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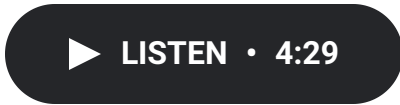
A regional collaboration of public media stations that serve the Rocky Mountain States of Colorado, Idaho, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming.



WYDOT Road Conditions

In pricey Western towns, some employers are getting homes trucked in from factories to house workers

Wyoming Public Radio | By [Hanna Merzbach](#)

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Clark and Danielle Johnson were herding their kids, both under age 5, who were frolicking around their disheveled fourplex living room. They were packing up the kitchen stuff and the knickknacks.

“All the random bits and pieces that you don’t know which box to throw them in,” said Clark, “and they’ll be...”

“Lost forever,” Danielle chimed in.

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Clark and Danielle Johnson pack up boxes in their living room. They've already moved the big furniture to the new place, but still have miscellaneous stuff to deal with.

Clark is a fisheries biologist for the Wyoming Game and Fish Department, so his family was moving into the state agency's new modular employee housing.

They'll pay the same amount for rent, but it will be about three times as big as this place, which has been pretty cramped for the family of four and their two wirehaired pointers.

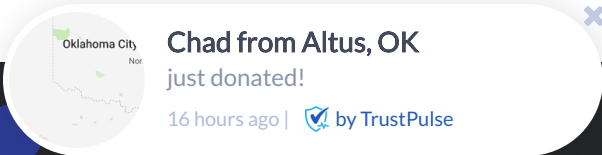
"You kind of see everything from where you're standing," Clark said, as his 4-year-old daughter, Clara, made sheep noises in the background. "Two bedrooms, bathroom. We've got just two little closets, and then a little living room and kitchen."

Knowing their subsidized rental was in the pipeline has kept the Johnsons in Jackson. Like many pricey corners of the Mountain West, the 10,000-person mountain town has [made headlines](#) for housing prices that rival New York City's.

Housing has become so expensive that employers are stepping in to help their workers. And to rapidly increase their housing stock, they're turning to modular homes, which are often bigger than mobile homes and more customizable.

Back in February, a bright orange crane whirred as it placed half of one of the Game and Fish homes on a foundation south of Jackson.

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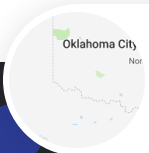
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Loren Woodin / Wyoming Game & Fish Department

Half of one of the Game & Fish modular homes dangles above the foundation south of Jackson.

They're split down the middle and assembled like legos. Seven houses in total were [made](#) factory in northern Idaho and transported there by truck.



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The agency provides employee housing throughout the state, but Woodin said this is the first time it made sense to go modular like this. It helped address construction worker shortages and sped up the schedule by a couple months, since it's easier to build all winter long inside.

"It's a temperature controlled environment and guys running around in shorts in the wintertime building stuff, instead of being all covered up in Carhartts and dealing with snow all the time," Woodin said.

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Loren Woodin, chief engineer at Wyoming Game & Fish, stands in front of one of the modular homes, with the Tetons in the background. This project has been almost a decade in the making. Before finding modular construction, the agency was considering moving its regional office out of Jackson, since it's so expensive.

Going modular ended up saving the agency big bucks — over \$5 million, to be exact, according to the architect and modular home champion of two decades, Greg Mason.

“Because of bulk construction, the raw materials of lumber and all that stuff, they tend to get a much better deal for all products,” Mason said.

This style still only accounts for under 7 percent of new commercial and residential buildings in North America, according to the [Modular Building Institute](#).

But that number has steadily been growing in recent years. Mason said the industry has seen a big boost from the tiny home revolution.

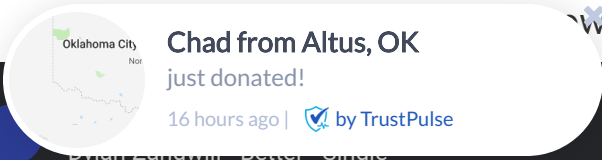
Stratford, which made the Game and Fish houses, is one of the oldest companies of this kind, but more are popping up. The Modular Building Institute [says](#) there's more than 250 companies in North America. Even Tesla and Amazon are breaking into the [prefab](#) industry.


Mason added quality has come a long way from your classic '70s double-wide manufactured home.

“All modular buildings used to have plastic laminate countertops,” Mason said.

... with some really nice marble or stone countertops in a

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Mark Wilson / Stratford

The kitchen in one of the Game & Fish houses, made by Stratford Homes. It's filled with new appliances, stone countertops and a big island.

In Kemmerer, Wyoming, the town is getting almost 90 units trucked in to house workers at [a new nuclear power plant](#). Employees in Yellowstone National Park and Big Sky, Montana are also living in this style of housing. And in Colorado, the government is even [incentivising](#) this kind of building.

But there's still some pitfalls. It can be harder to save money if you want just one single-
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“I was like, ‘Oh, oh, what's it gonna be like?’” she recalled. “I just was thinking like it was gonna be piecemeal, they're not very good quality or something.”

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Mark Wilson / Stratford

The row of modular homes sits in front of a view of the Tetons.

But standing in the entryway of their new place, Clark Johnson said it looks like your typical house – a far cry from your typical employee housing.

“If I hadn't have seen them come in on pieces, I wouldn't really think that they were

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It was the family's first night sleeping there, and the kids were wired. It's a big upgrade. There was the kind of echo that comes from having tall ceilings, plus three bedrooms, a fenced-in backyard, a walk-in pantry and even a laundry room.

"Way, way, way more space than we have been used to being in for the last eight years," Clark said.

Now that they were finally in the house, next up? Getting the kids to settle into bed and digging out the silverware.

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The Johnson family sits on their couch in their now modular home.

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Tags

- Open Spaces
- MWNB
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- Housing shortage
- Wyoming Game and Fish Department

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Hanna Merzbach

Hanna is the Mountain West News Bureau reporter based in Teton County.

[See stories by Hanna Merzbach](#)

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