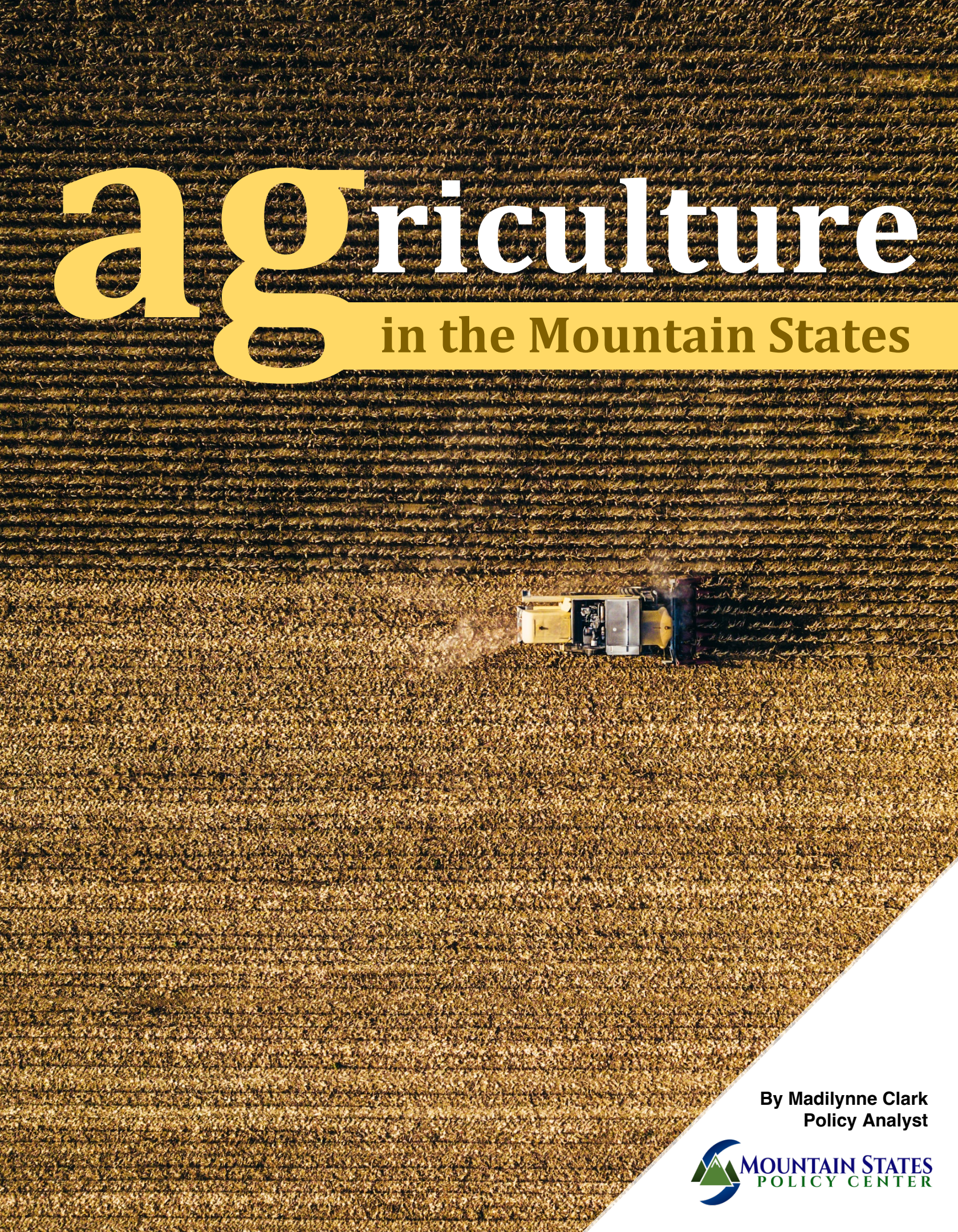
agriculture in the Mountain States



By Madilynne Clark
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Mountain States Policy Center

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KEY INFORMATION COLUMN

Introduction

Agriculture is a pivotal industry to the Mountain States, contributing billions of dollars annually. Jobs and businesses depend on the success of farmers and ranchers, but challenges are increasing for the region's agribusinesses. Inflation is challenging farmers nationally and regulatory pressure is increasing as west coast politicians push for more restrictive laws.

