



State Population Profile

WYOMING: THE DINOSAUR STATE

An NPG Commentary
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Wyoming is a great place to see dinosaur footprints. It even has a state dinosaur, Triceratops, voted on by its schoolchildren. Wyoming is a metaphorical dinosaur as well, for it is a throwback to the days when wildlife outnumbered people and vistas were not blocked by skyscrapers. It is known for its wildness and reputation as the cowboy state. Wyoming is a great destination for visiting dude ranches, seeing rodeos, backpacking, and backcountry fly fishing.

It also has bragging rights thanks to its rank as our country's least populated state, with only one area code and two sets of escalators for its nearly 589,000 people. Its largest city, Cheyenne, has only 66,507 residents. The population density of the entire state averages six people per square mile. For reference, Michigan is just slightly smaller than Wyoming but has a population density that is 30 times greater at 178 people per square mile.

It is interesting that Wyoming has not become a beacon for relocation from overpopulated states. This is attributable to several factors. First of all, it wisely does not advertise to prospective residents. The geography of the state is another important reason. The name "Wyoming" describes part of its landscape. The word was originally used to describe a valley in northeastern Pennsylvania. It means "at the big river flat" or "at the big plains," adapted from the ancient Munsee Delaware or Lenape word.

The state is very rugged and mountainous with a reputation for having freezing winters with winds that can blow semi-trucks off the freeway. Without big cities, it cannot offer much in the way of employment opportunities. While it is biologically diverse, it lacks cultural diversity, being 92.5% white. It suffers from serious water shortages and has been in a drought since 1999. More people will exacerbate this already challenging problem.

TROUBLE IN THIS HEADWATER'S STATE

Wyoming's water is geographically significant to the western states. It is considered to be a "headwaters state," meaning its main rivers send water to four major river basins. In normal years it only receives an average of 13 inches of rain, which is why the high elevation snowpack in its iconic mountains is so important.

Agriculture is the main water consumer in the state. Due to the arid climate, farmers and ranchers need to irrigate their hay and alfalfa crops in order to feed their livestock.¹

Without irrigation, farmers could not settle the land. In 1894, Congress passed the Carey Act, which enabled each Western state to acquire up to one million acres of federal land for free under the following condition: It had to use the proceeds from selling the

land to construct water projects. Wyoming, still sparsely populated at the time, took advantage of the act more than any other state.²

Nearly 70% of Wyoming's surface water supply comes in the form of snow, and agricultural irrigation accounts for 80% to 85% of the consumptive water use in the state. This leaves little additional water for current household use and even less for additional growth.³

The lack of snow in recent years has impacted all forms of water consumption. The effects have been so severe that experts have determined it is most likely caused by climate change. The ironic twist in this connection to the burning of fossil fuels is that Wyoming mines more coal than any other state, including Kentucky.⁴

AN OUTDOOR PARADISE

The state of Wyoming is made up of about one-third Great Plains on the east and about two-thirds Rocky Mountains to the west. Because it is rich in mountain ranges including Wind River, the Big Horn, and the Absaroka ranges, it is home to the wildlife adapted to these high elevations and rugged terrain. These include larger mammals which require large open areas: grizzly bear, elk, mule deer, bison, gray wolf, pronghorn, mountain lion, moose, bighorn sheep, and black bear.

Wyoming is a state full of beautiful rivers, including the Bighorn River and Wind River. In all it has approximately 108,767 miles of rivers and streams. These rivers and riparian habitats provide home to smaller mammals such as red fox, coyote, pika, and river otters. Its many iconic mammals attract plenty of outdoor photographers to its national parks, especially Yellowstone.

Most of Wyoming's wildlife lives within the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem in the state's northwestern corner.

It has become more intact biologically ever since wolves were reintroduced to the area in 1995.

FROM FORTUNE TO MISFORTUNE: WYOMING'S MINING INDUSTRY

It is both a blessing and a curse to have so many valuable minerals in your state. Mining as an industry is an economic driver and provides many resources for modern society. The downside of mining is that it also inspires heavy water use, destroys the land, and causes pollution.

Early discoveries of gold generated the funds to help Wyoming become a state. Its current energy-based minerals are the fossil fuels of coal, uranium, oil, and natural gas. It also mines nephrite jade which is the state's gemstone.

