

RURAL ROUNDTABLE REPORT

Monday, April 13, 2026 | Tourism

This report summarizes key insights from REAL Co-Lab's April Rural Business Roundtable that **brought together Montana business owners and the Montana Department of Commerce's tourism data manager to discuss predictions for the 2026 tourism season in Montana.** Panelists and attendees shared first-hand accounts on how changes in tourism are impacting businesses in the state and offered suggestions for how stakeholders can better support businesses during this time.

“We historically had a pretty strong Canadian contingent that would come down, and we still do, but it's definitely been reduced over the last year or so compared to what we were used to seeing. We saw our sales across the board drop probably 7 or 8% last year.”
— Ben Fosland, Pleasant Prairie Brewing

Featuring the insights of:



Jacob Starner
Economist

State of Montana
-Helena, MT-



Liana Handran
Business Owner

Handran's Home Center
-Scobey, MT-



Ben Fosland
Business Owner

Pleasant Prairie Brewing
-Scobey, MT-



Cheri Bjorgen
Business Owner

North Post
-Plentywood, MT-



Jenna Bjorgen
Business Owner

North Post
-Plentywood, MT-

“A quarter of my business used to literally come out of Canada, or [people] going to Canada. And, and now we're probably under 5%.”
— Liana Handran, Handran's Home Center

LOCAL CHALLENGES

Insights from Montana business owners and experts.

Anticipating Tourism Changes in 2026

Rural Montana business owners are experiencing economic strain caused by shifting trade policies, restrictive state hunting regulations, and declining Canadian border traffic. The discussion highlighted how these overlapping challenges trigger a ripple effect across rural communities, underscoring the urgent need for state and federal leaders to support the state's frontier economies.

Shifting Cross Border Traffic

While Canada remains Montana's dominant international market, accounting for 80% of all international point-of-sale spending, cross-border traffic has plummeted. Rural business owners reported a sharp decrease in Canadian patronage. State data from Oxford Economics and Visa Destination Insights shared by the Montana Department of Commerce's tourism data manager, Jacob Starner, validated this local downturn, revealing that overnight Canadian visits dropped from \$276 million in 2024 down to an estimated \$200 million in 2025.

Changing Recreation Regulations and Pricing

Changes to state licensing and recreation regulations are also directly reducing regional tourism. Bjorgen shared that local hunting traffic was down significantly last year, and is expected to worsen due to a new Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks regulation enforcing a 10-day delay for out-of-state hunters. Furthermore, the state has moved license sales online, which decreased the number of people who come into the store to purchase their licenses, ultimately decreasing additional product sales. In addition, Starner predicts a change in tourism patterns due to a steep increase in National Park entrance fees.

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"No one ends up here by accident. If you end up in Scobey, you meant to come. So, you kind of have to have a reason to be here, and I think that's been a focus, something that we've been working on, I mean, even as a community, to kind of make it more of a destination..."

—Ben Fosland, Pleasant Prairie Brewing

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Community Economic Ripple Effects

The drop in seasonal travelers and out-of-state hunters creates an economic domino effect across entire rural communities. Bjorgen pointed out that their retail location sits directly across from a local hotel, where they have witnessed a substantial drop in room occupancy. This vacancy immediately trickles down to hit local restaurants and surrounding main street stores that rely on those visitors to survive, showing that tourism declines are shared across the entire local economy. Many rural Montana communities don't have drive by traffic. Visitors have to intentionally choose to go there, making small tourism changes even more impactful.

