

Leaving: ‘The biggest reason we left was regulation’

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Farm migration

According to U.S. Census Bureau data, between summers 2020 to 2021, 4.3 million U.S. residents moved from one state to another. California and Washington lost residents to net out-migration, while the South and Intermountain West grew in population.

This general population data, however, doesn't reveal how many farmers moved.

Experts at nearly two dozen Western organizations — state departments of commerce, revenue, business and agriculture, along with non-profits and associations — said they are not aware of any organization that tracks businesses relocating to other states.

“It's challenging because businesses are not required to notify the state if they close or move out of state,” said Penny Thomas, spokeswoman for the Washington State Department of Commerce.

Lynn Hamilton, professor of agribusiness at California Polytechnic University-San Luis Obispo, said that rather than moving, farmers more commonly respond to pressures by consolidating, retiring early or phasing out labor-intensive crops in favor of machine-harvestable crops with higher profit margins.

Some operations, including vineyards, are especially hard to move, said Tawny Tesconi, executive director of the Sonoma County Farm Bureau.

“As farmers, we can't pick up the ground and move it,” said Shannon Douglass, a Glenn County farmer and first vice president of the California Farm Bureau Federation.

Dairy and livestock producers have moved in larger numbers.

According to USDA, between 2020 to 2021, California and Washington lost dairy cows while other states, including South Dakota and Texas, gained.

Ben Laine, vice president of dairy analysis at RaboResearch, said this can be attributed to increasing efficiency, farmers moving away from high-cost states and rising consumer demand for processed dairy products including cheese; many cheese plants are in or near the Midwest.

“It's not the case that everybody's bailing out of the West Coast,” said Laine. “Some are moving, but I don't want to sound the alarm. California is and will continue to be the main dairy state.”

Although most farmers aren't leaving, people with a bird's eye view — experts at land-grant universities, farm groups and commodity commissions — said they have noticed an uptick in farmers moving during the past few years.

“People have talked about moving for years and years, but now people are actually doing it,” said Ryan Jacobsen, manager of the Fresno County Farm Bureau. “Statistically, it's still probably a blip on the radar. But it's crazy that it's actually happening. Some people are

focused innovative data collection, research and modeling” to provide real-time data on water quality, quantity and usage. From there, scientists can develop an Integrated Water Availability Assessment predicting the amount of

surface water and groundwater available to balance each basin's needs.

Don Cline, USGS associate director for water, said water monitoring, research and modeling will help the Willamette Basin come up

with innovative solutions to issues that are common across many Northwest river systems.

“For example, we expect it to bolster our scientific understanding of seasonal variation in precipitation, groundwater-surface water

interactions, snowpack influence on summer low flows, watershed response to severe fire and harmful algal bloom prediction,” Cline said.

The USGS says it will begin meeting with partners in the basin later this spring.



Wayne Smith, right, and his kids. Left to right are Royce, Lydia and Tyrell.



Stephanie Nash, a dairy farmer whose family left California for Tennessee.



Tawny Tesconi

Lynn Hamilton

pulling up stakes and moving out of here.”

Here are some of their stories.

Nash Family Farms

California to Tennessee

Most farmers who talked to the Capital Press moved between 2020 and 2022, with a notable exception: Stephanie Nash, whose family moved ahead of the latest wave.

Nash, 28, is a fourth-generation farmer whose family has been in dairy for more than 100 years.

In 2014, the Nash family moved from Selma, Calif., to Chapel Hill, Tenn.

“The biggest reason we left was regulation,” said Nash.

Steve Nash, Stephanie's dad, had worked for years to build up high-quality genetics, so he brought his cows to the new location. It took about 30 semi-truck loads to move the family's 900 cows.

“It was a heck of a journey,” said Stephanie Nash.

Leaving was sad, Stephanie said, but she said she's glad the family moved because Tennessee has been more “business-friendly.”

David Lemstra

California to South Dakota

David Lemstra, a dairy farmer, said that about a decade ago, he realized farming in California would become increasingly difficult due to rising labor costs and limited water.

