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A Letter From the Deputy Secretary of Agriculture

The rural West, with its spectacular beauty and abundant natural resources, attracted my family over a century ago and is attracting many thousands of newcomers today. What I have observed happening in my home of Winters, California, is happening throughout the West. Small communities in scenic areas throughout the region that were dying just a decade ago are now experiencing rapid growth. While this is an indicator of the region's economic health, it is bringing ever-increasing rural attention to social and environmental issues—from sprawl to quality of life—that have until recently been thought of as “urban” problems. Pioneer families like my grandparents engaged in farming, mining, and forestry related activities that changed rural landscapes. Today's newcomers are more likely to want to preserve our scenic rural landscapes for their amenity value. After all, that is what attracted them to our small towns. Limits to population growth and urban and rural development are under intense debate in the West where migration rates are consistently higher than any other region.

I recommend that everyone read this issue of *Rural Development Perspectives*. A group of distinguished geographers, economists, and sociologists have done an excellent job of analyzing the problems and opportunities created by rural population increases. From water rights to quality of life issues, we need to understand the dynamics underlying the new West. Research like this will help frame constructive policy debates.

I am proud to call the rural West my home. I also welcome the opportunity to share it with other Americans in a sustainable way, in order to preserve the diverse agriculture and unique character of rural Western America.



Richard E. Rominger
Deputy Secretary of Agriculture

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This issue of *Rural Development Perspectives* focuses on the rural West, an area that has dramatically changed in the past two decades. A previous issue on the Great Plains highlighted the struggle of communities grappling with the negative effects of outmigration. People in the West are familiar with that problem but are just as likely these days to be debating the costs and benefits of rapid immigration. While some issues are unique to this region—for instance, the heightened role of public lands in rural economic development—others are linked with problems confronting rural areas across the Nation.

The rural West added over 1 million people during 1990-97, a 15-percent gain compared with just 5 percent for other rural areas. John B. Cromartie and John M. Wardwell show that these new migrants are no longer concentrating in the highest amenity settings close to metro areas but are “settling for less” in terms of scenery and accessibility. Given the rapid growth of western cities, the coming retirement of so many Baby Boomers, and the region's own youthful population, rapid growth in the rural West is likely to continue.

For many years, surveys of Americans have recorded a strong inclination for small-town and rural living. Gundars Rudzitis finds that people settling in the rural West attached much more importance to rural amenity characteristics than to employment opportunities or the disadvantages of urban life. Alex C. Vias confirms these findings in his analysis of population and employment growth, showing that the allure of amenities rose for both migrants and employers during 1970-95. In a reversal of the traditional pattern of people following jobs, the migrants themselves are fueling job growth with the businesses they bring and the infrastructure and services they demand. This new type of growth affects some areas more than others, as shown in the analysis of recent immigration to Oregon by Dean H. Judson, Sue Reynolds-Scanlon, and Carole L. Popoff. Metro areas are still attracting young professionals for employment reasons. Those moving to rural settings are more likely to credit quality-of-life factors for their move and be willing to take substantial pay cuts to obtain them.

On the other hand, some migrants to the rural West bring with them both financial and human capital. Peter B. Nelson draws a connection between rapid population growth and the concentration of income from self-employment and investments. Rural development policies need to take account of the way in which these migrants bring high-quality jobs into their new communities. William B. Beyers shows that job growth in the rural West, higher than elsewhere, was led by gains in health, business, and retail services, and was higher than can be explained by either growth trends nationally or the region's mix of industries.

Environmental concerns heighten the demand for cooperative public and private initiatives in the rural West. Kevin Ingram and Jan Lewandrowski address the increasing value to economic development of wildlife resources and the ways in which traditional land uses such as agriculture offer a means to protect this resource. Keith Wiebe, Ababayehu Tegene, and Betsey Kuhn show that land ownership consists of partial interests that are being voluntarily unbundled to help balance competing economic, social, and environmental objectives. Finally, Noel R. Gollehon shows that the transfer of water rights out of irrigated agriculture—the most common method for Western States to meet new urban demands—is likely to have a negative economic impact on agriculturally dependent rural areas. Small communities across the region must deal with these emerging environmental issues in their struggle to maintain a high quality of life in the face of demographic change.

John B. Cromartie