Sources

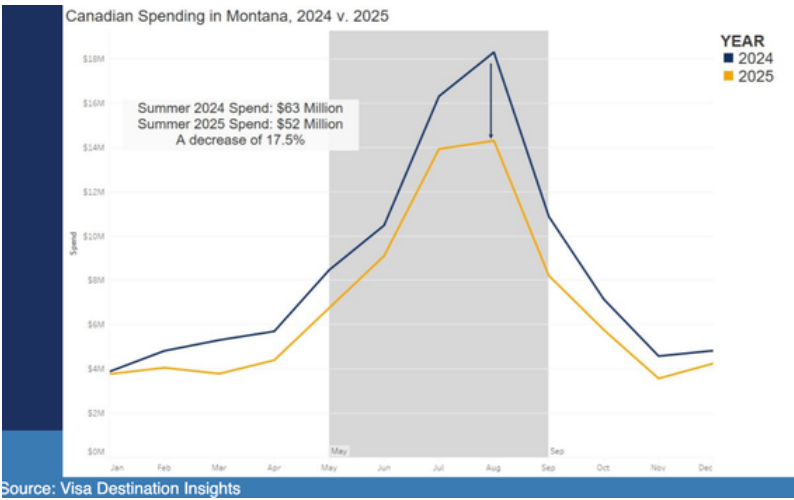
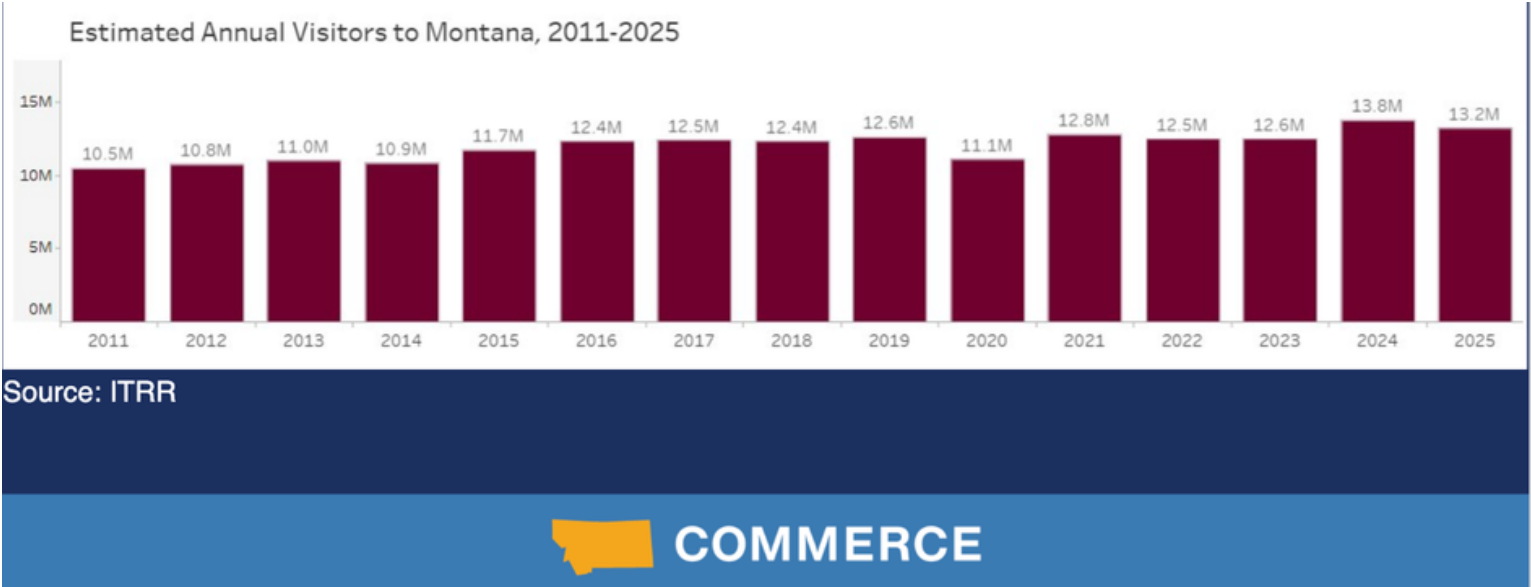
1 Montana Department of Commerce / Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research (ITRR), presented by Jacob Starner, Tourism Economist

TOURISM DATA IN MONTANA

Insights from Montana business owners and experts.

Montana Department of Commerce Data

Jacob Starner, Tourism Data Manager for the Montana Department of Commerce, provided a broader economic perspective that mirrored what our local owners are experiencing on the ground, sharing key metrics on shifting regional traffic and tracking the recent decline in Canadian tourism spending across the state. While overall headcount remained historically high, the real story lies in the shifting behavior of these travelers. The immediate concern for local economies isn't just the slight dip in visitor numbers, but the more significant drop in how much those visitors are actually spending while they are here.



