Chapter 4
Population Change in Colorado's River Basins:
A Brief History from 1950 to 2000 and Forecasts from 2000 to 2030

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Abstract
This chapter will summarize and present data on population change in Colorado from 1950 to 2000 and on expected change from 2000 to 2030 by river basin. The section will first describe the economic regions of the state and how they relate to river basins. It will next show how past economic and population changes of the economic regions have manifested themselves by river basin. Because of the aging of the baby-boomers of the State and of the Western U. S., new patterns of growth are expected to occur within the state. These too will be translated onto the respective river basins to provide a sense of future growth based on state geography.

Contents:

A Brief History and Forecast of Population Growth in the State's Economic Areas

In 1950, Colorado's population was 1.3 million. By the year 2000, it more than tripled, reaching 4.3 million. In 1950, the metropolitan Front Range consisted of two-thirds or 67% of the total population, with significant portions located in each of the other substate areas. Between 1950 and 1970, as the state added 0.9 million people, virtually all of that growth went to the metropolitan Front Range. The Western Slope population increased somewhat during that period, but the other three substate areas—the Eastern Plains, the Central Mountains, and the San Luis Valley (see Figure 4-1 and Table 4-1)— actually declined during this period. By 1970, the Front Range comprised 80% of the state's population.

After 1970, as the state's skiing and outdoor recreation resort industry experienced rapid growth, the Western Slope began growing very rapidly as well. By 2000, its 1970 population of 191,000 increased 140% to 460,000. Similarly during this period, the metropolitan Front Range doubled in size, from 1,328,000 in 1970 to 2,582,000 in 2000. In the Central Mountains, growth occurred strongly in the 1970s and then again in the 1990s, partly because of the development and expansion of prisons in Fremont and Chaffee counties and partly because of the attractiveness of these scenic areas for tourism activities. However, the populations of the Eastern Plains and the San Luis Valley continued to decline, only reversing this trend in the 1990s as economic successes elsewhere in the state spilled over into these regions.

Through the year 2030, the state is expected to continue to grow at an average rate of 1.7%, which is above the national average of 1%, but below the very fast rate of the 1990s—2.7% (see Table 4-2). A state population of over 7.1 million is expected by 2030, which is nearly a

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67% increase over the state's 2000 population of 4.3 million. Growth will again be fueled by high tech industrial development, national defense activities and regional services in the metropolitan Front Range. In addition, tourism will continue to expand both in the Front Range and in the Central Mountains and Western Slope as baby-boomers not only from Colorado but from the entire Western United States, including California and Texas, spend more time in the Rocky Mountain west, in many cases in their second home.

