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UNEASY COMPROMISES: In a sign of just how much the Western landscape has changed, cowboys kept their eyes on traffic as they drove 80-some cattle down US 34 in Colorado's Larimer County last year.

DOUGLAS VAN
REETH/LOVELAND DAILY
REPORTER-HERALD/AP

THE NEW PIONEERS OF SPRAWL

As Westerners pursue their own swaths of rural land, 'ranchettes' - and culture clashes - spread.

By [Amanda Paulson](#) / *Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor*

FORT COLLINS, COLO. – Larimer County is a study in contrasts. Situated on Colorado's northern edge, it's the bridge between urban Boulder and the plains of Wyoming, between arid grasslands to the east and the 14,000-foot razor peaks of Rocky Mountain National Park to the west.

It's close enough to Denver to be within commuting distance, but far enough that pristine tracts of wide open space persist, and fifth-generation farmers and ranchers still work on the land.

So it's not surprising that Larimer County is a prime battleground in one of Colorado's - and the nation's - most recent growth concerns: rural sprawl.

Sprawl, of course, is hardly a new issue for Colorado, a state whose population is growing faster than that of Bangladesh. But the focus is usually on dense subdivisions and the endless expanse of malls that creep over hills along the interstates.

Now, as more and more of the West's open space is carved up and converted into 35-acre "ranchettes" - the lower limit for avoiding subdivision restrictions in Colorado - some worry that the trend of exurban growth, while more subtle, could cause lasting damage to a countryside and culture that's already disappearing.

"This is the unknown threat to Colorado's landscape," says Will Coyne, a land-use expert at the Environment Colorado. "The focus on growth has been around urban and suburban growth, while we're watching millions of acres be consumed by ranchettes."

BIRDS, BEARS, AND FOOTPRINTS

Beyond environmental effects, the slow shift of telecommuters and retirees into rural areas populated by ranchers and farmers is a demographic transformation that's creating tension, straining local economies, and fueling a culture clash.

In 2000, nearly 2.5 million acres of Colorado's land was exurban development (parcels of 1.7 to 40 acres), according to David Theobald, a research scientist at Colorado State University's Natural Resource Ecology lab. By 2030, he calculates, that will more than double. "Rural sprawl has a larger footprint - between five and 10 times the amount of land as urban and suburban development - throughout the West," he says.

That footprint is a big reason that exurban development has people worried despite its seeming innocuousness compared with a densely populated subdivision.

To urbanites, 35 acres can seem enormous, and the herds of elk and antelope that still wander across properties can make the wilds seem undisturbed. But on a landscape scale, 35 acres is tiny: As far as the wildlife and plants are concerned, it might as well be a subdivision, according to Rick Knight, a wildlife conservation professor at Colorado State University. The properties are often overgrazed and more homes are threatened by wildfires. When Professor Knight compared biodiversity on ranchlands, protected lands, and exurban developments, the exurban sections - populated by dogs and cats in addition to more people - were by far the worst.

"It had the weediest flora, and the birds and carnivores you'd find in a suburban development," he says. Native songbirds like towhees or vesper sparrows are replaced by robins and magpies, and predators like badgers and bobcats start to disappear.

Those mules, mountain lions, and black bears that homeowners glimpse from their porches often aren't signs of an unharmed landscape, he continues, but anomalies of species slowly leaving an area. "We can understand how someone going in with a chainsaw and clearcutting a hillside affects the ecological community," Knight says. "but we can't seem to understand our own human impacts."

CHASING A SLICE OF THE WEST

Such concerns, says Martha Pagliotti, put blame in the wrong place. She and her husband

retired to their ranchette, in a development of 35-acre properties about 20 minutes outside Fort Collins, three years ago. They'd finally been chased from the home near Arvada, Colo., that they'd lived in and loved for 33 years; so many houses were going up that they could no longer see the mountains, or the stars at night.

"They've let this state be beyond ruined," Mrs. Pagliotti says. "Don't tell me I changed Colorado because I have 35 acres of land. I'm trying to live within the land of the Colorado I love."

