

## MOUNTAIN WEST CONFRONTS THE POPULATION PRESSURES OF THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

An NPG Forum Paper  
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### Introduction

If there is one area in the United States where people treasure their land, it's America's Mountain West.

There are eight states that comprise this vast area: Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming.

All of these states are rich with millions of acres of plains, prairies, mountains, valleys, deserts and river canyons that are still unimpaired by development. And a large percentage of the population that presently inhabits these eight states, who recognize their vulnerability to ever-increasing population pressures, are eager to see that the core beauty of these natural places is not diminished as the 21<sup>st</sup> century continues to play out.

However, in an area where a huge number of federal, state and local agencies make rules regarding how land is used, there is a constant battle over how, when, and where it can and should be preserved and or developed.

The list of the groups that influence these determinations is varied and extensive. It includes federal decision-makers including the Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, Army Corps of Engineers and others; powerful and influential oil and gas interests; state agencies; interstate commissions; highly vocal national and local environmental groups; and many, many others.

The push and pull of these forces working together – or against each other – will write the future of much of the West. Herein, we take a closer look at the present battles being waged on a number of different fronts and the consequences that right or wrong decision-making in the decades ahead will have in shaping a sustainable future for the countless millions of people who will make this area their home.

### PREVIEW

Twenty-five years ago, former Colorado governor Richard D. Lamm, a national leader in the movement to stabilize America's population, wrote:

"I suggest that one of the dominant environmental issues in the West's future will be: How many people can live satisfied lives here? Population size is a factor of three variables: birth rates, death rates, and immigration. Birth, death and territory. Can any other issue cover such deep atavistic feelings? The issue will divide friends and even family, but it will not go away...

...One truth the West must eventually understand is that its population cannot continue to grow forever. The West has a fragile ecosystem and humans are part of the ecosystem. We are not immune from the laws of nature however clever our technologies. We must ultimately worry about carrying capacity, sustainability, and how we affect our surrounding environment."<sup>1</sup>

Governor Lamm's concerns about the fast-growing population in America's West were very much on target – and are shared by countless millions of western residents today.

### POPULATION CHART

State	2010 Population	2030 Population
Arizona	6,392,017	10,712,397
Colorado	5,029,196	5,792,357
Idaho	1,567,582	1,969,624
Montana	989,415	1,044,898
Nevada	2,700,551	4,282,102
New Mexico	2,059,179	2,099,708
Utah	2,763,885	3,485,367
Wyoming	563,626	522,979
Cite: NPG website for educators: U.S. Census Bureau		
Total 2010 population: 22,065,431		
Estimated 2030 population: 29,909,432		

However, the numbers continue to grow and a number of states in this area continue to rank as the fastest-growing in the nation. While many Americans are well-aware that Arizona, Colorado, Nevada and Utah are gaining huge numbers of people annually, recent years have also found the residents of traditionally population-stable Idaho and Montana must also deal with a fast-rising population that is rapidly changing their bucolic lifestyles. At present, only New Mexico and Wyoming have seemingly escaped the significant population woes brought on by too many people.

As increasing population impacts almost every aspect of American life, the varied states of the Mountain West struggle to accept the rising tide of humanity in countless ways. State governments must adjust their spending budgets and programs accordingly. Local governments are confronted with the need to quickly provide more roads, sewers, hospitals, and schools – often much sooner than planned. And, in dealing with challenges on the state, regional, or local level, many of these actions will often have some impact on federal lands, with the omnipotent bureaucrats in the federal government constantly present to rule on what can and can't be done.

The soaring population numbers that result from the 2020 U.S. Census are sure to reveal an up-to-date picture of the growing population crisis currently plaguing the Mountain West and present to both leaders and citizens a wide array of challenges that must be confronted if this area is to remain a practical, sustainably balanced environment in which to live, work, and recreate.

## POPULATION TRENDS

The annual estimated census assessment released by the Census Bureau at the end of 2018 provided a “snapshot” of population statistics in the eight states of the Rocky Mountain West.

