

Michigan's resource use outstrips population growth, report says

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By JOHN FLESHER

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TRAVERSE CITY, Mich. (AP) — Michigan is paving over farmland, using energy and gobbling up natural resources at rates well beyond the state's population growth, says a report issued Thursday by two environmentalist groups.

"The science is in and the trends are clear," said Marisa Rinkus, Great Lakes population and environment outreach coordinator for the National Wildlife Federation. "The question is: `What are Michigan leaders going to do about it?'"

The federation teamed with the Center for Environment and Population, based in New Canaan, Conn., to correlate data about Michigan's population and demographics with environmental statistics. They are compiling similar reports about other regions and the nation.

The results demonstrate that ecological damage isn't simply the result of runaway population growth, researchers said. Individual lifestyle decisions, coupled with broader social and economic patterns, can be just as important.

Concentrating housing in "cluster" developments, funding mass transit and encouraging water conservation can help a community consume less than another of the same size, said Victoria Markham, director of the Center for Environment and Population. Individuals can walk or ride bicycles when possible, buy organic food and recycle waste.

"Choice is a huge factor in determining what environmental impact an individual or business has," Markham said.

Michigan's population grew by 12 percent, to about 10.1 million, over the past three decades. But the number of households grew by 43 percent during the same period, indicating the typical household has fewer residents than before.

Because every household contains possessions, occupies space and emits pollution, "an increase in the number of households can significantly increase environmental impacts even when the population as a whole is not growing at a fast rate," the report says.

Coupled with people's continuing desire for suburban lifestyles, the jump in households is encouraging sprawl, it says.

Roughly 820,000 acres of Michigan land were developed between 1982 and 1997. If that trend persists, 1.5 million to 2 million additional undeveloped acres will be converted to residential, commercial or industrial use by 2020, the report says.

That would represent a land development increase of 63 percent to 87 percent, while the population is projected to grow only 11.8 percent.

Some of the development is happening on once-productive farmland, of which 40,000 acres are paved over each year, the report says. Other increasingly popular locations for growth include coastal areas and forests, which damage wildlife habitat.

Sprawl encourages driving, which helps explain why Michigan's energy consumption has risen about 1.3

percent annually for the past 20 years — three times the annual population growth rate, the report says.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: John Flesher is the AP correspondent in Traverse City and has covered environmental issues since 1992.

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On the Net:

Report available at: <http://www.cepnet.org>

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