Federal Agricultural Easement Programs Strengthen Montana's Economy

In Spring 2026, with assistance from Montana land trusts, The Harbinger Consultancy analyzed the economic impact to farmers and ranchers who choose to perpetually protect their farm or ranch using federally-funded conservation easements.

The analysis focused on federally-funded easements established from 2022 to 2026 through programs run by the Natural Resources Conservation Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The analysis found that, across the state, landowners invested a majority of these funds (96%) into their businesses: 41% into debt repayment and savings; 37% into land purchase and real estate; and 18% into farm and ranch equipment, operations, and diversification. These investment patterns were used as the basis for a Montana-specific adaptation of a Colorado State University model that measures the economic impact on the state. Full methodology and sources are available in the technical report at www.montanalandtrusts.org.

Where the money goes

Share of federal payments by how landowners put them to work, 2022-2026.

Landowners reinvest **96% of easement payments** to strengthen their operations, communities and Montana's economy.

The Harbinger Consultancy, 2026 based on land trust staff estimates.

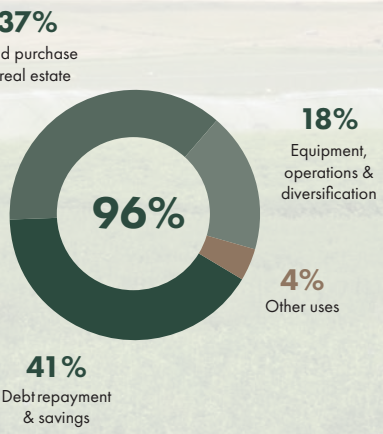

Photo courtesy Gallatin Valley Land Trust

$144 million

Federal Easement Income to Montana 2022-2026

Strategic Investments by Landowners

- Invest in Land Improvements & Operations
- Acquire or Lease More Acreage
- Pay Down Business Debt
- Support Ag Succession Planning
- Keep Family Land Intact
- Sustain Agricultural Legacy

Economic Impact Across Montana

$284M	$91M	1,800
Total Economic Impact	Labor Income	Jobs



Photo by Joel DeMay

Stronger farms. Stronger ranches. Stronger Communities.

Healthy agricultural operations are the foundation of Montana's rural economy.

The economic impact analysis is broadly conservative and does not account for several factors likely to make the true contribution greater than estimated, such as the additional impact of state and local matching funds, the longer-term effects of investing in business operations and expansion, the value of increased business stability and solvency, and the economic benefits of habitat improvement. Easements are concentrated heavily in rural Montana, where these dollars can have a pronounced effect.