In that report, we find that Utah's listing as one of the fastest growing states is due to a combination of a high fertility rate and retaining a high percentage of young people who look to settle in for the long term and make their careers in the ‘Beehive State.’<sup>2</sup>

*The Spokesman-Review* (Spokane, WA) recently carried a report that the neighboring state of Idaho's population will grow at three times the national rate through 2025. That estimate is based on a new forecast model developed by an Idaho Department of Labor regional economist that shows the over-65 population, which is currently just 14.7 percent of Idaho's population, is predicted to account for 34.4 percent of the total growth – with high levels of in-migration, especially to urban counties.<sup>3</sup>

Nevada's status in the top-ten fastest growing states is attributed to a growing exodus of people from California who are escaping high taxes, exorbitant rents, and soaring home prices. In January 2019, the *Las Vegas Review-*

*Journal* reported that younger people are attracted to Nevada, lured by a variety of industries and that the in-migration of retirees from many states is being driven by the fact that there is no [state] income tax and the cost of living is inexpensive.<sup>4</sup>

A *Denver Post* headline in July 2017 that read, “Colorado's population could increase by nearly 3 million people by 2050, according to forecast numbers” should have sent alarm bells ringing in the Centennial State. The accompanying article laid out that Colorado's population could increase to 8.5 million by 2050, according to forecasts from the Colorado State Demography Office. That would be an increase of more than 50 percent from 2015.<sup>5</sup>

The adjacent state of Arizona should also brace for an ongoing spike in population that will add to an already huge spurt of growth that has been increasing annually in recent years. The 2018 end of year U.S. Census update showed Arizona with 7.1 million residents – with 122,770 new residents arriving in one year. For decades, Arizona has been a retirement destination for many people from the Midwestern United States. And with the flood of ‘baby boomers’ now entering their golden years, its sunny climate will surely remain a major draw.<sup>6</sup>

An April 2019 interim Census report showed that once-sparsely populated Montana is now showing “big growth” particularly in the western portion of the state. The Census numbers noted that Gallatin County's population has grown 25 percent since the 2010 census, with many other counties growing by more than 8 percent. Montana Public Radio quotes Bryce Ward, an economist at the University of Montana, remarking that “those growth rates are among the highest in the nation.” And to add some perspective to such numbers, Ward relates that “the average county in the U.S. grew by about 1 percent between 2010 and 2018.”<sup>7</sup>

When David T. Taylor and Nicole Korfanta put together their study titled *Population Growth in Wyoming 2010-2015* for the University of Wyoming, they found that “Historically, Wyoming has experienced substantial fluctuations in its population.” The forces driving those unpredictable numbers were very much tied to the energy boom and bust the ‘Equality State’ has experienced in recent decades. A more updated report from September 2018 found Wyoming's rate of population growth to be slightly higher than the national average. However, current U.S. Census projections show Wyoming on track to lose approximately 40,000 residents by 2030.<sup>8</sup>

New Mexico, which hails as the ‘Land of Enchantment’ can actually celebrate the fact that its population growth has slowed to a crawl and is seeing fewer births, more deaths, and nearly no migration. Indeed, *The New Mexican* newspaper, reports that the state “is in the midst of its slowest population growth since statehood [1912]—and that is not likely to change.”<sup>9</sup>

## GROWTH VS. NO GROWTH

Besides growing at various degrees, what all of the Mountain West states share is a rising sentiment among many current residents that their states, cities, and small towns are becoming more and more overcrowded – and rapidly changing before their very eyes. There has traditionally been a very active ‘slow-growth’ contingent of citizens living in these states and each announcement of new census numbers tends to add to their activism.

The fight for the future of the West – and the challenges it presents – is reflected in a paper released by the Center of the American West in 2005. It stated:

“The American West is the fastest-growing region of the country, but it is also a place endowed with great open spaces that offer important ecological and social values... Residential and commercial development is spreading across the landscape. The region is home not only to some of the most sprawling cities in the country, but to a more dispersed ‘exurban’ pattern of low-density development in rural areas, especially near charismatic landscapes like national parks. Westerners watch these changes and grieve over lost open space while simultaneously appreciating the benefits of economic and population growth, and the land development, expanded services, and property value appreciation that naturally follows.”<sup>10</sup>

The Center for American Progress reports that “Every 2.5 minutes, the American West loses a football field worth of natural area to human development.”<sup>11</sup>

The frustrations of those pushing for no growth are revealed in a 2018 report on the recent history of Fort Collins, Colorado. *The Montana Gap* project, produced in partnership with the Solutions Journalism Network was titled *Did Fort Collins grow too big too fast?*

It highlighted the city’s unwieldy expansion that has seen it grow from a population of 43,337 in 1970, to 87,758 in 1990, to 143,986 in 2010, as a cautionary tale for dozens of similar Western locales.

The report quotes former Fort Collins mayor Kelly Ohlson who served in the mid-80s, commenting on the city’s fast-paced growth, saying: “We are not a model for growth management. Don’t use us as a role model, unless you want to be a quarter of a million people overnight. Don’t do as we did.”