Lesser known, but very important, are the state's trona mines. Trona is the raw material for soda ash, and the item just about every household has: baking soda. Located in the southwestern part of the state, the trona deposits are located between 600 and 2,000 feet below the surface. It is the largest known trona deposit in the world, formed from prehistoric Lake Gosiute approximately 50 million years ago. Trona is still a viable industry whereas the copper mining that began in the 1800s no longer produces a significant supply of copper.⁵

In more recent years, deposits of rare earth minerals have been found in the state. These refer to a group of 17 chemical metals which are used to make everything from advanced electronics to defense systems. Currently, China is the major producer of these high-in-demand chemical metals and the political pressure to produce them in the U.S. is conflicting with the environmental damage their extraction causes.⁶

SERVING A GROWING PLANET

Wyoming may not be overpopulated, but growing global demand is placing increasing pressure on its finite resources. As world population continues to increase and nations shift from underdeveloped to developed, demands for additional supplies of fossil fuels and minerals dominate international politics. The

U.S. is currently home to nearly 343 million people and, despite a very minor population decrease in recent months, is expected to grow for the foreseeable future. Encouraging growth either by births or by immigration is presenting a blind eye to the resource depletion it creates in its wake, no matter where people come from, their race, or ethnicity. Contrary to the birth decline mythology, it is only the rate of population growth which is declining. The U.S. and world population clocks reinforce this distinction: slower growth is still growth.⁷

When population growth is discussed in public discourse, it is rarely considered in terms of sustainability. Yet as populations grow, so does demand for the energy and minerals that mining provides, placing increasing pressure on resource-rich states like Wyoming.

The Powder River Basin, which stretches across northeastern Wyoming and southeastern Montana, has been targeted for additional energy development, including coal-bed methane drilling. This development requires large amounts of water and can draw down the basin's water table. Wyoming remains a major center of U.S. coal production: in 2024, six of the nation's eight largest coal mines were located in the state, including the top four largest mines. Burning Powder River Basin coal also produces substantial greenhouse gas emissions that contribute to climate change.⁸

The Federal Bureau of Land Management has already approved an operation which, if allowed to move forward, will mean an addition of 66,000 new wells in Wyoming and Montana, 27,000 miles of roads, and 53,000 miles of pipelines and overhead electrical lines. All of this will negatively impact wildlife and water supplies.⁹

The economics of supply and demand drive much of the mining exploration going on in the state. Local residents are often the victims of the pollution which can result from mining. Just a few years ago, in 2023, a man named James Christian discovered dirty mine water gushing out of the ground in his backyard in Wyoming County. This caused sinkholes to form along

with strong sulfur-like odors which hung in the air as well as oily sheens which coated their beloved Indian Creek. Residents have gotten sick and blamed the nearby mine for causing their illnesses. They sued and won their lawsuit, but clean-up operations are traditionally underfunded. Pollution is much harder to address in hindsight. Meanwhile, new mine expansions have been approved.

Indian Creek continues to have black and green coloration and many wells in the area have gone bad. The neighborhoods smell of rotten eggs, and the unpleasant scent has spread across the community.¹⁰

For years, environmental groups have fought the ever-expanding mining industry. Wild Earth Guardians, Powder River Basin Resource Council, Earth Justice, and Sierra Club are among the many regional and nationwide NGOs who have partnered with local native tribal councils to fight new mine permits, especially in environmentally sensitive areas. The economic incentives to keep digging for more fossil resources are clear. It is profitable for companies to invest in mining. Investors stand to make a huge profit since there is a rising demand for natural resources in our growing world. It is the demand for ever-diminishing non-renewable resources that keeps prices high. Behind it all is a growing demand for energy and minerals fueled by a growing number of people.

WYOMING AS A WARNING

We are all responsible for the damage being done within this beautiful state by allowing our country to continue growing, and for making it economically viable and utilitarian to keep mining these limited resources. They are called "fossil fuels" because they were formed millions of years ago, made up of fossilized plants and animals. Not only are they limited but burning them adds to the climate disasters we are already experiencing. Wyoming's state of affairs is a warning that we may go the way of the dinosaurs, not because of a meteor, but from our insatiable appetite for power, money, and growth on a special and limited planet.

NOTES:

1. <https://www.wyoextension.org/publications/html/B1272/>
2. <https://www.wyohistory.org/encyclopedia/watering-dry-land-wyoming-and-federal-irrigation>
3. <http://library.wrds.uwyo.edu/wrp/93-12/93-12.html>
4. <https://montanafreepress.org/2026/08/12/climate-change-snow-drought/>
5. <https://main.wsgs.wyo.gov/mineral-resources/overview>
6. <https://c3newsmag.com/u-s-rare-earth-independence-from-china-still-has-years-to-go-experts-say/>
7. <https://www.census.gov/popclock/>
8. <https://www.eia.gov/coal/annual/>
9. <https://www.nwf.org/Our-Work/Climate/Climate-Change/Fossil-Fuels/Coal/Powder-River-Basin>
10. <https://mountainstatespotlight.org/2025/09/10/wyoming-clean-water-dep-mine-expansion/>

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