Lemstra, 50, said the “straw that broke the camel's back” was the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act, legislation passed in 2014 that regulates groundwater management.

Lemstra said he believes



From left: Gail Sheelar, Pete Betancourt, Rick Sheelar and Brendan Duyck.

water shortages are not just the natural consequence of drought but are also the result of decisions made by government officials.

“I think California's water problem is a management issue,” said Lemstra.

In 2020, Lemstra's family sold its farm and herd and moved to South Dakota, a state with what Lemstra describes as “a more ag-friendly environment.”

Today, his family sells milk from its 4,000 cows to a newly expanded cheese plant.

Is he glad he moved? “Overjoyed,” he said. “We loved that place, enjoyed it very much, but California didn't seem to love us back.”

Smith family

Oregon to Nebraska

In early 2020, cattle ranchers Wayne and Midge Smith moved with their three kids from Oregon to Nebraska.

The Smiths had properties in Riley, near Burns, and Seneca, south of John Day.

The couple's decision to move was multifaceted, blending concerns over regulations, dwindling groundwater supplies and a desire to give their kids a better chance to farm for a living.

“In Oregon, it was an uphill battle to stay in business,” said Wayne Smith, 52. “To do the best thing for our business and for our kids to have a chance and a future in agriculture, we decided

to take the risk and make the move.”

It took 21 semi-trucks to haul their 360 best cattle to Nebraska.

Moving also took an emotional toll as the family left relatives, friends and land behind.

“Our whole family, we miss the mountains,” said Smith. “We don't have any mountains here. We can go to the highest point of our ranch, and as far as you can see, it's just rolling grass hills.”

But Smith said he believes his family made a good decision.

“There's not as much of a dairy wrestling match,” he said.

The Roths

Oregon to Oklahoma

In December 2021, the Roths — wife, husband and five children, who ran a cow-calf operation and grew organic crops in Hampton, Eastern Oregon — moved to Oklahoma.

What prompted the move? “On the one hand, I'd say political uncertainty. And on the other, I'd say political certainty,” said Stephen Roth, 47.

He explained that although policies were unpredictable, what was predictable was the political climate toward agriculture that, in his view, was mostly negative.

Roth said he and his wife were also concerned about

their children's education in Oregon's school system.

The icing on the cake was Oregon's energy and emissions regulations. Roth said that running a 1,800-acre organic crop operation demanded large amounts of diesel fuel.

And one year, from 2019 to 2020, the Roths said their farm's electricity costs increased by \$60,000.

They decided to move, leaving their cows and setting out to build a new herd.

Leaving felt strange, Roth said. He and several relatives attended Oregon State University, and he had thought his kids would do the same.

Shay Myers

Oregon to Idaho

For some farmers, “moving” has just meant expanding across state lines.

One example is Shay Myers, a grower in Malheur County, Ore., and CEO of Owyhee Produce.

“Obviously, our farmland can't be moved. So, we've moved our packing operations,” said Myers.

In the early 2000s, his business moved its asparagus-packing operation to Idaho, and in 2018, its onion packing operations. Next year, Myers plans to move the whole-peeled onion operation.

The No. 1 factor in these moves, Myers said, was the cost of labor. The minimum wage is lower in Idaho than in Oregon. Myers said that while some industries, like tech, can pass on or absorb costs, that's not an option for most farmers, who are “price-takers.”

Brendan Duyck

Oregon to Montana

At age 8, Brendan Duyck started helping his grandpa farm at the edge of Forest Grove, Ore., west of Portland.

“My mom thought I had too much energy, so she sent me to the farm,” said Duyck. He laughed.

When his grandpa retired, Duyck's uncle took over and Duyck helped run the 950-acre farm, which had a dairy and crop acreage.

In January of 2022, after 25 years of farming, Duyck moved his family to Montana.

Duyck said his main reason for leaving was Oregon's estate, or “death,” tax, but he said regulations, labor costs and concerns about COVID lockdowns all influenced the decision.