These warning words are echoed by present Fort Collins Councilmember Ross Cunniff who says: “I believe that there is a misperception, pervasive in our society, that growth equals good.” Cunniff continues: “The sad thing though is if something can’t continue forever, it’s going to stop. So how can we stop in a way that’s sustainable at the end rather than continuing to grow and grow and grow until you hit the crash?”

*The Montana Gap* report concludes: “In the end, for anyone looking at Fort Collins as an example of how to untangle the growth web, it’s difficult to view the city as anything other than a cautionary tale. Local leaders and residents did a lot right, both in terms of timing and execution, and yet the city still turned out a sprawling hodgepodge that only a few would deem an undeniable success story. Most recent estimates place the city’s population around 167,000, and in planning documents and long-range projections, officials say they’re accounting for the addition of another 85,000 residents.”<sup>12</sup>

## WATER IN THE WEST

The website [disappearingwest.org](http://disappearingwest.org) says it all:

“Rivers are the lifeblood of the West. They irrigate crops, provide clean drinking water, serve as habitat for fish and wildlife, and fuel an \$887 billion outdoor recreation economy. Rivers are woven into the West’s outdoor heritage and our very identity as Americans...

...But rivers – from headwaters to ocean – are under immense pressure. Climate change, development, and an ever-changing landscape are placing growing stress on the waterways that are so inextricably tied to the health of Western communities and economies... Growing human populations demand more from rivers: more water for cities; more diversions for irrigation and power generation; and more dams to manipulate natural river systems into performing for human needs. This development – which includes mining and urban sprawl – puts more strain on healthy, functioning river systems.”<sup>13</sup>

One of the biggest questions facing present and future residents of America’s western states is this: Will there be enough water to sustain the current population, let alone future population growth? Sadly, the answer to that question depends on how much snowfall the Rockies get each year.

Indeed, if there is any factor that can and will greatly limit how the Mountain West develops in the decades ahead it will be access to the huge volume of water that will be necessary to not only meet individuals’ daily needs, but also the substantial needs of farming, grazing, mining, and recreational activities that form the economic backbone of this vast area.

The agencies overseeing access to water in the West form a huge, bureaucratic stew. A network of powerful water managers supervises a finely-tuned balancing act of federal, state, and local laws and compacts that dictate the overall use of water and are constantly at odds with the powerful forces of cities, factories, farmers, ranchers, tribes, and environmentalists who demand to have a say in who gets what.

With healthy rivers vital to a secure future for the West, the insights of Ryan Richards (in his report titled *Restoring*



the *Balance* that he wrote for the Center for American Progress) are very much on target. Richards states: “With half of its rivers damaged by development, the West is at a crossroads. Policymakers can maintain the status quo and continue to lose the function of rivers, or they can tap into new ways of thinking to restore and protect rivers as the foundation of Western communities...”

...Only by charting a new path can policymakers secure a more stable and prosperous future for the region. But these new policies will require investments in the United States’ public lands; restoration of rivers and the infrastructure that shapes them; additional protections of natural rivers; and a commitment to working with landowners and cities to pursue shared goals that improve water quality and the health of river systems.”<sup>14</sup>

In an extensive paper titled *Water and Population in the American West*, Professor Denise D. Fort of the New Mexico School of Law presented the realities of this issue as it pertains to the fastest growing area in the U.S. She notes: “The amount of water available for human use is determined by the hydrological cycle. While there is a relationship between population growth and stresses on water supplies, the relationship is not linear. Increased human populations typically result in reallocation of current resources rather than the development of new water sources. Water supplies in the American West are particularly limited and, with newcomers lured by bright skies and new economic centers, population growth in the region has outstripped the rest of the country in recent years.” In her focus on population, Fort states: “The population of the West grew by 32% during the last twenty-five years, compared to 19% in the country as a whole...”<sup>15</sup>

As a river that serves the water needs of more than 30 million people spread over seven states (California, Arizona, Nevada, Wyoming, Utah, Colorado and New Mexico), the Colorado River is very much under population stress. That stress is exacerbated by the fact that many of these states rank among the nation’s fastest-growing. The use of the river’s water is governed by the Colorado River Compact agreed to by those seven states in 1922. According to *Wikipedia*, “The Colorado River is managed and operated under numerous compacts, federal laws, court decisions and decrees, contracts, and regulatory guidelines collectively known as ‘The Law of the River.’”<sup>16</sup>

*Wikipedia*’s comments on the Colorado River’s recent history underscore the threats that the unpredictable flow of this major water artery can have on the Mountain West.

