



## POPULATION GROWTH THREATENS IDAHO'S FARM ECONOMY AND CULTURE

An NPG Commentary  
by Edwin S. Rubenstein

On population growth, we have “good news” (sort of):

New data reveals that Idaho is no longer first in state population growth.

In 2022, Idaho's population grew by 1.8%, good for second place behind Florida.<sup>1</sup> In 2018 the state grew faster than any state in America, with 2.09% growth, according to the Census Bureau.<sup>2</sup>

But – at least as far as NPG is concerned – the good news is tempered by “not-so-good” news.

**“Despite inflation, rising mortgage costs and housing costs, [population] growth was still brisk among counties that experienced a slower influx of people.”<sup>3</sup>**

Idaho's 35 rural counties reported faster growth than the state's nine urban counties. In most of those rural counties, deaths outnumbered births, but the losses were offset by net migration from other states – notably California and Washington – and from urban places within Idaho.

**“Nationwide there are 3,093 cities with populations larger than 10,000. When those cities are ranked based on their population growth between 2019 and 2020, eight of the top 200 fastest growing cities are in Idaho. Kuna [ranked] (43), Post Falls (46), Star (55), Eagle (65), Meridian (70), Nampa (151), Ammon (167), and Caldwell (171) all have [population] growth rates ranging from 3.5% to 7.5%.”<sup>4</sup>**

Boise – the state's largest city – grew by just 1.54% over the same period.

This pattern mirrors the national trend of large metropolitan areas losing population to the suburbs and exurbs during COVID and its aftermath.

In no state across the country, however, does urban-to-rural migration pose as great a threat to overall economic growth as in Idaho.

### **It's the (agricultural) economy, stupid!**

**“Agriculture is the key to Idaho's communities, economy, and way of life...With over 24,000 active farms and ranches, agriculture contributes over \$7 billion to Idaho's economy each year,”** according to American Farmland Trust (AFT).<sup>5</sup>

But future growth is by no means a sure thing: Between 2001 and 2016 Idaho lost nearly 70,000 acres of farmland to urban sprawl – an area larger than the city of Boise. While this represents a tiny fraction (just 0.5%) of the state's total

agricultural acreage, a whopping 26% of the loss impacted **“Nationally Significant”** land – i.e., **land best suited for growing food.**<sup>6</sup>

**“Nationally Significant”** is the term used to describe this productive land in *Farms Under Threat: The State of the States*, a state-by-state analysis by the AFT.<sup>7</sup>

In fact, the 26% figure may understate the loss of Idaho's farm economy. It ignores a new, more insidious threat, called (somewhat misleadingly in our view) **“Low Density Residential” (LDR) land use.**

**LDR** refers to the hodge-podge of constraints that pop up around farm communities inundated by transplanted city folk. The new residents, not used to living next to farms, complain about being stuck behind farm machinery on local roads and of the odors related to farming. Retailers that farmers traditionally rely on – grain and equipment dealers, for example – are displaced by nationwide corporations like Walmart.

**Hotspots for LDR-related farmland loss include Rathdrum Prairie and the Treasure and Magic Valleys.** Land in LDR areas is 122-times more likely to be converted to high-density land use than other agricultural land in Idaho.<sup>8</sup>

The impact of **LDR land use** is hard to quantify, but farmers know it when they see it. They know it makes it harder for them to farm.

### **The ultimate constraint: Age.**

**“In Idaho, there are currently more than 3 times as many farmers over the age of 65 than under the age of 35.”<sup>9</sup>**

The hassle of farming in a community newly populated by city folk can induce even young, healthy farmers to sell – too often to real estate developers or large corporate farms that have no local roots. The next generation of farmers could be priced out of the farm economy completely, thereby threatening the very future of agriculture in Idaho.

