



Written by [Bruce Walker](#) on February 24, 2011

Can Rural America Be Saved?

Much of rural America is dying. The 2010 census data shows that one-fourth of all counties in the United States lost population. The industrial corporations which once provided good jobs to small towns in America are going out of business or moving out of the country. The loss of opportunity means that the first to go are often the young adults, who are looking for good jobs. West Virginia has 55 counties and 40 of those counties lost population over the last decade.



Ed Shepard, an 87-year-old resident of Welch, West Virginia, sums up part of the problem: "There's no reason for you to come to Welch. This is nothing but a damn ghost town in a welfare county." It isn't just the jobs that have gone, according to Shepard "20 years of the best fishing you ever saw. Nowadays, you can fish but you won't catch any trout. It's like the coal mines. It's all gone."

U.S. Steel shut down mining operations in McDowell County in 2003. When John Kennedy took office, McDowell County produced more coal than any other county in the country. No longer: coal mining, which once produced many good jobs, faces environmental regulatory issues. More and more, employment in the community has come from government activity, like a nearby prison. The people in McDowell County look, more and more, to government as a source of jobs for them. King Coal Highway is another project waiting for federal funding. The people of the area hope that will bring some jobs and also entice some additional commercial activity from the trucking lines.

West Virginia has long been the recipient of federal largesse. Senator Robert Byrd diverted an enormous amount of building projects into his state although once the construction is completed the jobs do not remain. Dependence upon federal projects like highways and bridges, however, is not sound long-term economics. Senator Byrd has been replaced by a senator with no real seniority. The massive stimulus package of President Obama, little of which was used on the sort of building projects West Virginians are used to, has also drained up any possible funds for infrastructure projects (or just plain, old-fashioned, pork.)

Part of this dependence on government is because rural counties with shrinking populations, like McDowell County, West Virginia, are growing old fast. Prosperous communities can also be graying communities, of course. Florida and Arizona, which attract large numbers of retired couples, are proof of that. Very few retired couples are moving into McDowell County, though. In fact, even illegal immigrants, who tend to flock to places where they will not face problems with immigration authorities,



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seem to have sworn off areas like McDowell County.

The movement of people out of rural areas and into cities is hardly a new story. In places like Welch, West Virginia, however, government could help the community by simply reducing its role. America still has enormous reserves of coal, and our nation could use all the domestic production of energy that it could generate. Not only would that help dying towns like Welch, West Virginia, but coal produced in America would generate state and federal tax revenues, lower our nation's balance of payments, reduce dependence upon unstable energy sources from tyrannical nations (like we are witnessing right now with the uproar in Libya that is echoing throughout the Middle East), and drive down the cost of energy, which is a major drag on our economy right now.

Even from an environmental standpoint, it would make sense to relax coal mining regulations in places like Welch, West Virginia. The "Population Bomb" that so troubles many environmentalists is a dud in McDowell County. There is plenty of room for growth in those areas of the county which have already had homes built, utilities installed, and roads paved. Encouraging Americans to migrate back into these rural counties would also put young people in closer touch with farms, nature and other salubrious conditions.

Are rural areas in America headed for a revival? Thomas Jefferson, who grasped the civic value of rural life, might well hope so. If this revival is possible and it is affected by artificial stimulation of economic activity to build government offices or operate prisons, then the "revival" will be short-lived. If, on the other hand, the revival in rural America comes from government getting out of the way — much like the great wealth of the American Frontier came from almost wholly unregulated homesteading and self-reliance — then, perhaps, the days of towns like Welch, West Virginia, may not be over yet.



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