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State of the Debate

Debate: All of rural America is shrinking, monuments or no monuments ...

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In this Friday, Nov. 13, 2015 photo, Bart Fisher, farmer and president of the Palo Verde Irrigation District, looks at the Colorado River while pausing for photos in Blythe, Calif. The third-generation farmer who was born in Blythe, left 29 percent of his farmland fallow this year. The Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, the nations largest distributor of treated drinking water, became the largest landowner in the region including Blythe for good reason: The alfalfa-growing area sits at the top of the legal pecking order to Colorado River water, a lifeline for seven Western states and northern Mexico.(AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)

The underlying flaw in the arguments raised by many Utah politicians who want to turn vast amounts of federal land over to the state or to private owners, and who are trying to block or rescind a Bears Ears National Monument, is that so much of Utah is being denied its share of economic growth because so much land is "locked up" by the feds.

— [Top Utah leaders vow to use whole 'arsenal' to fight Bears Ears monument](#) — Brian Maffly | The Salt Lake Tribune

That thinking is hard to dislodge because, it would appear, so many people actually believe it. It is not, or not only, a deliberate fudge told by people in the pay of the fossil fuel industry. Folks actually buy it.

Which requires them to be willfully ignorant of the fact that the

depopulation of rural American has been going strong for decades. The focus in many places is on big public-lands states like Utah and Oregon. But the decline is also severe in Kansas, Nebraska, Arkansas, even rural Wisconsin and Pennsylvania, places where the feds own little or no land and any national monuments are confined to a famous person's house.

Economic development today, as you can tell by looking up and down the Wasatch Front, is centered in places that already have economic development. Cities are growing. Rural areas are declining. People, especially creative, entrepreneurial people want to be around other creative, entrepreneurial people. Farming is increasingly mechanized and more and more farmland is owned by fewer and fewer people. Economic growth in rural areas, such as it is, is usually tied to boom-and-bust fossil fuel operations, the kind that light everyone's fire for short periods of time before going bust and leaving small, already under-financed cities and counties to clean up the mess.

— [Rural States Try to Stop Population Exodus](#) — Tim Henderson | Governing Magazine

" ... Population loss is a long-term trend in much of rural America, and it's gotten more acute since 2010, according to a Stateline analysis. Although 759 rural counties in 42 states lost population between 1994 and 2010, more than 1,300 rural counties in 46 states have lost population since 2010.

"As a result, some states with dwindling rural populations, such as Nebraska and Kansas, are trying to lure people with tax incentives, and small, shrinking localities are looking for ways to share services or cut back as the pool of taxpayers shrinks.

"They've tried shifting schools online in Colorado, and reverting to gravel roads in North Dakota and Michigan. The 251 residents of the village of Brokaw, Wisconsin, have launched an online campaign to raise \$2.5 million toward a \$3.8 million budget shortfall. ..."

— [Smallville, USA, Fades Further](#) — Neil Shah | Wall Street Journal

Migration Trend Underlines Economic Shift as Young People Chase Jobs in Cities

" ... The number of births in the U.S. last year exceeded deaths by the smallest margin in 35 years, according to Kenneth Johnson, a demographer at the University of New Hampshire. All told, in roughly a third of America's counties, more people died than were born. This "natural decline" was most acute in rural counties, about 40% of which tallied more deaths than births last year—a rate more than twice what was seen in metro counties, Mr. Johnson said. ..."

— [Why Wyoming Is in Economic Trouble](#) — Justin Fox |Bloomberg View

" ... There are two main reasons the state's economy has been lagging that of the nation and its Rocky Mountain neighbors. The obvious one is that Wyoming's economy is built around energy extraction, and the past couple of years have been tough on the energy business. But it also seems significant that as economic growth has become more and more concentrated in large metropolitan areas, Wyoming doesn't happen to have any of those. ..."

" ... The logic of large metropolitan areas as job-creation centers is that as production work (such as manufacturing and mining) gets automated, interactions between humans will become more and more important. Put more humans — especially humans with lots of skills — together, and you get more economic growth. And while some of this interacting can be done virtually, people seem to prefer living where there are lots of other people. Bigger metropolitan areas mean more alternatives if your (or your spouse's) current job goes away, and more amenities too. ..."

— [The Graying of Rural America](#) — Alana Semuels | The Atlantic

"... Over the past two decades, as cities have become job centers that attract diverse young people, rural America has become older, whiter, and less populated. Between 2010 and 2014, rural areas lost an average of 33,000 people a year. Today, just 19 percent of Americans live in areas the Census department classifies as rural, down from 44 percent in 1930. But roughly one-quarter of seniors live in rural

communities, and 21 of the 25 oldest counties in the United States are rural.

"Population decline in rural America is especially concentrated in the West. There's a lot of wide-open land there, but most people, and young people especially, live in the cities. Half the jobs in Oregon, for example, are now in three counties in and around Portland, according to a study by Headwaters. Almost two-thirds of Utah's jobs are along the Wasatch Front, which runs from Salt Lake City to Provo. ..."

— [Water limits renew urban vs. rural debate](#) — Chris Nichols | San Diego Union-Tribune

" ... In San Diego County, the scarcity and high cost of water has led to a loss of roughly 10,000 acres of avocado orchards over the past decade. Instead of growing one of the region's signature crops, avocado farmers are experimenting with vineyards and other less-water guzzling plants. Other growers have switched to solar farms or sold their property to development firms. ..."

— [Population and Migration Overview](#) — U.S. Department of Agriculture

" ... Nonmetro population growth from net migration peaked in 2006, then declined precipitously and shifted geographically in response to rising unemployment, housing-market challenges, energy sector developments, and other factors. ..."