“In late 2010, Lake Mead dropped to just 8 feet (2.4 m) above the first ‘drought trigger’ elevation, a level at which Arizona and Nevada would have to begin rationing water as delineated by the Colorado River Compact. Despite above-average runoff in 2011 that raised the immense reservoir

more than 30 feet (9.1 m), record drought conditions returned in 2012 and 2013.”<sup>17</sup>

## WHO CONTROLS THE LAND?

Once settlers started moving West in larger and larger numbers, the debate over who controls the land – and how it is used – started to take root and continues to this day.

A *Denver Post* editorial recently noted, while “population growth, tourist intrusions, and economic development pressures from oil and gas, mining and housing continue to mount, the West must get increasingly aggressive about protecting our remaining wild places.”<sup>18</sup>

### FEDERAL LAND OWNERSHIP BY STATE (as of 2013)

State	Federal Land Acreage	Total State Acreage	Percentage of Federal Land
Arizona	28,064,307	72,688,000	38.6%
Colorado	23,870,652	66,485,760	35.9%
Idaho	32,621,631	52,933,120	61.6%
Montana	27,003,251	93,271,040	29.0%
Nevada	59,681,502	70,264,320	84.9%
New Mexico	26,981,490	77,766,400	34.7%
Utah	34,202,920	52,696,960	64.9%
Wyoming	30,013,219	62,343,040	48.1%

Source: [https://ballotpedia.org/Federal\\_land\\_ownership\\_by\\_state](https://ballotpedia.org/Federal_land_ownership_by_state)

From the U.S. Congressional Research Service, “Federal Land Ownership: Overview and Data”

The major adversaries in this highly-charged controversy are the federal government and the states. On the sidelines, yet very influential, are energy companies, environmentalists, and scores of other special interests determined to advance their individual agendas. And in this highly-charged debate, the citizens of the eight states in the Mountain West are extremely vocal in working toward the shared goal to protect the cherished land that surrounds them.

A recent voter survey backed up that fact. In this year’s *Conservation in the West Poll*, 63 percent of Mountain West voters listed the ability to recreate on and enjoy public lands as the main reason they live in the West. This is especially true for voters in Montana (75 percent), Colorado (73 percent), New Mexico (62 percent), and Idaho (74 percent).<sup>19</sup>

While control of the land is not an issue that is going to be resolved soon – if ever – it is worthwhile taking a look at current activities by certain influential groups that are sure to play a key role in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

On the issue of whether the countless millions of acres in the West should continue to be reigned-over by the

federal or state governments, major groups are going head-to-head in rallying local leaders and citizens to their side.

The American Land Council (ALC) holds forth as speaking for 100 leaders in 14 states in setting out the basics of what they believe and what goals they hope to achieve. Their goals include: a timely and orderly transfer of large segments of public lands to willing states for local control that will provide better public access, better environmental health, and better economic activity.

The ALC has some valuable allies in the Congressional Western Caucus where a large bipartisan group of Senators and Congressmen from the Mountain West lay out where they stand, in stating on the caucus website:

“The vast majority of our federal lands were set aside with the understanding that they would be managed for multiple-use which would include grazing, recreation, conservation, and sensible natural resource development. However, numerous laws and regulations have been imposed that in many cases are unreasonable, burdensome and prevent multiple-use. Public lands that were once put to productive use have been locked up. Further, managing federal lands costs the American taxpayer tens of billions of dollars each year. Inexplicably, the federal government continues to spend hundreds of millions of dollars each year to acquire additional land. An area larger than the size of Florida has been added to the federal estate since [the] Kennedy Administration.”<sup>20</sup>

Taking the opposite view, the Center for Western Priorities (CWP) champions the cause that “public lands belong to all Americans” and is against states laying claim to them. They hold that “Throughout the West, a network of special interest groups and politicians are attempting to dispose of national public lands to state, local, and private control. Dozens of bills to achieve this goal have been introduced in state legislatures, and the debate has even reached the U.S. Congress, which has taken steps to undermine our system of public lands...Studies have shown that efforts to dispose of national public lands to the states would reduce access for recreation, hunting, and fishing – that’s why sportsmen and outdoor groups have fought strongly against such proposals. Additionally, economic analyses demonstrate that states could only afford the costs of managing public lands under extremely unrealistic and idealized scenarios. If land seizure proponents are successful, Western taxpayers would be saddled with the costly burden of wildfire prevention on public lands...These political attacks on American public lands are an affront to our heritage and to the collaborative spirit needed to manage our lands and resources wisely for this and future generations.”<sup>21</sup>

