

A Growing Colorado Anticipates a 2040 Population of 7.8 Million People

By: **BENTE BIRKELAND AND BURT HUBBARD** | December 14, 2015

"Colorful Colorado" may one day need to be referred to as "Crowded Colorado," given the number of people anticipated moving here during the next 25 years.



David Fulmer / Flickr.com

A sight many see as they enter the state, this Colorful Colorado sign can be seen along Route 40 as you enter into Moffat County from Utah.

El Paso County will still be the state's most populous county in 2040, with Denver remaining in second place. But Weld County's population is expected to double to half-a-million, and the growth will not be just along the Front Range.

A *Rocky Mountain PBS News* analysis of data from the state demographer and the U.S. Census Bureau shows seven of the 10 fastest growing counties will be on the Western Slope, including Eagle, Garfield and Routt counties.

The numbers show an estimated 7.8 million people will call Colorado home by 2040, an increase of about 2.3 million. All that growth will take a toll on the state's infrastructure as well as water and other natural resources.

The population projections from the state demographer

also show:

- Almost half of the state's growth, 1.1 million people, will take place in the seven county Denver metro area, whose population will soar to 4.1 million by 2040. Denver will remain the second largest county, barely edging out Arapahoe County. Both will have more than 850,000 residents within 25 years.
- Douglas County, the state's growth leader in the 1990s and early part of the 21st Century will see growth slow. By 2040, it will rank only 24th in overall growth since 2015 with its population increasing by 51 percent.
- San Juan County will remain the state's smallest county, adding only 82 residents and have a total population of 787 by 2040. Otero and Washington counties on the Eastern Plains will grow the least, adding just over 5 percent to their respective populations over the next 25 years.

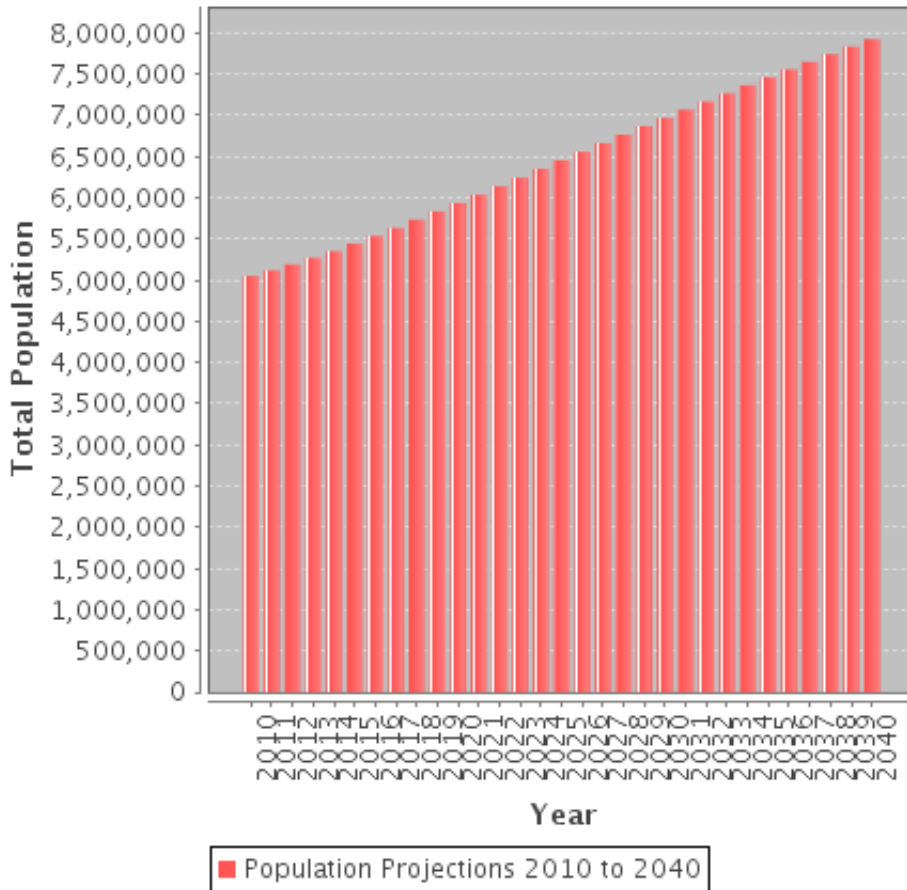
"Colorado continues to attract those in the 24-35 year age group and that means there's jobs here and young people are coming from all over the country to fill those jobs," said Mark Radke, with the Colorado Municipal League. "It shows health, if you were seeing the opposite you'd know you'd have a problem."

Growth, though, poses its own challenges.

Affordable Housing

Colorado's housing market is already tight (<http://www.kunc.org/post/colorados-fast-recovery-brings-growth-and-housing-crunch/>). More people will likely continue to price out those who can't keep up with the real estate market.

Population Projections 2010 to 2040



Spokeswoman Kelly Moye of the Colorado Association of Realtors said some in the industry are concerned that the absence of housing affordability will become a major issue.

"So eventually our market will become not affordable for most people," Moye said. "And when companies look to bring jobs and all their employees here, they may choose another place because it's not an affordable place to live ... so it's a big challenge."

It's already a challenge in Colorado's resort communities (<http://www.kunc.org/post/summit-county-middle-class-feels-squeeze-attainable-housing>). Thirty-year-old Tran Pham was able to find a place to live in Telluride, but that's just half the equation. She couldn't find space to grow her Vietnamese food business, so she's moving on

(<http://o6ych40o0am16zwr12vywxa1ccx.wpengine.netdna-cdn.com/files/2015/12/colorado-population-projections-2010-2040-state-demography-office-11302015.png>)

State Demographer's Office/Department of Local Affairs

State Demography Office / Department of Local Affairs

(<https://pixpix.co/gnartgnart/8Hi3VNNZhW/>).

