



Bart Davis

Western Growth Trends: Pressure on People and Resources

By Sen. Bart Davis, Idaho

The Western United States is among the most diverse, vast regions in our country. As the West has developed and grown, so have its unique challenges. Water scarcity, dramatic and diverse population growth, increased energy competition, greater involvement in international affairs and a growing urban-rural divide all pose enormous challenges to the human and natural resources of the West.

To meet these 21st-century challenges, state and local governments, along with the federal government, will need to develop strategic flexible and collaborative strategies. The decisions will not be easy. In fact, they will be contentious and will require a strong political will and a shared vision on the part of Western leaders.

The stakes are high, and the results of our actions, or inactions, will have major repercussions for the future of the West and its people.

Changing Population and Demographic Trends—The Driver

The West's changing demographic makeup is transforming its regional landscape profoundly. Consumer markets, politics and day-to-day personal transactions simply cannot continue on a business as usual basis.

One of the most significant demographic trends of the 20th century was the steady shift of the population west and south from other regions.¹ The population of the West grew faster than the other three regions of the country in every decade of the 20th century.²

From 1900–2000, California's increase alone accounted for nearly one-sixth of the total U.S. increase and was more than the combined increase of 27 states.³ Five of the fastest growing metropolitan areas in the United States between 1990 and 2000 were in the West—specifically Las Vegas (Nev.), Yuma (Ariz.), Boise (Idaho), Phoenix (Ariz.) and Provo (Utah).⁴

The racial and ethnic composition of the region also has changed dramatically. In 2000, the minority population represented 42 percent of the total population of the

West.⁵ Three Western states—New Mexico, Hawaii and California—stand out as the nation's first nonwhite majority states.

The ethnic group with the largest increase in population was Hispanic. From 1980 to 2000, the Hispanic population more than doubled. More than 40 percent of the Hispanic population lived in the West from 1980 to 2000.⁶ Most of the Hispanic population is Mexican in origin, fueled by high levels of immigration and high fertility levels.

Increased population diversity in the West from net immigration, domestic migration and increased birth rates has major impacts on the delivery of services by state and local governments, as well as profound implications for social, economic and cultural diversity policies. The ability of Western states to grapple with the fast-paced demographic trends will play a major role in public policy debates in state capitols in the coming years.

Population Growth Puts Pressure on Already Scarce Water and Energy Supplies

The West's growing population is putting even more pressure on the region's already scarce water and energy supplies. Recent warm climate trends have significantly affected annual precipitation and weather patterns in the West. Warming conditions have decimated snowfields far earlier than usual. These conditions have made weather patterns increasingly unpredictable. While lengthy droughts always have been a regular part of climate in the West, recent simulation models suggest that drought will continue to be a factor in the future.⁷

The National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the federal government's

drought monitoring agency, recently stated that the downward precipitation trends in the West are among the lowest in history. This in turn has created dry weather in over 80 percent of the West—thereby reducing water supplies in major rivers, reservoirs, lakes and dams.⁸ NOAA officials do not anticipate any drought relief in the near future.

The length and severity of the current drought have a dramatic affect on water supplies at a time of increased demands on regional water resources. Water scarcity stems from a growing urban population and from increased demands from agriculture, industry and the environment. Drought conditions and increased competition for this limited resource have caused growing tensions and political competition in the West.

Two examples of these growing legal and political tensions include the ongoing debate over Colorado River water that serves Colorado, Wyoming, Utah, and New Mexico in its upper basin and Nevada, Arizona and California in its lower basin, as well as Mexico. Current levels in the river's two main reservoirs, Lake Powell and Lake Meade, are historically low.⁹ Additionally, the Snake River and Columbia River basin are involved in various water disputes and calls to shut off junior water users, which impact all aspects of life. Meeting the states' allocation demands may be impossible due to decreased water levels.

The West is responding to scarce water supplies in a variety of ways, including water transfers from rural to urban uses, regional water banks and desalination projects. Water transfers are the most contentious of these alternative approaches because of the implications for the future of agriculture, development and rural land in the West.

Meeting the demands of the West's growing population and economy also is depleting limited energy resources. Existing oil and gas resources in the United States may not be able to meet the future needs of the region. The West will likely turn to foreign oil supplies or accelerate the development of renewable resources such as wind, solar power and water.

