

The Aging West

Forget retiring to Florida, Arizona, more boomers heading to Rockies

YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK, Wyo. (AP) — John Kerr wasn't dreaming of palm trees and balmy winters when he retired from WGBH, the Boston public TV station known for producing such hits as "Antiques Roadshow." His thoughts had gone West.

The 69-year-old put on a green uniform and Smokey Bear hat and became a seasonal ranger in Yellowstone National Park, where snow can fall every month of the year, including July.

"That's why they have wood stoves and furnaces," Kerr said. "Warm weather isn't

the issue for me. It's keeping vital and interested and involved."

Demographers say thousands of people like Kerr are heading to the Rocky Mountain West in their later years. Forget the warmth of Florida and Arizona. Baby boomers, in particular, are gravitating toward the peaks and sagebrush basins of Wyoming and Montana, promising to turn these states from relatively young into two of the nation's oldest.

They're drawn by low crime, fresh air, little traffic and abundant outdoor activi-

ties, said Larry Swanson, an economist and director of the Center for the Rocky Mountain West in Missoula, Mont.

Although people of all ages like those things, older people tend to be flexible enough in their careers, families and finances to finally kick up their boots on a porch rail, he said.

"If you're 25, you say, 'I'd like to live here, but maybe someday in the future,'" Swanson said. "But if you're 45 or 55, the future is now."

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The populations of Montana and Wyoming are not very old. In 2000, Montana ranked 18th and Wyoming 43rd for the relative size of their 65-and-over populations. But by 2030, the Census Bureau predicts Montana will rank fifth and Wyoming third in the nation for their over-65 populations.

Florida is expected to remain on top, though Wyoming and Montana will both likely be a good deal older than Arizona — even as the Grand Canyon State moves up from 22nd to 14th.

The two states are not seeking out older people; they are being discovered.

Laurie Lyman, 55, was an elementary school teacher in San Diego when she began traveling to Yellowstone on long trips to watch wolves. In 2005, she decided it was time to get as

close to the wolves as she could.

"I said to my husband, 'You know what? Life's too short. I'm going,'" she said, adding that many people like her are snapping up property around Yellowstone.

Officials with the two states are preparing for the influx. This year, Montana established a trust fund so the state's older population will have access to health care and other essential services, even in rural areas.

"We've done projections of stuff and seeing our elderly population doubling in the next 10 to 15 years," said Charlie Rehbein, chief of the Montana Aging Services Bureau. "I think it's going to have a tremendous impact."

One challenge is that the two states already have very low unemployment, around 3 percent, and could face a real labor

crunch when the oldest baby boomers hit 65 in 2011.

"We haven't seen anything yet, because the exodus has not really begun out of the work force," said Swanson, the economist. "That's going to begin in two or three years."

Rather than struggle with a labor shortage, Wyoming officials hope to get older people to stay in the workplace and persuade business owners to hire older workers, said Rob Black, policy analyst for Wyoming Gov. Dave Freudenthal.

Swanson said most of the baby boomers moving in plan to work. Kerr, for example, said he would continue working — for now.

"My life hasn't slowed down," he said. "I've found a lot of sustenance — spiritual sustenance, I suppose — in the natu-

ral world. I think it helps put our fast-paced world into balance."

Working was what Lee and Beth Dix had in mind in 1999 when they began thinking about leaving Washington, D.C., where he was a systems analyst for IBM Corp. and she was a corporate planner for Fairchild Corp.

Lee Dix, 62, said the couple researched dozens of communities in Idaho, Montana and Wyoming, then flew to Denver and started driving. The couple ended up in Cheyenne, the first overnight stop on their trip.

Lee Dix said the couple did not even consider Florida or Arizona after sweltering in Washington.

"Except for the wind here, this is a pretty ideal place for us," he said.