"I love Telluride. (But) my passion to do something for myself is a little bit bigger than Telluride," Pham said. "If I was able to get a place set up here then I would totally be staying."

An Urban-Rural Divide

Most of those moving here will likely settle in more urban areas, while some rural communities (<http://www.kunc.org/post/colorados-rapid-urban-growth-encroaching-weld-countys-ag-roots>) are struggling to stay relevant. Pockets of Western Colorado and the Eastern Plains will stay stagnant or lose population.

John Sutherland, the city administrator of Lamar – located two hours east of Pueblo – said young people in his community are leaving to go to areas with better job prospects.

"We've got a number of initiatives underway by people who have dug their heels in and said we're not going to allow this to happen," he said.

Sutherland is hopeful that "attitude will win," but he isn't sure it will be enough. For the Municipal League's Radke, taking on the challenges seen in Lamar and elsewhere will take some new approaches.

"What I've always found heartening is the inventiveness of these communities and building on what they have and making the most of that to improve their economy," said Radke.

Planning For What's Next

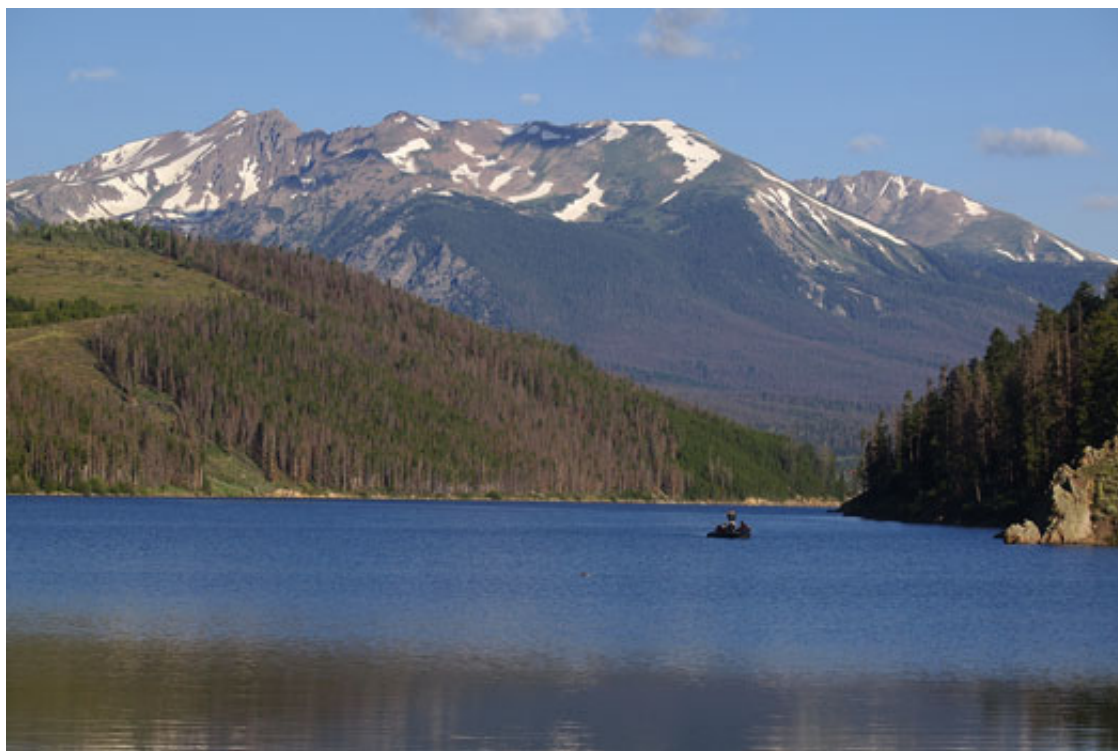
Change is inevitable – which is why state leaders say it's important to create long-term plans now. For example, how do we ensure enough water for those additional 2.3 million people the state expects by 2040? With an acre foot of water for every two families annually, the growth will require almost 300,000 acre feet of new water each year. By comparison, Lake Dillon, the largest reservoir in the Denver Water system, has a capacity of 257,304 acre feet.

Gov. John Hickenlooper is promising action on that front in the newly-released statewide water plan. Colorado also has a commission on aging and during the 2015 session lawmakers created a separate task force to study the issue and examine everything from healthcare and transportation to housing and retirement savings.

While Colorado is among the youngest states in the country, a large group of people who moved here in the 1970s will be reaching retirement. State demographer Elizabeth Garner points out that nothing "magical happens at 65," but that change is part of the deal.

"You start switching into that non-worker, your commuting is different, your use of transportation is different, your housing may change," Garner said. "Your spending changes."

Managing that change is the next challenge for a growing Colorado.



<http://o6ych40o0am16zwr12vywxa1ccx.wpengine.netdna-cdn.com/files/2015/12/Lake-Dillon.jpg>

Denver Water

Lake Dillon is the largest reservoir in the Denver Water system, at 257,304 acre feet. The 2.3 million new residents of Colorado by 2040 are expected to need an additional 300,00 acre feet of water each year.

This story was produced in collaboration with Rocky Mountain Community Radio. Jim Hill and Stephanie Paige Ogburn of KUNC Radio contributed.