Bonner Peak Ranch, where the Pagliottis moved, is a picturesque area of some 80 properties on the edge of the foothills, with log cabins and stately homes nestled among rugged ridges. Most homes blend into the pinyon-tufted hills. The other day, says Pagliotti, she saw 27 deer on her lawn.

"I love the quietness and the naturalness," she says. "Seeing the sunset, having the land. We chose this particular thing because it's what was available."

Pagliotti is prepared for the compromises of rural living. Electricity often goes out, and when a freak snowstorm hit last year, six days passed before anyone could get into or out of their driveways.

But not everyone who moves here is as ready for the inconveniences. Highways, cellphones, and Internet access have encouraged commuters and former urbanites to go after a slice of the West, but the reality doesn't always match the ideal.

John Clarke, a former commissioner of Larimer County, remembers new residents complaining that the county hadn't plowed roads that were their own responsibility, or that the mailman wouldn't drive three miles in to a house. One man complained the county graded his road only once a year. "I did a calculation - we were getting \$800 a year in property taxes from the properties abutting the road, and spending \$7,000 to maintain the road once a year," says Clarke. "But he wanted more."

A CLASH OF EXPECTATIONS

So as the demographic shift brings a culture clash along with a landscape transformation, the

tension isn't just between lifestyles, but between reality and expectations. That's why Mr. Clarke wrote the "Code of the West" when he was commissioner, outlining realities basic to any rural resident - "unpaved roads generate dust;" "manure can cause objectionable odors" - but an unpleasant surprise for others.

"People say they want to move into rural areas," says Jim Reidhead, director of Larimer County's Rural Land Use Center. "What they want to do is superimpose an urban lifestyle on rural America. They get upset when they're on the way to Hewlett Packard and they're caught behind a combine. They don't like the smells, and God forbid their neighbor's out haying at 3 a.m. We have truly a clash of cultures."

But few can agree on the solution. Some suggest increasing the 35-acre exemption - as Montana did, to 160 acres - giving counties more say over planning and zoning when land is sold. But that's an unpopular idea among ranchers, farmers, and the state's fierce property-rights advocates, and many experts question whether it would get to the heart of the problem.

Still, Mr. Reidhead is doing his part to find solutions that work around ideologies. Unlike some, he doesn't see the 35-acre development as an unqualified evil. He's seen 35-acre tracts managed well, especially when property lines are delineated to maximize open space, cluster homes, and minimize damage caused by roads.

So instead of outlawing the ranchette, he'd like both sides - environmentalists and property-rights people - to find solutions for common goals, like preserving vast ranch and farmlands that still cover much of the West.

"The dilemma in the planning business is that everyone knows what they don't want," says Reidhead, surrounded by maps and county plans in his Fort Collins office. "It takes an entire community to preserve farmland. We're asking the farmer not to become a millionaire [by selling off his land]. We have to meet him halfway."

One of Reidhead's main projects involves helping farmers and ranchers develop less productive sections of their land - the corners that a pivot irrigation system can't reach, for instance - while keeping the vast majority of the property intact. In exchange for putting conservation easements

on most of the land, the county allows the rest to be developed into parcels smaller than 35 acres, while still avoiding some of the most restrictive subdivision requirements, like sewers.

Driving out of Fort Collins, he points to a project he facilitated - six homesites, clustered along the corner of a farmer's irrigated land, taking up far less space than if he had simply subdivided and sold out. "It's a decent compromise," says Reidhead.

But farther out of town, he passes an example of the real reason he's fighting the onslaught of development: the Roberts Ranch, nearly 20,000 acres of the West the way it used to be. It stretches up from the flat plains to the rocky plateaus and ravines of the foothills, rugged red country without a house in sight. An antelope herd grazes calmly just off the road.

"This is the Western landscape right here," says Reidhead with a smile. "Some days I get a little discouraged, and I come out here and see, well, it does make a difference. This is a landscape worth fighting for."



STAFF
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