Amidst this controversy, a state legislator in Utah is backing efforts to “develop a method for valuing vast reaches of federal land.” Indeed, HB 357 that passed last session, charges the Utah Commission on Federalism...to press Congress to “secure payments in lieu of tax that are equivalent to the property tax the state would generate but for federal controlled land in the state.”<sup>22</sup>

### Data analysis by the Center for Western Priorities finds that:

- 66 percent of Westerners think that **removing protections from national monuments is a bad idea.**
- **56 percent of Western voters oppose disposing of national public lands** to state hands, only 37 percent of voters are supportive of the proposal.
- From 2016 to 2018, the federal government spent over \$8 billion **suppressing wildfires on Western public lands.**
- More than two-thirds of Western voters believe that national public lands **belong to all Americans** and not just to the residents of a particular state.

Source: Center for Western Priorities

## ENERGY AND THE WEST

The argument over access to and use of federal lands by the energy and mining industry is a non-stop debate. Any push to let more private companies gain access to federal lands is repeatedly met with cries from environmentalists who often see such development as a scourge on a pristine wilderness that should remain untouched.

The Trump administration has indicated that it is eager to “green light” more mining activity by streamlining the rules that govern it. In April of 2018, Joe Balash, then the Assistant Secretary for Land and Mineral Management at the Department of Interior, made clear such intent at the Western Mining Conference where he said: “At the Department of the Interior we are looking forward to working with you in the future as we take on challenges for the benefit of the American public. Our approach has included a combination of rule rescissions, review of existing policy, and promulgation of new policy or guidance, all of which aim to reduce unnecessary burdens on those developing our mineral estate on public lands.”<sup>23</sup>

Without question, there are many things wrong with present energy policy in America’s West and a *Bloomberg* editorial titled *The Mining Industry Has Had It Easy For Far Too Long*, that ran in March 2019, highlighted one of them: It called for a major rewrite of the *General Mining*

*Act of 1872* that “still governs the harvesting of gold, silver, uranium, copper, zinc and other minerals from federal lands.”

The editorial explained the need for updating this antiquated legislation by stating: “It exempted hardrock mines from paying a federal royalty on the minerals they took out of the earth, and enshrined a maximum price of \$5 per acre for land purchases. It gave mining precedence over other land uses, such as grazing, forestry or conservation. And because environmental protection wasn’t a dominant concern at the time, it made no provisions for safeguarding land and water.

All this made sense in 1872, before Colorado, Montana, Washington and Wyoming were states. It makes no sense today — and the costs of failing to substantially update the law are manifest. They include billions of dollars in lost royalties from domestic and foreign mining companies. Producers generally pay a royalty of 8 to 12.5 percent to extract coal, oil and gas from federal land. Why should hardrock miners be excused?

In addition, there are cleanup costs for hundreds of thousands of abandoned mines and polluted waterways, which the Environmental Protection Agency puts at a minimum of \$20 billion. And there are the costs of placing mining above all other uses on public lands.”

Bloomberg went on to note: “Members of Congress from mineral-rich states, including some who sit on powerful resource committees, are looking at the issue. Frustrated by foreign companies extracting royalty-free gold and other hardrocks from American land, troubled by environmental disasters originating from old mines (like the one that turned Colorado’s Animas River a toxic yellow in 2015) and prompted by changing demographics, they are finally moving toward amending the law.”<sup>24</sup>

On another mining front, it appears that while the coal industry is under intense pressure as climate change dominates discussions about future energy sources, coal will surely stay a powerful economic force in the Mountain West.

A recent assessment of the coal industry in Wyoming gave a realistic report as to coal’s present-day status. According to the Wyoming Mining Association: “The challenges for Wyoming’s coal industry continue in 2017. Low natural gas prices, the aggressive regulatory regimen of the previous administration, and subsidized renewable power have prompted utilities throughout the country to decrease coal consumption....

