40 years of their

lives in the County, while half of all absentees have spent less than 15 years in the county and most spend less than one month per year there. Employment, education, income, and political ideology are similar among all locals and absentees. Latah County property owners tend to be well educated with nearly half having completed a 4 year degree, nearly half being employed as professionals or farmers and ranchers, and over half reporting to be at least moderately politically conservative.

In general property owners strongly agree that Latah County embodies meanings of strong communities, traditions, and historical importance. Local property owners, focus on the importance of families, making sacrifices, and the independence embodied by life in Latah County. On average attitudes about the socio-economic state of the County are relatively neutral, while property owners tend to have positive attitudes about the County's natural resource base, specifically scenery, sportsman opportunities, forest health, and the abundance of wild lands. Locals and absentees do differ in their attitudes about the affordability of land and housing in the County. Locals and absentees also tend to differ in their attachment to the county, which was measured on a five item scale of emotional bonding to the County. Locals exhibit significantly higher levels of attachment than absentees. Furthermore, attachment to Latah County is strongly related to length of residence (i.e., people who have lived in Latah County longest, tend to have the highest levels of attachment). This finding is regardless of current place of residence indicating that strong attachments to the County can endure the distances of time and space.

Local and absentee property owners identify with the same communities indicating that there is no community that tends to attract more locals or absentees. One large difference exists in the percentage of absentees who do not identify with any community in the County. While nearly all locals identified a community to which they feel a part, 22% of absentees report that they feel a part of no community. Among those property owners who do identify with a community the presence of wildlife, opportunities for recreation, and other features of the natural setting of communities are consistently rated as the most important traits of communities in the County. While social traits such as opportunities for community involvement, the ability to freely express oneself about community affairs, and local culture generally tend to be less important than the natural setting of the community, locals generally find social features of the community as more important than absentees. Complimenting the importance of the natural setting of communities, all owners tend to be most satisfied with the recreational opportunities near their community, while satisfaction with employment, commerce and community governance is neutral. With few exceptions, locals exhibit higher levels of involvement in all types of community groups, and overall involvement tends to be with groups oriented towards natural resource production and conservation or socio-economic planning and development.

Latah County property owners exhibit a stewardship ethic with regards to their values-orientation towards natural resources. All owners tended to agree with values that support the active management of resources, while simultaneously agreeing with the value of the natural world independent of people and the benefits to both people and the environment that good stewardship can bring. The combination of strong agreement with the active management and intrinsic values of the natural world suggests a stewardship quality in the values of Latah County property owners.

Finally, respondents were asked to rate the likelihood that they would support or oppose specific land use and natural resource management scenarios. The scenarios included increased forest thinning by the USFS under the Healthy Forest Initiative, rapid increases in residential development on productive agricultural ground, the designation of a park/reserve on Moscow Mountain, and increased land use regulations for native Palouse Prairie habitat. No differences between locals and absentees exist for the support or opposition of the scenarios. Generally property owners responded overwhelmingly with support for forest thinning. Residential development on agricultural ground is generally opposed with only 15% of respondents in favor of this kind of development. A park designation is supported more than 2:1. And last, property owners tended to oppose land use regulations. Uncertainty is lowest for the development and thinning scenarios, which is not surprising given the prominence of both topics in Latah County and around the Western US more generally. Responses confirm that active management of natural resources in the County is supported by property owners, while changes in land use and regulation should be approached with measured caution.

### **Conclusion**

We find the need for a more nuanced hypothesis about local and absentee property owners in Latah County. Absentee property owners tend to appear less like second home or recreational property owners and more like local owners who for one reason or another have left Latah County for other places while holding onto their property. Reasons for holding onto property as an absentee owner may be due in part to strong attachments to the area. A more detailed analysis of absentee owners may suggest that absentee owners who are former residents, as exhibited in Latah County, may be more similar to local owners and therefore have fewer impacts on local culture than absentee owners who are recreational or vacation home and property owners. On the other hand, increasing rates of *former resident* absentee owners may not provide the economic opportunities presented by absentee owners who purchase homes or property for vacation or recreational opportunities.

We find that Latah County is perceived as a place of strong communities, families, tradition, and history. Attitudes about the County and its communities tend to be positive and strongest towards its natural amenities and resources, and somewhat neutral towards socio-economic factors. Values towards natural resources reflect a stewardship orientation rather than either the extreme of heavy resource development or strong protectionism, and responses to natural resource management and land use scenarios reflect this stewardship orientation. Demographic and socio-economic change in Latah County will likely continue as the County follows broader regional trends. Understanding the impacts of those changes on the beliefs, attitudes, and values of people tied to the county can help local officials and community leaders to strategize ways to deal with those changes that maintain the basis for the County's sense of place. In doing so, we recommend focusing on the health and sound stewardship of natural resources, and the idea of Latah County as a place of strength for communities and families.

### **Reference**

Dillman, D.A. 2000. Mail and internet surveys: the tailored design method. John Wiley & Sons, New York.