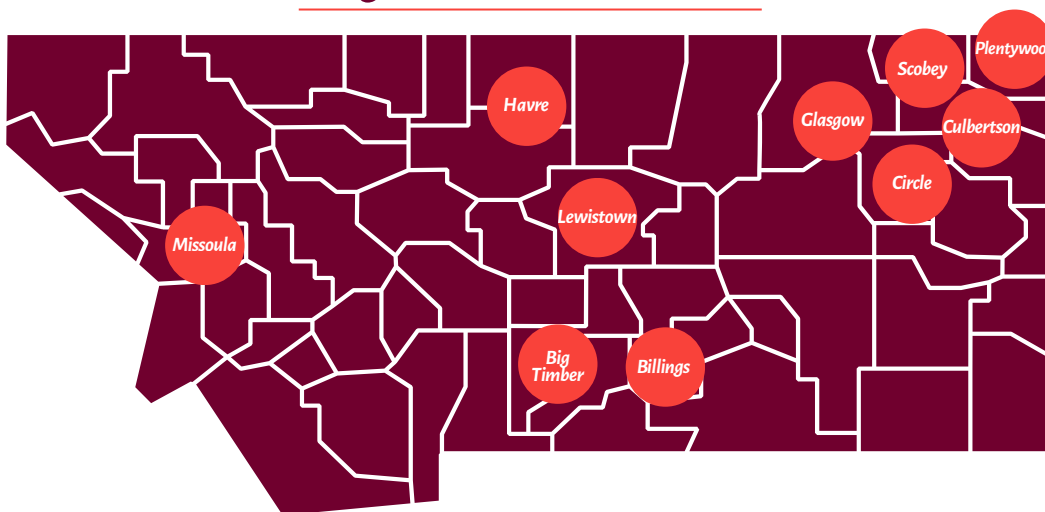
Canadian Spending in Montana 2024 v. 2025

This graph portrays data from Visa Destination Insights that compares the amount of money spent in Montana by Canadians in 2024 and 2025. We see a decrease of 17.5% when comparing the summer months for those two years. This represents a major drop in revenue for the local businesses that typically sell their goods to Canadian visitors

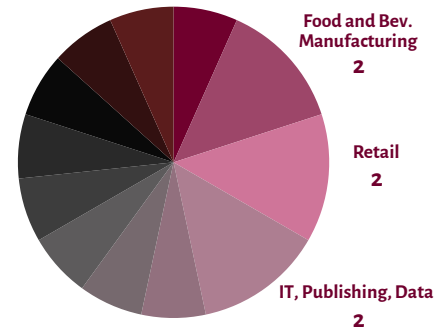
REGISTRATION DEMOGRAPHICS

18 Completed Registration Surveys **25** Total Attendees

Registrant Locations:



Registrant Industries



Other industries represented with one registrant:

- Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing, and Hunting
- Federal Government
- Hospitality
- Non Profit
- Educational Services
- Administrative and Support Services
- Professional Services
- Finance and Insurance
- Other

REQUESTS FROM BUSINESS OWNERS *to stakeholders and policymakers*

Enhance Predictability and Support for Everyone

Business owners need stable regulations, travel incentives, and fair marketing support for businesses and communities in all areas of the state.

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"You know, when they promote Montana, it seems like western Montana with the mountains, and that is more promoted than our area. We're kind of a forgotten area out here, and I... and with our population being what it is, we don't have the voice, is what I feel like."

—Cheri Bjorgen, North Post

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TOURISM RESOURCES FOR BUSINESSES



Hot Tip! The Montana Department of Commerce has several programs, services, grants, and loan programs for communities across the state, some intended to boost rural tourism. Programs include:

Montana Department of Commerce Tourism Programs and Services

The Montana Department of Commerce's Community MT Division focuses on strengthening local towns and tribal communities through sustainable economic development and planning.

They provide expert assistance and guidance in land use, strategic planning, infrastructure, downtown revitalization, and mining impact support.

Montana Department of Commerce Tourism Grant and Loan Programs

The Tourism Grant Program is powered by Montana's 4% lodging tax, also known as the "bed tax." These funds are collected whenever visitors stay overnight in the state.

- [MT Tourism Development Grant Program](#) - strengthens communities across Montana by increasing their economic appeal and vibrancy as welcoming visitor destinations.
- [Agritourism Grant Program](#) - assists Montana's rural and tribal agricultural businesses and communities and promotes diversification and support
- [Destination Event Grant Program](#) - assists Montana's communities with destination events and new events that will increase tourism
- [Tourism Development Enhancement Revolving Loan Fund](#) - a public-private partnership that supports Montana's tourism economy
- [Montana Emergency Tourism Assistance Program](#) - distributes grant awards for tourism-related emergency service projects in rural areas
- [Montana Historic Preservation Grant](#) - supports the preservation of Montana's historic structures, sites, societies and museums, contributing to the maintenance and demonstrating the economic impact of historical resources throughout the state

About REAL Co-Lab

This report was produced by the *Rural Entrepreneurship and Leadership Co-Lab* (REAL Co-Lab) at University of Montana. We're committed to partnering across the U.S. to better understand and share the stories of rural entrepreneurs, leaders, and their communities. Our mission is to deliver actionable insights through studies, experiments, and pilot programs to support all U.S. entrepreneurs and leaders, their communities, and the economy.

Have questions or want to stay in touch?



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