

2012 Colorado Planning & Management Region Report

Region 14 – Huerfano and Las Animas Counties

INTRODUCTION

Region 14 includes the counties of Huerfano and Las Animas. Las Animas County is located at the southernmost border of Colorado and New Mexico with Huerfano County located north of Trinidad and south of Pueblo. Per the 2011 population estimates, the region's population is 21,465, a -6.95% change from 2000. Huerfano County experienced a -17.65% population change, while Las Animas County saw a 1.42% decrease over the same period.

County	Census 2000	July 2011	% Change
Huerfano	7,862	6,474	-17.65%
Las Animas	15,207	14,991	-1.42%
Colorado	4,301,261	5,118,526	19.00%

Source: State Demography Office

Las Animas County is the largest county in the state of Colorado and the fifth largest in the nation with 4,772 square miles; Trinidad is the county seat. At 6,025 feet in elevation, 300 days of sunshine and the charming brick streets the area is very welcoming to visitors and retirees. Travelers from the south along the I-25 corridor get their first glimpse of "Colorful Colorado" with the Sangre de Cristo Mountain range meaning "Blood of Christ" to the west and the Comanche Grasslands to the east. The area boasts 3 lakes that provide excellent fishing, water activities, camp sites, and RV accommodations. Informational programs include bird watching, flora and fauna identification and other educational programs to include youth involvement. The Trinidad Lake State Park amphitheater provides a venue for demonstrations of horno cooking, a form of adobe oven, bringing the Spanish cooking tradition incorporated into southwest cooking today. The area is also known for the famous Town Marshall, Bat Masterson, petroglyphs, dinosaur tracks, and artifacts from Native American communities. The nationally recognized Santa Fe Trail from Missouri to New Mexico was a well-established trail conveying thousands to the west and traveled directly through Trinidad. The Santa Fe Trail Days Festival promotes the trail on Main Street in Trinidad. The nationally award winning Cougar Canyon Golf Resort Community and the Trinidad Municipal Golf Course provides challenges to golf enthusiasts across the country. The Southern Colorado Repertory Theatre, winner of four Outer Critics Circle Awards, continues to provide entertainment to thousands from Denver to New Mexico with high quality thespians.

Huerfano County is located approximately 37 miles north of Trinidad along the I-25 corridor. The county is 1,591 square miles; Walsenburg is the county seat. Multiple lakes and streams and the aspen-lined roads offer a picturesque trip along State Highway (Hwy.) 12 a.k.a. "The Scenic Highway of Legends". The notable Huajatolla Peaks or Spanish Peaks, meaning "Breasts of the Earth" are visible from either Hwy. 12 or I-25 corridor between Huerfano and Las Animas Counties. The Utes, Navajos, Jicarilla Apaches and Comanches believed this is where Mankind first emerged from the womb of the Earth into their version of the Garden of Eden.

JOBS & THE ECONOMY

USDA Rural Development, in conjunction with the Western Rural Center, CSU Extension, Colorado Department of Local Affairs, Colorado Office of Economic Development and International Trade, and El

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Pomar Foundation created a Stronger Economies Together (SET) Program. “The purpose of SET is to strengthen the capacity of communities/counties in rural America to work together in developing and implementing an economic development blueprint for their multi-county region, one that strategically builds on the current and emerging economic strengths of that region.” The applicants from Huerfano and Las Animas Counties in Colorado and Colfax County in New Mexico forming the Raton Basin Regional Economic Development District (REDD) are near completion and working toward a final report to the USDA.

Members of the tri-county REDD team met each month for a total of thirty-five hours to receive training on regional job clustering, demographic information, emerging industries, and strategic planning. Following the training, County Commissioners from Huerfano, Las Animas, and Colfax Counties entered into Memorandums of Understanding to provide continued representation from their respective counties toward a sustainable approach to continue with the effort. This regional effort resulted in an invitation to the White House for Las Animas County Commissioner Mack Loudon, Huerfano County Commissioner, Art Bobian and Colfax County Commissioner, Bill Sauble for discussion on regional issues.

In Huerfano and Las Animas the national decline in market prices for coal bed methane gas have affected local exploration and production, causing a large number of industry employees to relocate or seek other employment. The New Elk Mine reached an employment peak, then had to lay off 200 employees and then had to close for an initial 60 days because they could not sell the coal. Further indications are that the New Elk Mine is ceasing operations due to the economic downturn. There is plenty of coal available, but stockpiled, as there are no buyers for the coal.

In August 2011, Las Animas reached an unemployment rate of 9.4% that compares to August 2012 unemployment of 11.5% up from July 2012 at 10.9%. Huerfano County reached 11.1% unemployment in July 2011 compared to the State of Colorado at 8.3% as of July 2011. Huerfano County unemployment rate in July 2012 was up to 12.4% but declined in August 2012 to 11.6%. The State unemployment for August 2012 improved over 2011 from 8.1% to 7.8%.

The City of Trinidad minor league baseball expansion team had a very successful first year with the Trinidad Triggers of the Pecos League.

HOUSING

Per the US Census Bureau, new privately owned residential building permits increased from 2010 to 2011. Data for 2012 is not available.

County	2010 Total Building Permits	2011 Total Building Permits	Year-Year Change
Huerfano	0	30	30
Las Animas	20	22	2
Total	20	52	32

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AGRICULTURE

Ranching is still a predominant activity within the county. Although there is some agriculture in the region it is supportive of the ranching industry; crops are typically alfalfa or corn for livestock feed.

Economic discussions at the Bottom Up, Stronger Economies Together, and Community Round Up meetings include interest in value-added production for agriculture and cattle.

OTHER

Heritage tourism is important in Las Animas and Huerfano Counties and their rich histories. New efforts have been made with local improvements by cleaning up the cities to attract visitors. Both counties have focused on the large talent of local artists and musicians. The Trinidad Blues Fest also suffered from economic woes as the Fest was reduced to fewer attractions and only one performance day. Huerfano County's Annual Celtic Festival in late September and the Santa Fe Trail days in Las Animas continue to draw many tourists to the region.

The City of Trinidad was successful in its grant efforts to receive an award for emerging creative community. Community forums are scheduled for government and elected officials, not for profit directors, business leaders, and the general public.

CLEAN ENERGY

The 2010 closing of the Huerfano County Correctional Facility (HCCF) was detrimental to the county, especially the loss of employment opportunities. However, the county realizes their natural opportunities in renewable energy. The approval of a wind turbine project east of the I-25 corridor reflects the resiliency of the region.

During the Governor's Cabinet meeting held at the Mount Carmel Health, Wellness and Community Center discussion focused on desired plans to work with Pioneer Natural Resources to develop a compressed natural gas station into Trinidad to complete the I-25 corridor. This discussion occurred with cabinet members, including Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT) Director Don Hunt, Lieutenant Governor Joe Garcia and Economic Development Director, Ken Lund.

NEW PROJECTS

Multi-Modal Transit Center: The collaborative efforts of the City of Trinidad, the South Central Council of Governments (SCCOG), CDOT, Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway, Greyhound Bus Lines, and Amtrak resulted in the concept of a centrally located transportation hub. The center assists travelers via intercity bus, route bus, and rail to anywhere in the United States. Bids were awarded for the

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architectural design of the center in July 2012. Funding is in place for construction and is estimated to cost around \$800,000. Both the construction and the operation will infuse local economic activity.

Health & Wellness: Mount Carmel Health and Wellness has been identified as an Enterprise Zone Contribution Project. The Health and Wellness Center officially opened in 2012 and is staffed and open for business.