Jobs and businesses depend on the success of farmers and rachers.

Policy ideas championed in California, such as removing the agricultural exemption for overtime pay, have been lightly scrutinized and adopted with fanfare in Washington and Oregon. But these policies hurt farmers and farmworkers alike.[1]

Policymakers championing small farmers and underrepresented workers often forget to talk to these groups at-large – groups they are claiming to protect.[2] Legislators and bureaucrats need to understand agriculture before they add more regulations to the agribusiness industry.

Mountain States Policy Center (MSPC) has written the following report to summarize the composition of the agricultural industry across the five mountain states of Idaho, Montana, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming. The role agribusiness plays in the region is vital and policymakers need to identify the immense network it supports and enable its future success, not suppress its growth with more regulations.

There are 117,100 farms and ranches within the states of Idaho, Montana, Utah, Washington and Wyoming.

Farming Operations

Farms and ranches in the Mountain States are vital to the regional economy. In 2021, Idaho, Montana, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming were home to 117,100 farms and ranches with gross sales from $1,000 to more than one million dollars annually.[3] Of these, 54% are hobby farms grossing less than $10,000 annually and 27% gross between $10,000 and $99,999 per year. Only 19% of farms in the Mountain States gross more than $100,000 per operation. These larger operations account for 80 percent of the 123.6 million acres in production in the region.

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[1] "Farm workers speak out against state overtime ruling," Save Family Farming, https://savefamilyfarming.org/farm-workers-speak-out-against-state-overtime-ruling/.
[2] "Farm overtime hearing was 'disgrace,' says son of lifelong farm worker," Save Family Farming, 13 February 2023, Audacy, https://www.audacy.com/podcast/save-family-farming-show-cfbac/episodes/farm-overtime-hearing-was-disgrace-says-son-of-lifelong-farm-worker-62d5b.
[3] "Farms and Land in Farms 2021 Summary," United States Department of Agriculture National Agricultural Statistics Service, February 2022, https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/Todays_Reports/reports/fnlo0222.pdf.

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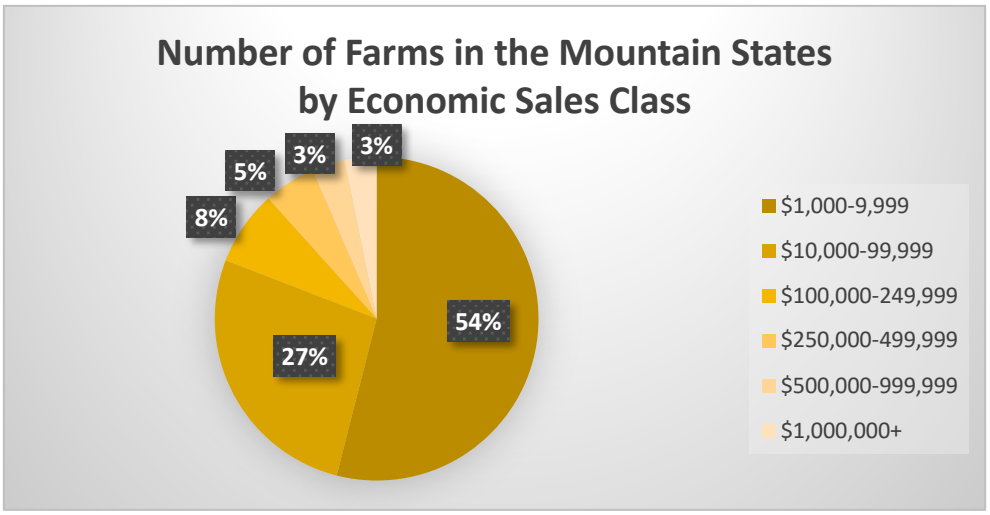
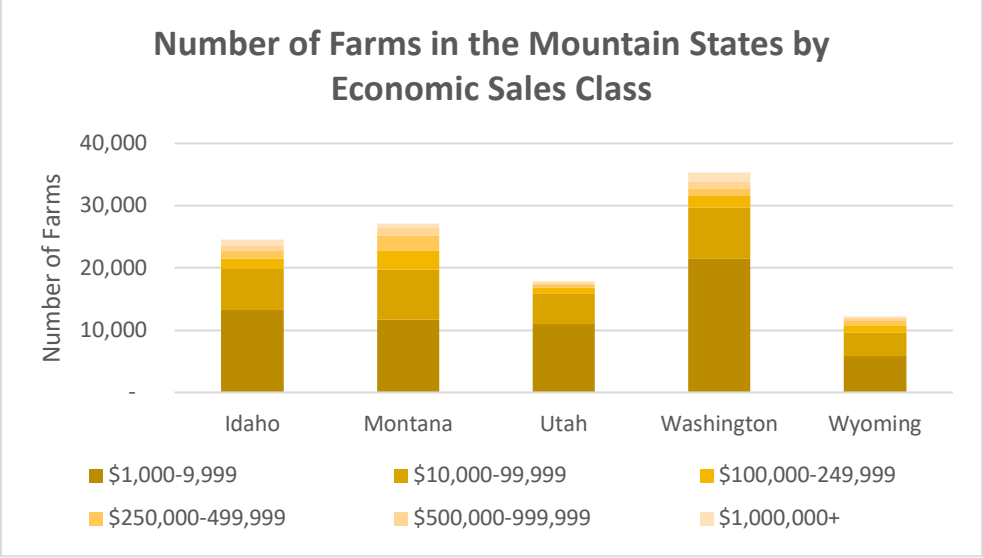
The majority of farming operations in the Mountain States are hobby farms.



