

THE Durango HERALD

Tribes impact state's economy

S.W. Colo. Native Americans add \$1.5 billion

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JOSH STEPHENSON/Durango Herald file photo

DENVER – A recent analysis highlights a significant statewide economic impact by the Southern Ute Indian Tribe and the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe, both in Southwest Colorado.

The tribes – along with Alaskan Natives of Colorado – contribute more than \$1.5 billion in economic impact, creating more than 8,800 direct jobs and another 12,539 indirect jobs. Earnings from these jobs are estimated at more than \$549 million, despite Native Americans accounting for only 1.6 percent of the Colorado population.

It is estimated there are more than 500 businesses, nonprofits, government agencies and events owned by or focused on Native Americans that impact the economy in Colorado, according to the Colorado American Indian and Alaska Native Economic Impact Report, released Tuesday by the Colorado Commission of Indian Affairs, the Denver American Indian Commission and the Colorado Office of Economic Development and International Trade.

The agencies sought to compile the first-of-its-kind report for Colorado after noticing a lack of data on the subject. The hope is the data can help inform policy decisions in the years ahead.

“As Colorado’s oldest and continuous residents, today, the Ute tribes are the largest employers in their respective counties,” said Ernest House Jr., executive director of the



Colorado Commission of Indian Affairs. "The data this report provides will help advocate and promote future economic vitality between our tribal and non-tribal partners."

The poverty rate for Native Americans in Colorado is lower than the rest of the nation, standing at 25 percent, compared to 29 percent nationally. But Native Americans continue with struggle compared to total population poverty rates, including 13 percent for Colorado and 15 percent nationally.

Similarly, Native Americans lag in attaining higher education, with only 15 percent attaining a degree in Colorado, compared with 13 percent nationally. For the total population, 37 percent attain a degree in Colorado, compared with 29 percent nationally.

"In each of these categories, there is significant room for improvement in the economic status of American Indians and Alaska Natives," the report states.

It goes on to suggest that state and local officials should facilitate growth by crafting policies aimed at entrepreneurial development, business growth and creating additional opportunities for Native-owned firms. There is also an opportunity for the state to cooperate more directly with tribes in terms of economic and business development.

"The unique legal and tax status of the reservations can provide a significant economic advantage to businesses hoping to relocate to the State of Colorado, and the existing workforce and business infrastructure from native-owned firms can help further support this ..." the report states. "As important players in the Colorado economy, the Native Americans need to be considered in policy decisions."

Lt. Gov. Joe Garcia agreed that the economic impact could have far-reaching effects in Colorado.

"This report recognizes the economic impact that our American Indian population including our two Ute tribes have, not only in Southwest Colorado, but throughout the entire state," he said. "It is impressive to see 1.5 percent of the population generate over \$1.5 billion and helping to grow Colorado's economy."

Calls by The Durango Herald to the office of the chairman of the Southern Ute Indian Tribe went unreturned on Wednesday.

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