

have replaced small plots and laborers

increase. Kansas sold almost \$300 billion in agricultural products in 2007.

In 1940, agriculture accounted for 22 percent of the country's exports for \$2.42 billion a year. By 1980, agricultural exports totaled 15 percent of the nations' exports, but was worth \$35.6 billion. By 1990, one farmer was supplying food for an estimated 100 people.

In 1980, the farm financial crisis burdened farmers with heavy debt, creating a huge exodus of the farm population. Plus, by 1980, the largest share of federal farm spending was going to large operators and not the small family farm.

Known as an agricultural state, Kansas is one of the slowest-growing states in the nation and is known as a state of "rural flight," with a pattern of people migrating from the coun-

tryside to the metro areas. Not surprisingly, Johnson County (outside of Kansas City) is one of the fastest growing in the nation.

Rural doesn't refer to just farms. Towns in farming communities fall into the same category. Of all the cities in several Mid-west states, 89 percent have populations of less than 3,000. In northwest Kansas west of Hays, only Colby and Goodland have populations exceeding that number.

However, a desire for a better quality of life, solid schools, a hometown feeling and friendly neighbors has opened some new doors for people to return to rural areas, and has attracted new business from states where there is no room to grow.

The McCarty Dairy is a good example of a business seeking room to grow where it

would be accepted in an area of other agricultural businesses.

A few so-called "experts" say northwest Kansas should consolidate and form one large county that covers thousands of square miles, similar to Cherry County in Nebraska.

"Not a good idea," say other folks, who would live at the outer perimeters of say, a four-county consolidation.

However, there may be a bright spot on the horizon. A projected baby-boom retirement migration could have an impact on rural America, according to John Cromartie and Peter Nelson in an economic research report for the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

They say that members of the baby boom generation, now 45 to 63, are approaching a period in their lives when people move to rural areas and small towns. They are looking for some amenities like good hospitals and clinics, yet with a quieter and slower pace, away from heavy traffic and crime.

Cromartie and Nelson wrote that an analysis of "age-specific" net migration during the 1990s revealed a significant shift in patterns as Americans moved through different life-cycle stages. And if the post-World-War-II generation follows similar patterns, rural counties could experience an influx of Baby Boomers between now and 2020.



Kevin Wark was planting wheat on corn ground that had been hailed. Wark is part of a shrinking population of farmers in Thomas County. The farm financial crisis of the 1980s and federal payments going to larger operators created an exodus of the farm population.

— Photo by Vera Sloan/Colby Free Press

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