Of these states, Washington is home to the most farming operations, followed by Montana and Idaho. Washington's diversified crops, small and local farm focus, and efforts in growing farm-to-market venues has allowed many to enter the farming industry. Following the national trend, the majority of farming operations in the Mountain States are hobby farms, grossing less than $100,000 per year.

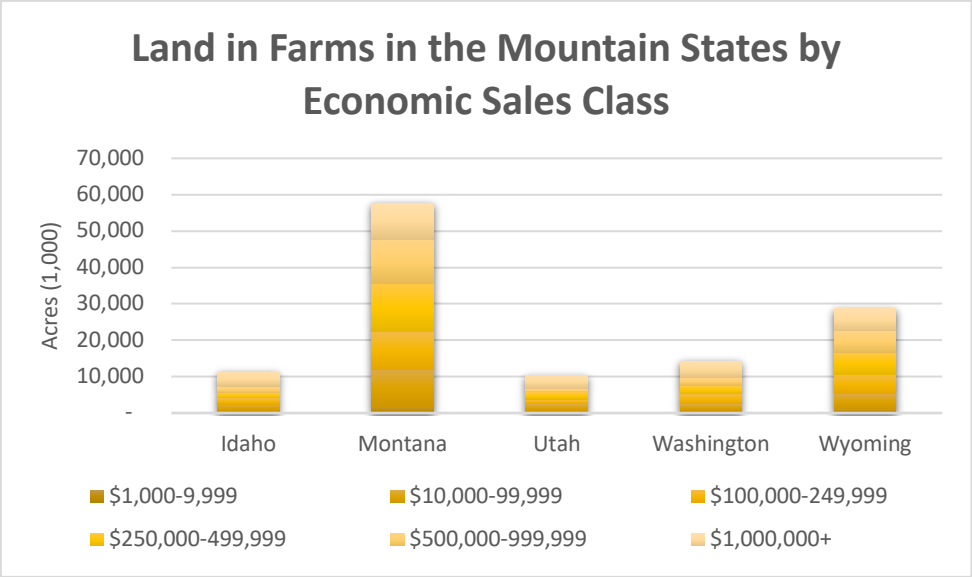
Montana is the largest agricultural state in terms of area farmed.



