

Depopulation is the Fork in the Road Where Change Meets Opposition

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If you think accepting change is difficult, try implementing it. History tells us those who consciously choose to move off the often-traveled straight and narrow road are challenged. And not every adventurer survives.

Those who embrace the tried and proven are generally assured survival. Those who study change know that changing the tide of history is no easy task. This fact is manifested by the countless meetings these days held throughout the Midwest to stem the out-migration of people.

Many areas are literally at another fork in the road, trying to deal with the problems associated with an aging and declining population. The people from the plains of the Dakotas, Wyoming and Montana are disappearing fast. Homes and even churches and schools are for sale at an alarming rate.

Leadership is needed. Direction is needed. Answers are needed. In envisioning that fork, we often forget that every fork has at least two prongs or two paths. Most times the path of least resistance is taken. For instance, instead of resolving the need for people, technological advancements may accelerate depopulation.

I recall a recent advertisement promoting a driverless tractor as a way to make farming and ranching easier. Obviously, rather than address the need to maintain population, one is left with the eerie thought of a landscape simply run by machines. Perhaps with a flip of a switch here or tick of the lever there, the north forty is seeded. Does this truly reflect the direction and future the people of the region want?

Never before in the history of the region has there been such a need for people. The pioneers endured tremendous physical hardships to settle the region. Today, their descendants are called to preserve life here. There are no quick fixes to reverse the exodus of people, but that should not preclude attempts to reverse the trend. Perhaps the path of greater resistance is the better path.

The original premise under which this area of the country was settled did not account for regional differences in potential productivity or environmental fragility. From east to west, North Dakota presents several very different landscapes and most definitely transcends biological communities that vary depending on local

environment and climate (what scientists call biomes).

Agricultural practices which do not recognize limitations and opportunities for a specific biome are difficult to sustain. Production systems must be developed in response to innovative markets while ultimately supporting prairie communities and sustaining viable societies. In addition to producing the high quality food for consumers, the real urban benefit from crops and forages grown in western North Dakota may be the carbon that is stored in agricultural systems, and the rural benefit the value of the meat produced.

Did I say meat? Did I imply forage-based systems?

Yes, meat is the harvestable product of forage-based systems. The world population is seeking protein in the form of meat. Meeting demand for the world's population is a unique opportunity that a forage-based system, the less traveled path, can respond to.

For now, the reality of depopulation still smolders in the ruins of homestead shacks and lost towns. Some of these areas may have been overpopulated at one time. However, as cows at the North Dakota State University Dickinson Research Extension Center settle down at night a stone's throw from the ghost town of Fayette, I can't help but wonder if maybe our forefathers took the wrong path. Now may be our turn to develop production strategies that match conditions of the western plains or a more forage-based cropping system.

This system comes closer to the native plant community that was in place when the Europeans first arrived in this region. I don't want to be too critical of the elders, but a production system based on cows and forage doesn't sound half bad. It strikes a balance between forage-based and grain-based crop and livestock systems.

May you find all your ear tags.

Your comments are always welcome at www.BeefTalk.com. For more information, contact the North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association, 1133 State Avenue, Dickinson, ND 58601 or go to www.CHAPS2000.com on the Internet. In correspondence about this column, refer to BT0115.

Population Trends of Selected N.D. Counties

County	State Population Rank	1980 Population	2000 Population	2020 Population (projected)
Cass	1	88,247	123,138	151,651
Rolette	10	12,177	13,674	14,029
Mountrail	20	7,679	6,631	6,503
Emmons	30	5,877	4,331	3,710
Griggs	40	3,714	2,754	2,099
Golden Valley	50	2,391	1,924	1,658

North Dakota State Data Center, North Dakota State University