



Saskatchewan faces population crisis as thriving Alberta draws skilled workers

James Wood, with files from Murray Lyons in Fort McMurray, Alta.

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REGINA -- As the Alberta boom continues to draw people from across Canada, Saskatchewan is bleeding people to the province next door.

A declining birth rate and the continuing outflow of people especially to economically red-hot Alberta, which saw over 12,000 Saskatchewan residents arrive in 2004-2005 have choked off any growth in the province.

The most recent estimates put Saskatchewan's population at only 990,000 people, smaller than some of Canada's major cities.

When Saskatchewan was born, its founders envisioned a province that would grow as abundantly as the crops that burst from its fertile soil. A century later, the fear is that without growth, Saskatchewan will wither like a wheat field without rain.

Over the last 70 years, the province has seen its population wax and wane by small increments, exceeding the million mark for a brief few years only to slip below it once again.

Even now, with steady economic growth fuelled by sky-high resource prices, Saskatchewan's population isn't growing and has in fact dipped in recent quarterly reports.

After decades of holding steady, alarm bells are sounding that the province's current trajectory is a recipe for disaster unless changes are made.

The University of Saskatchewan's Mark Partridge says the province's population can grow or shrink.

But the status quo is not an option.

"I don't see a scenario where we stay at a million people," says the director of the Canada Rural Economy Research Lab at the University of Saskatchewan.

"We're going to start losing people because we will not be able to provide the services or at such an expensive rate and eventually we'll start driving out people that need more services."

After Saskatchewan became a province in 1905, the population surged with settlers lured by cheap land and the vision of Saskatchewan as the breadbasket of Canada. By the 1931 census, Saskatchewan had over 922,000 people and was the third-largest province in Canada.

But the Great Depression and the Dirty '30s hit Saskatchewan's agriculture-based economy like a hammer, and by 1951 Saskatchewan had dropped to 832,000 people.

Today, it's the lure of high wages and guaranteed work in neighbouring Alberta that is causing large numbers of Saskatchewan residents to look west and, for many, leading them to places such as booming Fort McMurray, Alta.

Helen Duncan and her husband Barry left Saskatoon about three years ago. Now the manager of YMCA community programs in Fort McMurray, she says Saskatchewan young people are quite in demand on local job sites, especially those who may have taken a year of pre-employment trades training.

"They are naturally way more sought-after when they come," she said.

Barry had worked 19 years in Saskatchewan as a geologist, but was a victim of soft uranium markets. He went back to the U of S for further business education, and after years of trying to hook up with a Saskatchewan mining company he has his career back on track with the Albian Sands project.

Recruiters from Albian Sands were recently in Saskatoon. Two hours into a three-hour session, the line of interested job-seekers still snaked out of a hotel meeting room.

Chris Hogg, originally from Outlook, Sask., may have the kind of professional credentials that an oilsands company is looking to get. He's just completed an electrical engineering degree at the U of S and he's sure that if you find the right job in the oilsands "you can make a career of it."

While the crowd at the Albian Sands job fair was mostly male, Lessa Savage and her girlfriends figure the time is right to give Alberta a try.

"Alberta is where it's at," said Savage, 22, who admits she has what she considers a good job in Saskatoon. "There's more money ... more things to do."

Even having what appears to be a more assured job in small-town Saskatchewan is not reason enough to stay for some. Kevin and Carol Foster have lived in Hudson Bay, Sask., for a number of years and Kevin works at the modern OSB mill built by Weyerhaeuser six years ago. But with just one child left at home, the family has decided it's time for a change.

"Our son is taking off to Alberta," Carol says. "He knows that's where his job opportunities are as he goes into engineering."

U of S agricultural economists Partridge, Rose Olfert and Murray Fulton have studied Saskatchewan's population issues extensively, issuing a major study last year.

They found that the province is part of a pattern of pervasive population decline throughout the Great Plains of North America, from West Texas to the northern prairies. That comes mainly from a long-term shift in the agricultural sector because of technological and economic changes.

Whereas the number of farms in Saskatchewan once exceeded 140,000, the number is now around 50,000. And where an overwhelming majority of the population was once rural, Saskatchewan is now primarily an urban province.

Partridge says population growth is now a necessity for Saskatchewan. Out-migration strips many of the best-educated and highly trained young people from Saskatchewan, leading to a potential shortage in the workforce.

Economists worry that a stagnant tax base will make it difficult to pay for increasingly expensive services and infrastructure. Low population numbers also affect the amount Saskatchewan receives from the federal government in transfers and equalization.

"We could enter a vicious circle. We lose more people, we lose more services, we lose even more people and even more people ... we really need to turn that around," says Partridge.

While Saskatchewan's aboriginal population has a high birth rate and is growing rapidly, it is not fully integrated into the province's education system or labour force.

The other problem with the lack of growth is that the province's widely-distributed population makes for an inequitable distribution of services.

The "vicious circle" that Partridge talks about has already been seen in rural areas, where declining population contributed to cuts in services such as the closure of rural hospitals in the early 1990s which then contributed to further population loss.

The province's lack of growth has been a perennial political issue in Saskatchewan.

In its campaign in the 2003 provincial election, the Saskatchewan Party ran on a platform that called for growing the province by 100,000 people in 10 years.

"It's an issue we hear about every single day," says Saskatchewan Party Leader Brad Wall. "We hear directly from moms and dads and grandparents that they're just tired of going to Calgary to visit their kids."

Premier Lorne Calvert says globalization, liberalized trade and a shift in the agricultural economy since the 1980s means Saskatchewan can no longer be complacent about growth.

The measures taken in this spring's provincial budget cuts in corporate taxes to enhance economic development, a continued tuition freeze at the province's universities and new spending on skills training and a new emphasis on immigration have all been linked explicitly by the NDP government to population growth.

Partridge says cities need to be strong to serve as engines of growth for both urban and rural Saskatchewan.

While Saskatoon's population is still well below the important milestone of 500,000, it is, along with Halifax, one of two "contender engines" of growth in Canada that are under that mark.

"There is some critical mass, it has an innovation climate, it has a nice university, it has some cultural amenities. Saskatoon has some elements that could pull it, and it could gain critical mass. (But) we shouldn't be saying it will happen overnight," says Partridge.

As for the long term, Helen Duncan is too taken with her new community to say when she and Barry might return to Saskatoon, if ever. For now, she doesn't see Fort McMurray's proximity to Saskatchewan as a threat to the province's economy.

"I think that Fort McMurray is here to complement Saskatchewan and not steal from it," she said. "I am in the newcomers club and a lot of our members are from Saskatchewan."

"Most of them plan on returning, and that will be good for the Saskatchewan economy."

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