...Despite these obstacles, coal is still a significant source of energy, generating 30.4 percent of the nation’s electricity in 2016, declining one and a half percent from 2015. Even so, Wyoming coal is responsible for generating 44 percent of all coal fired electricity production in the nation. As the nation’s preeminent coal producer, Wyoming is home to 8 of the top 11 producing mines in the nation.”<sup>25</sup>

## THE WEST WILL KEEP GROWING

Almost 20 years ago, noted environmentalist Timothy Palmer authored an NPG Forum Paper titled *The Fate of America*. In that paper he spoke of the concept of “empty” land that is relevant in discussing how many American’s wrongly view the “wide open” West. Palmer asserted:

“Studies have shown that in North America, at current rates of consumption, each person requires 12.6 acres of land for support. A city of 1 million thus requires 12.6 million acres for its support in living space, food processing, commodity production and waste disposal. And that assumes “productive” land. With these figures in mind, America is not nearly as spacious as it might seem, even beyond the sprawl of the cities. A phenomenon I call the “delusion of open space” occurs when flying over the United States. I think everybody experiences this: I look out the window and see a lot of “empty” land. But when I consider the facts that water must be available for people to live, that those 12.6 productive acres are needed by each person, that substantial acreage in areas such as floodplains must be available for the earth’s built-in maintenance program to function, that habitat must be shared with other forms of life if natural systems are to survive and we’re not to be alone in this world, and that a bottomless deficit is accumulating every day because we consume massive amounts of nonrenewable resources just to sustain the population we already have—when I consider all that, I can only conclude that America is full. Indeed, it’s over-full, whether I see ‘empty’ land out the window or not.”<sup>26</sup>

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**But, there’s reason to believe that a lot more development is coming. The West has grown faster than the country as a whole for much of the last century, and is likely to outpace national growth for the foreseeable future.**

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### Center for the American West

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Sadly, the threats of overpopulation, overexploitation of the region’s natural resources, and the ever-looming threat of future droughts, don’t seem to be able to derail the West’s fast-paced growth. In looking at what’s ahead, the Center for the American West declared:

“A few key facts of western land use are important. First, half the land between the front ranges of the Rockies and the Pacific coast is federally owned, and not subject to residential or commercial development (it may have gas wells, roads, lodges, and clear-cuts, but it won’t have shopping malls or cookie-cutter subdivisions). And much of the West’s private land is not likely to be developed in the foreseeable future – it is too dry or too remote. But,



there's reason to believe that a lot more development is coming. The West has grown faster than the country as a whole for much of the last century, and is likely to outpace national growth for the foreseeable future. The 'New West' is increasingly attractive to migrants and to investors. Western land owners will certainly continue to respond to market forces, and to their own preferences, by transforming lower value land uses, like agriculture, into more financially-rewarding options like subdivisions and shopping malls...

...Finally, Westerners will continue to buy homes in suburbs distant from city centers and to build second homes in the forests and on ridge tops. They will demand highways, water systems, and other utilities. They will also continue to complain about the sprawl, traffic, interrupted views, and lost sense of community that growth brings. Over the last decade, Westerners have witnessed remarkable change, have watched whole mountainsides develop, and found their commutes lengthening. But we all still find it hard to imagine what the land will look like in twenty, thirty, or forty years, when the region's population is likely to have grown by 50 percent or more again."<sup>27</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Looking at the fast-growing West, it appears to be a demographic and environmental crisis that will continue to spin out of control with too many people up against limited natural resources. For many western residents who settled there just a few decades ago, that crisis has already greatly tarnished their dreams of living in an enchanting environment that's rich in nature and far-removed from the chaotic lifestyles that plague so many other areas of the U.S.

However, while population levels continue to soar and once small towns turn into larger cities almost overnight, all is not lost. It is not too late for the myriad stakeholders who want to "rescue" the Mountain West from the perils of an ever-expanding population to raise their collective voices, stand strong against the 'growth at any cost' crowd, and put in place sensible, effective, and responsible rules that would slow, halt and eventually reverse population growth.

Barring a major cataclysmic event, the Mountain West is on a dangerous path where there is no turning back unless the policymakers join forces with activist citizens and environmentalists to fashion a different, more livable, future.

For the elected leaders at all levels in the eight Mountain states it will take both political courage and a strong political will to reach that goal. They must understand that growth is an enemy to be fought – not a benefit to be embraced. They must open their eyes to the fact that ever-rising population numbers do not translate into better states, cities or towns. They must be the trailblazers who put an

end to the current addiction to growth and say 'no' to more development and more people.

In all, those who hold the decision-making power today will decide the fate of the Mountain West during the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They must make the tough decisions to turn their jurisdictions around before it's too late. By doing so, they will put the Mountain West on a journey to a safer, less populated, and environmentally-sustainable destiny.

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**NOTE:** The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of NPG, Inc.



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