URBANIZATION IN UTAH
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In past decades, declining profitability of cattle ranching on both public and private land appeared to represent the greatest threat to livestock grazing. However, recent studies suggest that urbanization, accompanied with a shrinking land base, presents the gravest threat to western ranching. Additionally, other challenges to the western livestock industry, such as extensive invasion by non-native plants and an escalating concern over endangered species, are intensified by urbanization (Sheridan, 2007; Holechek, 2001).

Conservative estimates indicate that 3 to 4 million acres of private rangeland in the western United States have been converted to suburban developments and ranchettes (Holechek, 2001; Resnik et al., 2006). Since World War II, the western United States has changed from a rural society dominated by agriculture, livestock grazing, mining, and logging, to a society characterized by urban, suburban, and exurban growth. Beginning in the 1970s, a transformation of the land market was initiated. Farmland and rangelands began to be valued in terms of their real estate potential rather than their value as cropland and pastureland (Sheridan, 2007).

The rise of suburban growth has been attributed to post-World War II policy changes during the 1940s. Mortgage insurance and loan programs under the Federal Housing Authority and the Veterans Administration provided low-interest mortgages with minimal to no down-payments for first-time home buyers and returning veterans. Funding for the construction of interstate highways under the Interstate and Defense Highway Act of 1956 and low federal tax rates on automobile fuel contributed to the expansion of single-family dwellings in the suburbs (Williams, 2000; Soule, 2006). Floodplain insurance also contributed to the construction of homes in outlying areas (Burchell et al., 2005). Growing populations, rising incomes, falling commuting costs, and failures to account for the benefits of open space and the costs of infrastructure have contributed to suburban growth that has displaced valuable agricultural land (Brueckner, 2000; Kotval and Mullin, 2006).

Continued suburban and exurban growth in the western United States has been promoted by two primary circumstances. First, improved communication and technology, rising affluence, and demographic shifts have increased the demand for residential real estate and elevated the value of private rangeland property in the Intermountain West. Second, the profitability of agricultural industries continues to decline, particularly in arid public land ranches, as a result of rising production costs, such as insurance, electricity, taxes, livestock health care, transportation, supplemental feeding costs, and state and private lease grazing fees (Holechek, 2001; Holechek and Hawkes, 2007; Workman and Evans, 1993).

As a result of these two situations, ranchers and farmers may increasingly view selling land to developers as a viable alternative or as an inevitable option to intergenerational inheritance (Gosnell and Travis, 2005). When a decision is made by a rancher or farmer to sell property, a cascading effect of land transformation is instigated. The decision of a single ranch or farm owner to sell land may, in fact, determine the fate of many thousand acres. Landowner decisions affect more than their own property. One decision can weaken the agricultural infrastructure, change the land values, and create new growth nodes (Liffman et al., 2000). Livestock producers who wish to remain in production may not be able to lease sufficient land to supplement their deeded land, and they may not remain financially viable. Consequently, they may succumb to development pressure (Resnik et al., 2006).

The rapid rate of land transformation, accompanied by urban, suburban, and exurban growth, is coupled with large-scale rangeland and farmland fragmentation. Land fragmentation adversely affects the efficiency and productivity of agricultural operations. Some studies have indicated that for every 1 acre lost to subdivisions, another 3 to 10 acres may be lost from the ranching land base due to fragmentation (Holechek, 2001). The repercussions of unregulated growth and land fragmentation include declining agricultural commodities, suppression of rural economies, displacement of wildlife habitat, elimination of recreational opportunities, and rising land prices.

In addition to the direct loss and fragmentation of private rangeland and farmland, the unregulated patterns of urbanization in the Intermountain West pose several indirect social and economic problems to ranchers and farmers. Typically, as suburbanization extends into rural areas, agricultural and nonagricultural land-use conflicts become more severe. Increases in non-farm population in rural and semi-rural areas introduce a number of factors that may undermine the agricultural establishments (Lopez et al., 1988).
Ranching and farming activities that are deemed nuisances by new suburban residents, such as burning and weed control, may be legislated against. Property taxes, which are substantially incurred by ranchers and farmers who own vast tracts of land, may be increased to pay for new schools, roads, and utilities. The costs of infrastructure, such as roads, electricity, sewage, water, and telecommunication, for low density housing are typically two to four times more than those associated with higher density housing within city or town perimeters. The principle of eminent domain may be imposed by governments to acquire ranchland and farmland for public uses aimed at serving the new suburban population. Trespassing, vandalism, and loss of livestock from theft and vehicle accidents may increase as development extends beyond the urban fringe (Berry, 1978; Holechek, 2001).

In Utah, the land in farms, including harvested cropland and pastureland, declined by 2.5 million acres, or 18 percent, from 1960 to 2008 (NASS, 2009). Although urbanization may not be the sole cause of this decrease in Utah, it has undeniably contributed to the trend. Since Mormon settlers entered the Salt Lake Valley in 1847, the population has steadily grown. With the exception of the Great Depression and the recession in the late 1980s, the average growth rate in Utah since 1900 has been about 2.5 percent per decade. In 1900, the population of Utah was 276,749; in 1950, the population was 688,862; and in 2000, the population was 2,233,169. The estimated population of Utah in 2008 was 2,736,424. The population has long been concentrated along the wasatch Front; however, the Wasatch back valleys and southern Utah are experiencing some of the highest rates of growth. As of 2008, the five most populated counties in Utah were Salt Lake County with a population of 1,009,518; Utah County at 483,702; Davis County at 288,146; Weber County at 221,846; and Washington County at 133,791 (Figure 8.7.1). The five fastest growing counties, given the rates of change from the 1990 Census to the 2007 Census estimates, were Washington, Summit, Iron, Tooele, and Wasatch counties (Figure 8.7.2).

Many state and local government agencies are beginning to implement solutions that counter this trend of land transformation. Tax-based funds are being developed, such as the State of Utah LeRay McAllister Critical Land Conservation Fund, to preserve critical lands, such as farmland, ranchland, wildlife habitat, and culturally and historically significant landscapes, from future development. Tax-based revenues are often used to purchase conservation easements. Conservation easements are legal agreements between private landowners and land trusts or government agencies that extinguish the development rights in order to protect the valuable resources on the property. The property remains in the possession of the original landowner and most private property rights are retained. The easement is held by a land trust, such as The Nature Conservancy, or a government agency, such as the Utah Department of Natural Resources or Utah Department of Agriculture and Food (UGOPB, 2008).
Figure 8.7.1. Populations of Utah counties.
Figure 8.7.2. Population growth rates of Utah counties.