“I've been fed up with regulation and taxes for a long time. But COVID was the last straw,” he said.

Duyck got a temporary job at Discovery Ski Area in southwestern Montana, but

in the long term, he envisions working in agriculture.

In Montana, Duyck said, the community appreciates agriculture. Duyck said he feels like Oregonians “want all their food grown somewhere else, out of sight, out of mind.”

But Duyck left his heart in Oregon.

His uncle, 65, continues to run the farm. He's had three back surgeries, so running equipment for long periods of time can be hard on him. Duyck plans to visit this year to help with harvest, but there isn't a younger generation to take over the farm now.

“Oh dang, this is so hard,” Duyck said, his voice breaking as he fought back tears. “So hard to talk about it. It's hard. It was my life. I was pretty sure I was gonna die there.”

Rich Callahan

Washington to Nevada

Some farmers have left behind farm life for good.

In 2020, Richard “Rich” Callahan, a Washington state grower, sold his 450 acres of apples and cherries to a pension fund and moved to Nevada, retiring at 54, earlier than he had planned.

“It was the best thing I ever did,” he said. “I don't regret moving out of Washington.”

Callahan said that although he loved farming, he concluded “the risk was not worth the reward anymore” amid new regulations, climbing labor costs and other challenges.

Callahan said what frustrated him most was what he perceived as a negative attitude toward farmers from labor groups, state agencies and the public.

“It didn't matter what you did, you were always wrong, you were a bad person,” he said. “You could never get done looking over your shoulder, and I couldn't take it anymore.”

Those who stay

While some farmers leave, most remain.

“Most people aren't leaving. Most are staying,” said Douglass, the farmer in Glenn County, Calif. “I'm glad I'm here. We do have these roots and this love for the place. And we want to stay.”

Mary Anne Cooper, vice president for government affairs at the Oregon Farm Bureau, said farmers are pivoting, consolidating and planting different crops to stay in Oregon.

“It's in your blood,” she said. “It's everything that you've worked your life for.”

Into the unknown

For Shane and Crystal Otley of Harney County, the future is a blank slate. If their deal closes April 15, they plan to move their approximately 170 head of cattle to a state where they can expand and where their daughters, Jacey and Sierra, can “take up the reins” if they want.

“They're young. They can still change. But we want to leave that door open to them,” Shane Otley said of his daughters. “Where we're going, I hope will be better for all of us.”

Water: Research and modeling will help basin come up with innovative solutions

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date back to the 2009 SECURE Water Act, which directed the USGS to establish a national water availability assessment.

The agency uses “regionally

focused innovative data collection, research and modeling” to provide real-time data on water quality, quantity and usage. From there, scientists can develop an Integrated Water Availability Assessment predicting the amount of

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Weather: ‘You can't really rule anything out, but I think the odds are pretty slim’

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In the short term, the National Weather Service predicted Friday that Washington, Oregon and Idaho will be cooler and wetter than average over the next two weeks. Northern California's weather will be near normal,

the service predicted.

As expected during a La Nina, Washington's snowpack was strong early in the winter and was 107% of normal on Jan. 1. It declined to 95% of normal by March 1, according to the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

The snowpack typically peaks in April. It's been falling behind average all month.

NRCS water supply specialist Scott Pattee said Friday that he's not optimistic the snowpack will recover and get back to average.

“You can't really rule anything out, but I think the odds

are pretty slim,” he said.

The climate center predicting a wet January, February and March for Washington. “That has not played true at all,” Pattee said. “We should be receiving snow in the mountains every day this month.”

Bond said that even if La

Nina drops snow at high elevations, it may not provide much relief for low-elevation parts of Central and Eastern Washington that remain in severe or extreme drought.

“Some places that are more in trouble now don't necessarily do as great during La Nina,” he said.

Drought grips the entire West. Some 50% of Washington is in drought, the U.S. Drought Monitor reported March 10. Eight other Western states are suffering more.

Some 90% of Oregon and 100% of California are in a drought. Drought covers 84% of Idaho.