Montana is the largest agricultural state in terms of area farmed. In 2021, Montana had 57.9 million acres in production and Wyoming followed in second with 29 million. Washington, Idaho, and Utah lagged far behind with 14.5 million, 11.5 million, and 10.7 million, respectively.

KEY INFORMATION COLUMN

Majority of agricultural land in Idaho and Washington is crop production.



Agricultural land has multiple purposes, divided between cropland, pasture (grazing), woodland, and other categories. 'Other' categories typically include land for barns and equipment. The majority of agricultural land in Idaho and Washington is crop production. Wyoming, Utah, and Montana have a majority share of their agricultural land in pasture. On a per acre basis cropland is more valuable, but this is largely an uncontrollable factor. Soil quality, water availability, and regional climate sway most of the pasturing versus crop production decisions.

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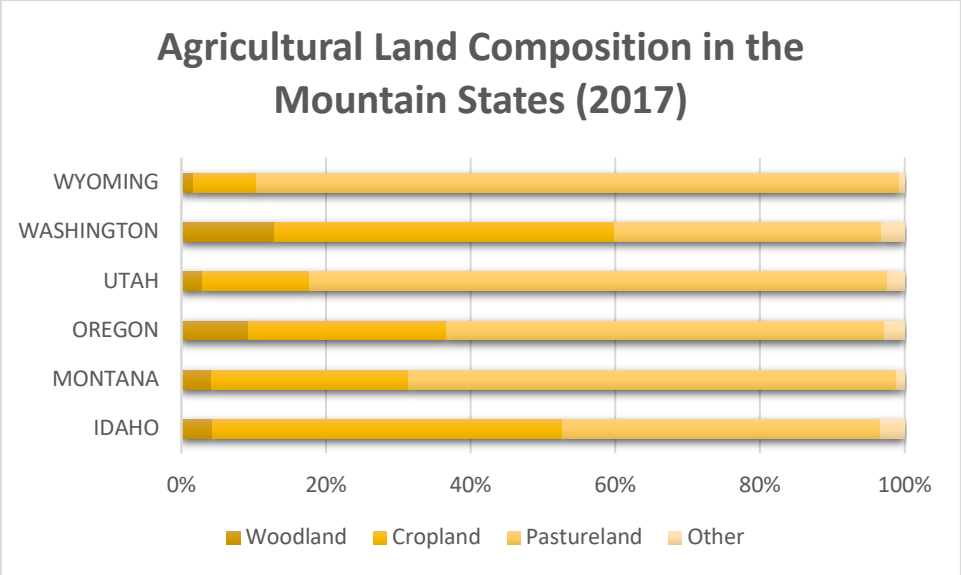

[4]

[4] Quick Stats. United States Department of Agriculture National Agriculture Statistics Service (USDA NASS). https://quickstats.nass.usda.gov/

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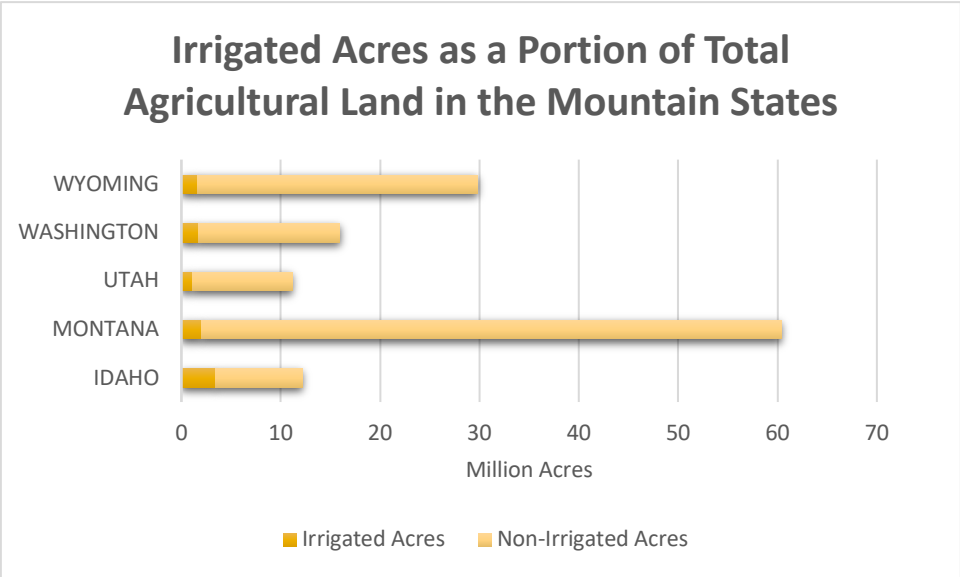
Of the Mountain States, Idaho has the largest percentage of irrigated acres, with 27.9 percent of agricultural land in irrigation systems.