Increased worldwide demand for energy resources has dramatically increased its costs. In the last three years, much of the West has experienced significantly higher and more volatile natural gas prices, increases in electric prices, and power shortages.¹⁰

The West's demand for energy resources—and its volatile market prices—is further complicated by global competition, especially from China. China's aggressive pursuit of energy to maintain its strong economy has helped drive oil prices to record levels in the last year.¹¹ China is the second-largest consumer of oil after the United States, and its consumption is projected to rise from 6 to 9 percent by 2020.¹²

Demand for Increased International Engagement

Population and economic growth have demanded increased international engagement. Overall, states throughout the nation are becoming more internationally active, spending approximately \$190 million on international programs in 2002, up from \$20 million in 1982.¹³ In 2004 states maintained approximately 224 overseas offices.¹⁴

The West is a part of this national trend, and its expanding economy and population, especially driven by new immigrants, have resulted in much greater engagement in international affairs. Over the past 20 years, the Western region has placed much more emphasis on investing in global markets and developing closer ties to its bordering countries—primarily Canada and Mexico.

According to a 2004 survey conducted by the State International Development Organizations (SIDO), 11 of the 13 Western states maintained overseas offices (Nevada's offices are run by voluntary representatives). Only Wyoming and California (which closed 12 offices in 2003) did not maintain offices overseas.

Jobs are the driving force in state international engagement. State officials consistently list the desire to create or protect jobs as the primary motivation in international

programs.¹⁵ The link between employment and state international engagement is well-founded. More than 18 million Americans owe their jobs to trade, foreign direct investment or international tourism.¹⁶

Economic factors are the dominant force in state international engagement. However, immigration, terrorism, environmental challenges, the spread of infectious diseases, and new obligations under international agreements also contributed to the trend.¹⁷

States use a broad array of programs to advance their interests in the international arena, including international trade and investment, border cooperation, international education initiatives and international partnerships.

The West is the only region in the United States that shares a border with both Canada and Mexico. It is also the gateway to Pacific markets. Western states have responded to the unique policy challenges faced by border states and provinces by creating a wide range of programs and mechanisms to reach across international borders. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) adopted in the 1990s accelerated this trend. By 2002, Canada and Mexico represented the top two export markets for American products, with sales to Canada alone exceeding all U.S. exports to the European Union.¹⁸

Along the West's northern border, governors, legislators, and other elected officials meet regularly under the auspices of such regional organizations as the Northeast Governors and Eastern Canadian Premiers, the Pacific Northwest Economic Region, as well as regional conferences of CSG.¹⁹ Along the southern border, governors from the four U.S. and six Mexican states meet annually through the Border Governors Conference. Legislators from these same states convene through CSG's Border Legislative Conference to collaborate on common concerns.

Deepening Rural/Urban Divide

Two characteristics of the West distinguish it from any other region in the country: most of the land in the West is owned by the federal government, and most of its population lives in metropolitan areas. The intense urbanization of the region has increased the concentration of political and economic power in the cities of the region as the rural areas lose people and political clout.

This phenomenon is true in the Rocky Mountain states, as well as in the coastal

states of the West. If the trend continues, the region's rural economy and historic landmarks may be in jeopardy.

Conclusion

The existing challenges faced by the Western United States—water and energy scarcity, increased international engagement, and increasing rural/urban divide—are compounded by the increased population and demographic trends. These trends are transforming the West and are driven by a variety of social, economic, cultural, global and environmental factors. The ability of Western leaders to respond to the challenges will be critical for the future of the West.

Endnotes

¹*Demographic Trends in the 20th Century: Census 2000 Special Reports*, U.S. Census Bureau, 1.

²*Ibid.*

³*Ibid.*, 24.

⁴John Fetto, "On the Move," *American Demographics*, (February 2003).

⁵See note 1, 88.

⁶See note 1, 71.

⁷"Climate Change: a challenge looming for California," *San Diego Union Tribune*, August 15, 2004.

⁸NOAA PowerPoint Presentation at CSG-WEST Water and Environment Committee at the 2004 Annual Meeting, Anchorage, Alaska.

⁹"Right Move on West's Water," *Denver Post* Editorial, December 31, 2004.

¹⁰WGA Policy Resolution 03-09, September 15, 2003.

¹¹Don Lee, "China Barrels ahead in Oil Market," *Los Angeles Times*, November 14, 2004.

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³*State Official's Guide to International Affairs*, (Lexington, KY: The Council of State Governments, 2003).

¹⁴"State International Development Organization's 2004 Survey: Emerging Trends in State International Business Development."

¹⁵See note 13.

¹⁶Earl Fry, Public remarks at the International Forum, The Council of State Governments, December 2002.

¹⁷"State Guide to International Relations."

¹⁸Earl H. Fry, *North American Economic Integration: Policy Options, Center for Strategic and International Studies*, (July 2003), 2.

¹⁹See note 13.

Bio

Bart Davis is the Idaho Senate majority leader and the immediate past chair of The Council of State Governments-WEST. State Capitol Building, P.O. Box 83720, Boise, ID 83720. (208) 332-1000.