

Colorado's growing population: impacts and prospects

**By Gary Raham
North Forty News**

The census takers have counted heads. The experts have drawn fine graphs. World population will top 7 billion this year.

If you are a baby boomer, you have seen world population more than double in your lifetime. United States population stands now at 308,745,538. Colorado has shared and prospered from some of that growth, expanding from 1,753,947 in 1960 to 5,160,189 million in the 2010 tally. It also suffers from the added pollution and pressure on water and mineral resources that growth creates.

What can we say about the state of our wonderful state – and our northern Colorado niche, consisting of Larimer and Weld Counties – as human numbers continue to climb in the coming decades?

According to the Colorado State Demography Office, most people in Colorado live in the counties of El Paso (622,263), Denver (600,158), Arapahoe (572,003), and Jefferson (534,543).

The state as a whole grew at the rate of 16.92 percent over the past decade, down from the more frenetic rate of 30.6 percent from 1991 to 2000. Larimer County seems to be growing at a rate very close to the state average, while Weld County ranks second on the growth rate list at 39.7 percent. Douglas County is growing at 62.4 percent. Garfield, Mesa and Eagle counties also showed strong growth while 26 percent of counties showed growth declines.

Fourteen municipalities doubled their size or more over the decade. Northern Colorado hosts some growth hot spots: Firestone (431 percent), Severance (430 percent), Frederick (251 percent), Erie (188 percent) and Timnath (180 percent).

Colorado is also becoming more diverse ethnically and racially. Colorado's Hispanic population (the largest minority) increased 41 percent (by 300,000). African Americans grew by 19 percent,

while Asians and White non-Hispanic increased by 45 percent and 9.9 percent, respectively. These increases occurred throughout the state and not just in metro areas.

Projections indicate that Colorado will continue to grow in the coming years at a rate of about 2.2 percent annually. Industrial activities in and near Denver will fuel a lot of that growth, but northern Colorado looks good for industrial growth, too. Embrace Northern Colorado (www.embracecolorado.com), a local nonprofit "think tank" attempting to identify and find solutions to growth issues over the coming years, notes several aspects of northern Colorado's economic base:

- Many businesses now compete in the global economy.
- Weld County ranks in the top 10 richest nationally in production of agricultural products.
- Colorado State University, technology and manufacturing dominate the economy in Larimer County.
- Weld County has nearly 12,000 oil and gas wells.

The State Demography Office (http://dola.colorado.gov/dlg/demog/pop_totals.html) also points out that Colorado's population is aging. Baby-boomer workers are reaching retirement age, and northern Colorado attracts aging immigrants who like beautiful places to visit, the university culture and strong urban services.

Demographers predict, "The population over age 65 will increase 78 percent during the next 15 years, shifting this age group's proportion of the total from 9.8 percent in 2009 to 17.4 percent in 2025."

Seniors will fuel a larger portion of the economy over the coming years (especially after 2015) and may also have to fill a gap in the work force. Embrace Northern Colorado predicts labor shortages between 2012 and 2030 as numbers in the workforce decline following the boomer generation.

Water use and availability will play a key role in Colorado's future, with growth issues sometimes conflicting with both agricultural needs and environmental concerns. Colorado serves as the source of major rivers, yet that water doesn't "hang around" all year. Much of it is confined in reservoirs and then moved to agricultural land or urban areas.

The Big Thompson Project, which moves water from the Granby area on the Western Slope to Larimer and Weld counties, serves as a prime example of water diversion in Colorado. Other areas of strong growth, like Douglas and Arapahoe counties, depend heavily on deep groundwater sources – legacies of the last Ice Age that are nonrenewable.

Agriculture uses 90 percent of Colorado's water, but municipalities have been consistently buying agricultural water rights from farmers for urban development. That practice is likely to continue as long as selling water is more profitable than farming.

According to Embrace Northern Colorado, domestic water use for the region's current population is approximately 76,000 acre feet/year (an acre foot is 326,000 gallons) and, at current consumption rates, northern Coloradoans will need an additional 126,000 acre feet annually by mid century.

Some relevant sites about Colorado water issues can be found at www.cwi.colostate.edu,

<http://co.water.usgs.gov> and www.colorado.edu/law/centers/nrlc/publications.

National Geographic magazine points out in "Enter the Anthropocene Age of Man" (March 2011) that geologists are contemplating designating the last 11,500 years as the beginning of a new epoch in the history of Earth – one dominated by human activities and population growth.

It takes 38 percent of Earth's ice-free surface to feed us. Our waste fills the oceans. (In 2006, the United Nations Environment Program estimated that every square mile of ocean hosts 46,000 pieces of floating plastic.) Our carbon emissions, since the invention of agriculture and especially since the industrial revolution, are changing atmospheric composition and altering climate. We are a force of nature that will leave at least a thin page in the geologic record.

Fortunately, the little piece of the world called Colorado has fared reasonably well so far and largely benefitted from a stunning landscape that has attracted steady growth and mostly clean industry. With diligence, informed vigilance – and a bit of TLC – there's no reason that Coloradoans can't extend that prosperity into the foreseeable future

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