[5]

Idaho has the largest percentage of irrigated acres in the Mountain States.

Agricultural Production

Area farmed and number of operations tell just a portion of the agricultural story in the Mountain States. Climate, crop diversity, and irrigation play powerful roles in expanding agricultural production. Washington and Idaho are the top agricultural production regions in the mountain states. Washington ranks 16th nationally with $11.32 billion in gross farm receipts, Idaho (20th) has $9.07 billion, Montana (30th) with $4.48 billion, Utah (37th) with $2.23 billion, and Wyoming (38th) with $1.94 billion.[6]

Gross receipts from ag production in Idaho top $9 billion. In Montana, gross receipts top $4.48 billion. In Washington, $11.3 billion in gross farm receipts allow it to rank 16th.

[5] "Farms and Land in Farms 2027 Summary," United States Department of Agriculture National Agricultural Statistics Service, February 2018, https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/Todays_Reports/reports/fnlo0218.pdf
[6] Farm Sector Financial Indicators, State Rankings, United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service, https://data.ers.usda.gov/reports.aspx?ID=17839

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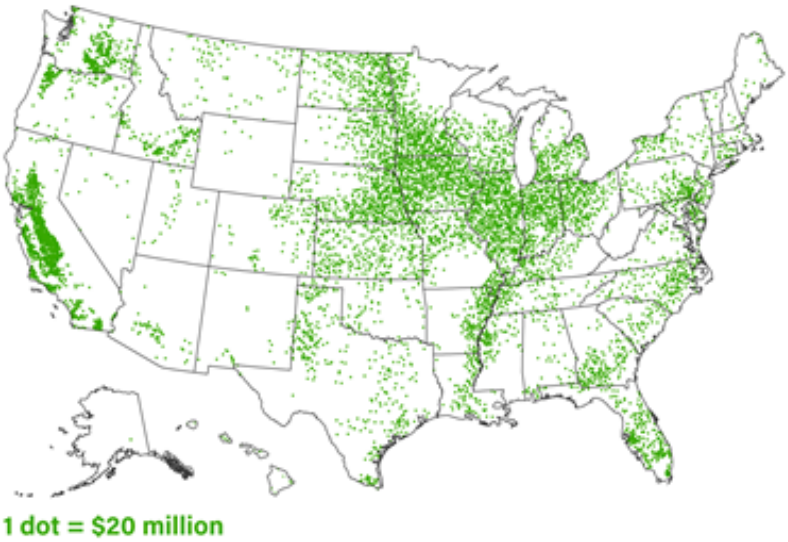
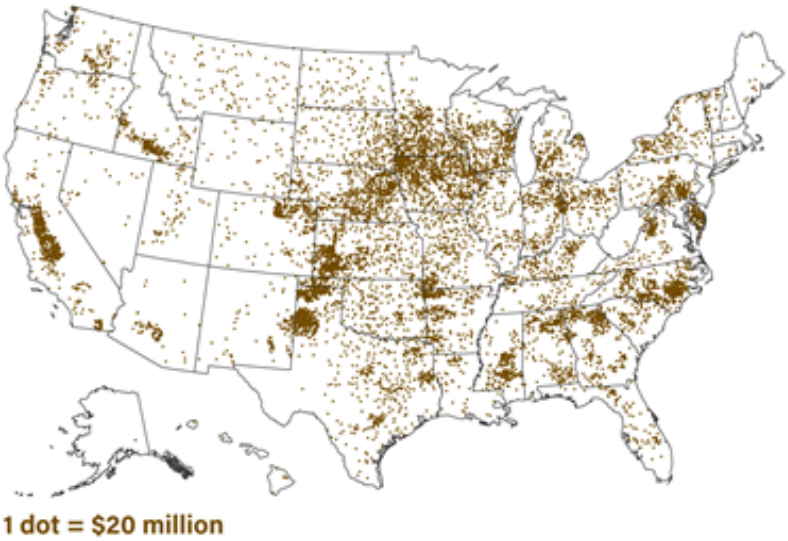
Long summer days in the irrigated regions of southern Idaho and the Columbia Basin of Washington lead to higher crop production value.

