

Fewer, larger farms work with high tech

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The trend of the farm population in north-west Kansas is no secret. Rural population has been declining since the day mechanization began to change the ways of farming. The better the technology, the fewer people need to do the work, and the greater the increase in the size of each farm.

Less-efficient farms were squeezed out as many farmers became victims of the technology revolution, which rapidly increased farm size.

Then came the great farm crisis of 1980, forcing small farm operations to sell out to bigger farmers or to investors who hunting a place to put their money.

In Thomas County alone, 56 percent of cropland is owned by nonresident land owners.

The publication "Changing Face of Rural America" says today's American farmers represent a shift in attitudes and desires, but asks the question: what shadow does this cast on the future of U.S. agriculture as a whole? It's anyone's guess.

Sixty percent of the population lived in rural areas at the beginning of 1950, but by the end of 1960, the metro population of the Great Plains exceeded rural population for the first time.

A quick glance at statistics provided by the U.S. Census Bureau about overall economic trends indicate a fairly positive outlook for American agriculture. It reveals that in the past five years, the total number of farms within the country actually grew by 4 percent, but some studies show the growth is not in production farms, but small farms.

However, many believe farms will continue to become larger with fewer operators.

Western Kansas cities not served by Interstate highways base their survival on agriculture, and it's hard for smaller towns to attract new jobs. Their only hope is to attract businesses from heavily populated areas that have no room to expand. A perfect example is the McCarty Dairy near Breton, which relocated from Pennsylvania to northeast Thomas County.

Most rural counties have teamed with their county-seat towns to organize an economic development alliance in a cooperative hunt for businesses looking to relocate. Some have been successful in selling old school houses to be converted into small manufacturing facilities to help keep their communities alive, although at least two of those have since closed.

With 6,000 ghost and dwindling towns in Kansas, the future for a growing population in western Kansas doesn't look rosy, unless the area can get a foothold in dairy and related industries or some like opportunity.

The idea of the federal government buying up thousands of acres of land in western Kansas and turning it into a national park is a horrifying thought. Who could ever conceive of our grasslands, beautiful as they are in their



Wind and blowing dirt didn't deter farmers anxious to get their corn crop out of the field and wheat crop in the ground last fall. Ron Haremza was cutting dryland "105-day," or short-season, corn on land he farms five miles east

of Colby. Farmers have declined in number partly due to changes in technology that have led to fewer people needed to work the land and larger farms.

— Photo by Vera Sloan/Colby Free Press

own, understated way, competing with Yellowstone, Yosemite or Rocky Mountain to grow a tourism industry?

Kansas Agricultural Statistics conducts a farm census every year. The best figures available for the rural population (including the federal census of 2000) for northwest Kansas from 2000 to 2009 shows a decrease in the population for all northwest Kansas counties.

Statistics show the decrease for those years to be:

- Cheyenne County, 14.7 percent from 3,165 to 2,700.
- Decatur County, 17.8 percent from 3,472 to 2,855.
- Gove County, 19.2 percent from 3,068 to

2,480.

- Logan County, 16.3 percent from 3,046 to 2,549.

- Norton County, 10.5 percent from 5,953 to 5,330.

- Rawlins County, 18.2 percent from 2,966 to 2,425.

- Sheridan County, 13.4 percent from 2,813 to 2,435.

- Sherman County, 13.3 percent from 6,760 to 5,860.

- Thomas County, 10.2 percent 8,180 to 7,343.

- Wallace County, 19.5 percent from 1,749 to 1,408.

In most instances population figures are tied

to economic performance. Information from Ross Sloan of the U.S. Farm Service Agency in Colby is that there are 561,336 acres of farmland in Thomas County, with 56 percent controlled by nonresident owners.

"The 460 farms in the county in 2007 had dwindled to 404 by this year. That figure may not necessarily represent the number of people who have left the farm, but could be an indication of consolidation of family farm units into one larger unit in some cases," Sloan said.

However, statistically, young people do continue to leave the farm. The average age of the Kansas farmer is over 56. In spite of the fact that farm population has declined steadily over the years, farm output has continued to