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By Walter E. Hecox and Christopher B. Jackson

The Rockies Project identified a county-by-county measure of fire risk and calculated the top 10 counties most at risk. Of them, seven are in Arizona: Maricopa, Pima, Pinal, Navajo, Coconino, Mohave and Yavapai. Other high-risk fire counties are Clark, Nev.; Santa Fe, N.M.;
and El Paso County in Colorado.

Rapid population growth, perhaps above all else, fuels change in the Rockies. The explosion of people, when mixed with other regional trends, threatens the Rockies profoundly. The steady influx of people contributes to the strength of the economy and social fabric of the region. But with them comes added pressure on the infrastructure and natural amenities. Included in the changes sparked by the current population explosion are major modifications to the size and character of the metropolitan centers.

Between 2000 and 2005, the population of the Rocky Mountain region grew 9 percent, 4.5 times the national rate. Contrary to the perception of being mostly rural, the population of the Rockies actually is more urbanized than the U.S. as a whole. In 2005, 83 percent of Rockies residents lived in an urban area, compared to 79 percent nationally. In 1950, 55 percent of Rockies residents lived in an urban area, and in 1900, only 32 percent did.

Rapid population growth coincides with an increase in urban construction. A Brookings Institution report finds that six of the top states in the U.S. for predicted growth in residential housing units over the next 25 years are in the Rocky Mountain West, with Nevada, Arizona and Utah being the top three. A closer look at metropolitan statistical areas in the Rockies yields similar growth trends. Predicted growth of housing units places Las Vegas first, followed by Phoenix, Salt Lake City, Tucson and Denver. One important component of growth in the Rockies is the increase in those aged 65 and older, a boom within a boom. Between 2000 and 2005, the elderly population in the West grew by 45 percent, a higher rate than in any other region. Many cities in the region have experienced double-digit growth of their elderly population, including St. George, Utah, 27 percent; Las Vegas-Paradise, Nev., 22 percent; Santa Fe, N.M., 17 percent; and Colorado Springs and Fort Collins, both 11 percent.

As more people move into urban and suburban areas, opportunities and challenges arise. Urban growth manifests itself not just in the familiar sprawl pattern, but also in planned and thematic developments. Trends toward new urbanism result in different approaches toward combining housing, recreation, basic health care and employment in one location. Such trends will help define - and perhaps maintain the region's quality of life - in the 21st century.

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