Market value of crops sold in 2017



Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from USDA, National Agricultural Statistics Service, 2017 Census of Agriculture.

Market value of livestock, dairy, poultry, and their products sold in 2017



Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from USDA, National Agricultural Statistics Service, 2017 Census of Agriculture.[7]

Long summer days in the irrigated regions of southern Idaho and the Columbia Basin of Washington lead to higher crop production value. Livestock and dairy production are also concentrated in these regions. Montana, Wyoming, and Utah have more dryland acreage, colder

[7] Agricultural Production and Prices, United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service, https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/ag-and-food-statistics-charting-the-essentials/agricultural-production-and-prices/

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regions, and more rangeland pasture, spreading out production value over larger swaths of land.

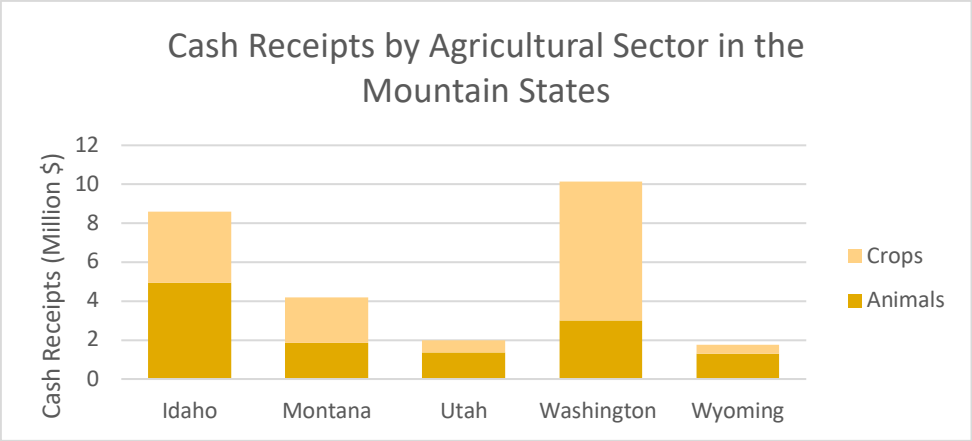
Top Agricultural Products in the Mountain States

Washington is the most valuable agricultural producer in the Mountain States, followed closely by Idaho. Montana, Utah and Wyoming trail far behind at less than half the value of the top two states.

Animal production accounts for a majority of cash receipts in the region.

Throughout the region, animal production accounts for the majority of cash receipts. In Washington, the value of cropland far exceeds animal production, accounting for 70 percent of agricultural cash receipts.

Montana is more evenly split with crop production accounting for 56 percent of cash receipts. Animal production in the mountain states is mainly cattle and calve sales as well as dairy milk, with only a few other minor categories like hogs and eggs. Cropland production is much more diverse in every state.



Cattle sales rank in the top two commodities in all of the Mountain States.

Our region produces a diverse list of agricultural commodities.

Consistently, cattle sales rank in the top two commodities in all of the Mountain States, while dairy and hay production rank in the top ten for four of the five. Outside of these three commodities each state utilizes its resources to produce a variety of valuable crops.

