



Economic Research Service

United States Department of Agriculture

## Natural Amenities Drive Rural Population Change

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Climate, topography, and water area are highly related to rural county population change over the past 25 years. A natural amenities index, derived and discussed here, captures much of this relationship. Average 1970-96 population change in nonmetropolitan counties was 1 percent among counties low on the natural amenities index and 120 percent among counties high on the index. Most retirement counties and recreation counties score in the top quarter of the amenities index. Employment change is also highly related to natural amenities, although more so over the past 25 years than in the current decade. The importance of particular amenities varies by region. In the Midwest, for example, people are drawn to lakes for recreation and retirement, while people are attracted to the West for its varied topography.

**Keywords:** natural amenities, population change, retirement, recreation

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### **Data files...**

[Natural amenities county-level data](#) can be downloaded in an Excel or text file.

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### **Further readings...**

See additional ERS research using the natural amenities measures:

"Behind the Data: Natural Amenities Scale," by David A. McGranahan, in *Amber Waves*, Vol. 3, No. 2, April 2005.

"Farm Programs, Natural Amenities, and Rural Development," by David A. McGranahan and Patrick J. Sullivan, in *Amber Waves*, Vol. 3, No. 1, February 2005.

"The Roots of Rural Population Loss," by David A. McGranahan and Calvin L. Beale, in *Amber Waves*, Vol. 1, No. 1, February 2003.

"Understanding Rural Population Loss," by David A. McGranahan and Calvin L. Beale, in *Rural America*, Vol. 17, No. 4, Winter 2002.

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