

A revival plan for Great Plains states

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The Northern Great Plains of Montana, the Dakotas, Wyoming and Nebraska are at an economic, demographic and ecological crossroads.

The dominant industry on the Northern Great Plains, agriculture, is unable to sustain a viable — much less, prosperous — economic base for the region despite being propped up by nearly \$16 billion in subsidies and disaster relief over the past five years and by the below-market leasing of 13 million acres of federal land for livestock grazing.

Meanwhile, the natural landscape, a potential important source of new economic growth, is a shadow of what it once was.

Just 150 years ago, the abundance of wildlife and prairie grasslands in the Northern Great Plains rivaled the Serengeti of East Africa. Today, farming and livestock grazing cover nearly 99 percent of the region, whereas refuges, parks and other conservation areas cover only 1 percent. Native prairie continues to be converted to crops, mainly because of farm subsidies.

The combination of public attitudes and fair-trade policies will eventually reduce agricultural subsidies in the region. This, combined with increasingly

competitive national and global markets, leaves little hope that grain and livestock production will ever again sustain the region.

A new approach to federal rural policy is urgently needed. One proposal comes in the form of the New Homestead Opportunity Act, introduced in Congress by U.S. Sens. Byron Dorgan of North Dakota and Chuck Hagel of Nebraska.

The measure proposes to stabilize rural areas that have experienced significant population loss by providing individual and business tax breaks for living there and by establishing a venture capital fund to promote business development.

The senators deserve credit for recognizing that the key to stemming population loss is to create economic opportunity in small communities. But the proposed act falls far short of what is needed because it fails to address the root causes of the problem.

According to a recent study by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service, one of the three main factors associated with population decline in rural areas is the lack of natural amenities for outdoor recreation.

Other studies of the western United States confirm that counties with ready access to national parks, wilderness areas and other outdoor recreation opportunities, compared to those without these amenities, experience substantially higher rates of population growth and economic prosperity.

A natural amenity economy arises when conservation areas and abundant wildlife attract new businesses and residents, generate significant revenues from tourism, and create jobs through institutional expenditures in land and wildlife management.

Economic revitalization of the Northern Great Plains will require that communities attract and retain well-educated people who participate in the national and global economy. Many rural communities have much to offer businesses in the form of a responsible work force, good schools and safe streets.

Few plains communities, however, provide large conservation areas that can provide high-quality outdoor recreation, from hunting and fishing to nature study, hiking and camping.

We can create a system of conservation areas in our nation's prairie heartland for local communities and the world to enjoy. All the pieces of our natural heritage are there, waiting for us to have the vision and fortitude to put them back together again.