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Rank	Idaho		Montana		Utah	
1	Dairy products, Milk	3,062,312	Cattle and calves	1,566,396	Cattle and calves	499,641
2	Cattle and calves	1,667,798	Wheat	1,124,369	Dairy products, Milk	408,480
3	Potatoes	949,101	Hay	446,117	Hay	287,204
4	Wheat	625,894	Barley	191,261	Hogs	208,067
5	Hay	520,706	Miscellaneous crops	180,784	Miscellaneous crops	177,097
6	Miscellaneous crops	454,401	Hogs	107,971	Chicken eggs	159,749
7	Sugar beets	360,636	Dry beans	89,883	Floriculture	96,839
8	Barley	270,913	All other animals and products	63,900	All other animals and products	64,055
9	Corn	128,270	Lentils	63,441	Wheat	30,699
10	Hops	104,964	Sugar beets	60,306	Corn	21,649

Rank	Washington		Wyoming	
1	Apples	2,185,373	Cattle and calves	1,006,907
2	Cattle and calves	1,232,480	Hay	241,093
3	Dairy products, Milk	1,206,024	Hogs	116,576
4	Wheat	844,441	All other animals and products	84,070
5	Potatoes	688,904	Miscellaneous crops	60,019
6	Miscellaneous crops	511,387	Sugar beets	44,734
7	Cherries	482,338	Dairy products, Milk	41,153
8	Hops	482,267	Corn	37,257
9	Hay	377,294	Barley	36,411
10	Grapes	300,750	Chicken eggs	20,723

[8]

Idaho's colder climate and higher elevations preclude it from a flourishing fruit industry with apples and grapes not making the top 10.

Washington's agricultural value is driven by specialty crop acreage, with apples, cherries, hops, and grapes ranking in the top ten for the state. Washington also shares similarities with Idaho, producing milk, cattle and calves, wheat, and potatoes.

Idaho's colder climate and higher elevations preclude it from a flourishing fruit industry with apples and grapes not making the top 10, though they are produced in small volume. Idaho's sugar beet and barley production play a significant role in the state's economy.

Economic Significance

Nationally, Idaho is more dependent on the agribusiness sector than any other state in the union.

Though Washington is the leading producer of agricultural products in the region, the agricultural economy is more significant to Idaho. Nationally, Idaho is more dependent on the agribusiness sector than any other state in the union. Excluding indirect effects, agribusiness contributes seven percent to Idaho's GSP (Gross State Product). University of Idaho researchers calculated that Idaho's agribusiness GSP is:

- 4.3 times greater than Washington (1.63%)
- 4.5 times greater than in Utah (1.62%)
- 4 times greater than in Wyoming (1.825%)
- 2 times greater than in Montana (3.65%)[9]

[8] Cash Receipts by State, United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service, https://data.ers.usda.gov/reports.aspx?ID=17843#Pddbfaedb5ecf45adb5f05145e57fa89d_4_17iT0R0x12
[9] Watson, Philip, Economic Contribution of Idaho Agribusiness 2021, University of Idaho Extension, https://www.uidaho.edu/-/media/UIdaho-Responsive/Files/Extension/publications/bul/bul892.pdf?la=en

KEY INFORMATION COLUMN

Conclusion

Understanding the pivotal role agriculture plays in the Mountain States is crucial to protecting this critical component of the regional economy.

Businesses, jobs, and families are dependent on the success of agribusiness. Farms, production facilities, input suppliers and supporting businesses benefit when voters and legislators understand the importance of agriculture to the state and the region.

Nothing in this publication shall be construed as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any legislation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Madilynne Clark is a policy analyst at Mountain States Policy Center.

Madi holds a master's degree in Agricultural and Resource Economics from Colorado State University as well as a B.S. in Environmental Economics, Policy, and Management from Oregon State University.

She is the former Director for the Initiative on Agriculture at Washington Policy Center, one of the first free market think tanks in the nation to launch a focus on Agriculture.

Before joining WPC, she worked for Ag Association Management in the Tri-Cities, Washington, working with growers and industry across Washington, Oregon, and Idaho. She also spent two years as an associate of The Context Network. Her time involved working as a business analyst on various agriculture projects in production, wholesale, retail, and policy Ag sectors. She was also a wildland firefighter for four summers.

Madi's work has been published in *The Capital Press, Tri-City Herald*, and the *Spokesman-Review* and she has spoken to agricultural and policy groups across the Pacific Northwest.

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