Addie Candib, AFT's Pacific Northwest regional director, sees an agricultural apocalypse in the making:

**“Idahoans take great pride in their identity as an agricultural state, and communities are just beginning to see what happens in places like Treasure Valley and Magic Valley... Rapid population growth – Boise is one of the fastest growing cities in the nation – is driving the loss and fragmentation of farmland, threatening not just Idaho's**

ability to grow food, but its way of life.”<sup>10</sup>

### The Wildcard: Climate Change

**The good news:** increases in CO<sub>2</sub> and other greenhouse gases are generally regarded as good for crop yields.

**The bad news:** Idaho farmers do more than just grow crops. Two of the state's largest agricultural commodities – potatoes and onions – must also be stored.

The *Idaho Climate-Economy Impacts Assessment*, a two-year study by the McClure Center for Public Policy Research at the University of Idaho, presents Idaho-specific information on climate and agriculture.

Kelley Olson, executive director of the Idaho Barley Commission and a member of the advisory board for the study, expressed concern about the state's ability to properly store harvested crops, saying:

**“We expect to have access to high-quality potatoes and potato products and onions year-round, and if they don't store well because they go into storage in poor conditions – if they're too warm or without the right air flow – those crops are at great risk of not being able to store,”** Olson says, **“I hope I'm not confronted in 2050 with us importing potatoes and onions (to Idaho).”**<sup>11</sup>

### The Political Consequences of California-to-Idaho Migration

Tony Bennett may have left his heart in San Francisco but an increasing number of California residents are moving their hearts, souls, and bodies to Idaho.

In raw numbers, sure, more Californians are moving to Texas, Nevada, and Arizona. But Idaho, which ranked 20<sup>th</sup> as a magnet for California migrants a decade ago, now ranks 9<sup>th</sup> highest, surpassing not just rust belt states like Illinois, Ohio, and Pennsylvania, but also more scenic locales like Hawaii and Utah.<sup>12</sup>

In 2021, Idaho gained 48,876 more residents (from other states) than it lost. By contrast, California lost 367,292 more residents (to other states) than it gained that year.<sup>13</sup>

For many Californians the attraction is price. But among the California counties with the highest average home prices – San Mateo, San Francisco, Marin, and Santa Clara – only one, Santa

Clara, ranked among the top California counties sending migrants to Idaho.

For some, Idaho's conservative culture and political orientation seem to be the major draw. Case in point: Susan Lehner, a communications professional who moved to Boise from Lafayette, a town east of San Francisco Bay. Once a devotee of San Francisco, Lehner's **“...effort to show her fourth-grade son sections of the area she loved turned sour when they passed used syringes, human feces and a half naked man face down on the ground.”**<sup>14</sup>

**“The joy of bringing my son to my city was gone,”** Lehner said. She and her husband liked what they heard about Idaho. When the Lehnners put their California house on the market, a real estate agent gave them a parting reminder of what irked them about the Bay Area's liberal culture: he advised them to remove the American flag hanging over the entrance.

In Idaho, the arrival of cultural conservatives fleeing coastal liberalism has made this redder-than-red state redder still. *Politico* reported that, **“Those who fear and those who cheer the effects of right flight agree on one point: The newcomers are pushing Idaho politics further to the right.”**<sup>15</sup>

Lehner experienced this change first hand. Unlike her San Francisco real estate agent who worried about an American flag, her Boise agent posted an ad saying, **“This property is for sale to Liberty/ Constitutional Buyers ONLY.”**<sup>16</sup>

### Summary

Idaho and its cities are attracting record numbers of new residents. While Meridian and Nampa, respectively the state's second and third largest cities by population, have been national leaders in growth for several years, six smaller Idaho cities have recently joined them on the list of the 200 most rapidly growing cities in the country.

Less than 20 years ago they were small farm communities that could not envision the influx of out-of-state migrants, many of whom are from urban places where roads, police, fire, and emergency medical services exceeded anything available locally.

The cultural and economic divide between new arrivals and long-term locals creates new opportunities and new challenges that the state has yet to contemplate.

Source materials for this article are available at [www.NPG.org/stateprofiles](http://www.NPG.org/stateprofiles).



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