Figure 4-1: **Map of Colorado's Statistical Substate Areas**
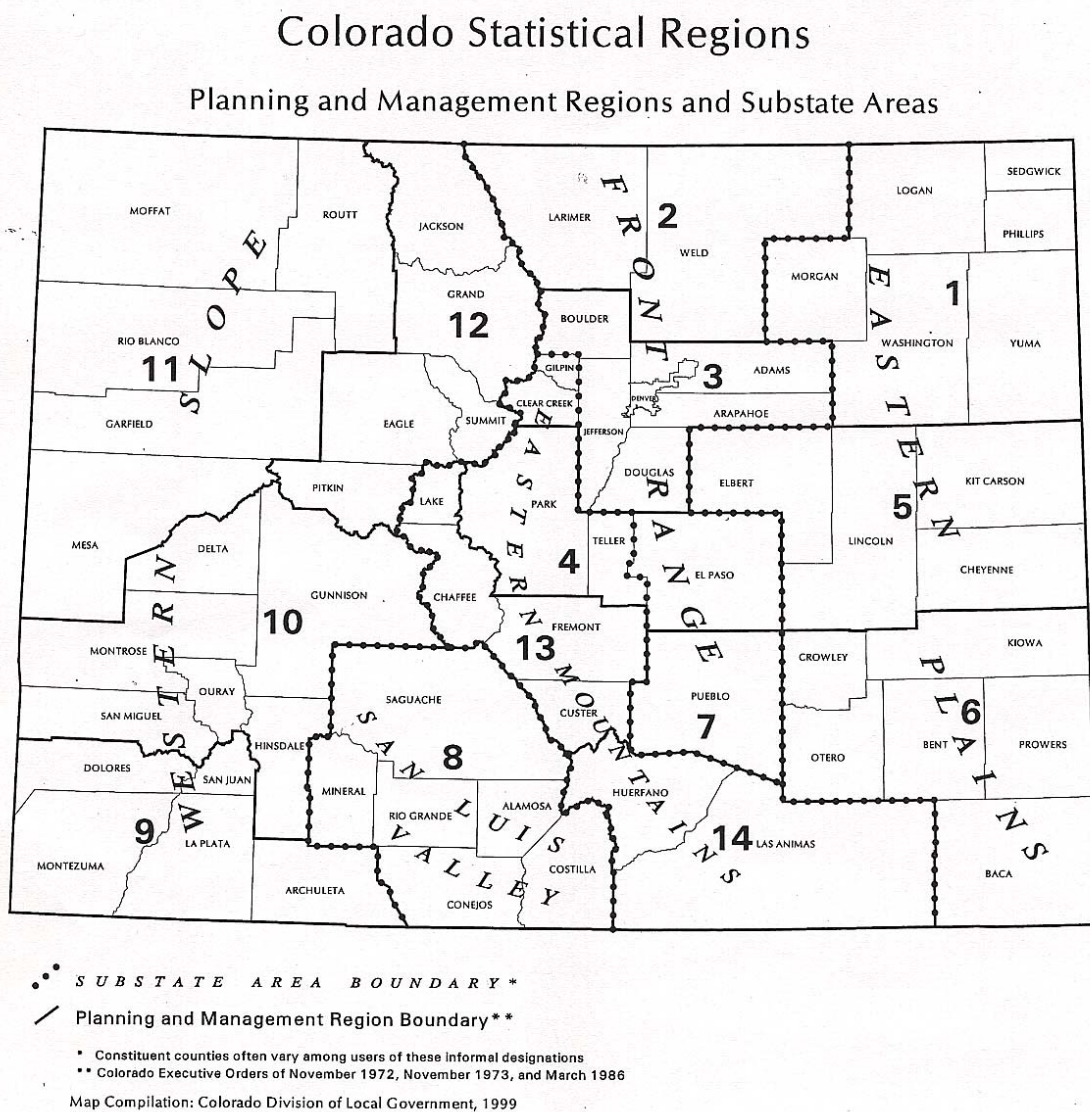
Colorado Statistical Regions

Planning and Management Regions and Substate Areas

• • • S U B S T A T E   A R E A   B O U N D A R Y *

／ Planning and Management Region Boundary**

* Constituent counties often vary among users of these informal designations
** Colorado Executive Orders of November 1972, November 1973, and March 1986

Map Compilation: Colorado Division of Local Government, 1999

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Table 4-1:   Overlap between Substate Economic Areas and Water Divisions

Substate Economic Area	Water Division/Major River Basin
Front Range	Division 1, South Platte and Republican River Basins
	Division 2, Arkansas River Basin
Eastern Plains	Division 1, South Platte and Republican River Basin
	Division 2, Arkansas River Basin
Central Mountains (Eastern Mountains on Figure 4-1)	Division 2, Arkansas River Basin
San Luis Valley	Division 3, Rio Grande River Basin
Western Slope	Division 4, Gunnison River Basin
	Division 5, Colorado River Basin
	Division 6, Yampa, White, and North Platte River Basins
	Division 7, San Juan and Dolores River Basins

However, another major aspect of continued growth in the state will be the retirement of the state's and the west's baby-boomers. Assuming many of these retirees will stay in or come to Colorado, this demographic phenomenon will add a new dimension to Colorado's population—a significantly large elderly group. Also assuming that new middle-aged and younger people will replace them in the workforce, this additional dimension of Colorado's population will mean more people both in the Front Range and in the scenic areas of the state: the Western Slope and the Central Mountains but not excluding those of the Eastern Plains and San Luis Valley as well.

A History and Forecast of Population Growth in the State's River

Table 4-2:   Population from 1950 to 2030 by State Water Division

	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	2020	2030
Division 1	821,522	1,152,158	1,508,314	2,000,569	2,280,470	2,988,027	3,579,800	4,200,900	4,961,900
Division 2	299,494	384,755	472,113	560,919	641,499	807,621	947,100	1,089,400	1,242,400
Division 3	45,963	38,704	37,466	37,914	40,207	46,190	51,600	57,000	62,400
Division 4	40,667	41,174	42,978	58,599	58,438	79,754	98,600	120,400	147,500
Division 5	61,831	75,420	89,650	144,025	178,555	252,567	327,700	412,400	517,300
Division 6	21,581	19,869	19,770	34,655	33,022	40,437	47,200	54,800	64,300
Division 7	34,031	41,867	39,305	53,052	62,203	86,665	108,600	134,000	164,600
State Total	1,325,089	1,753,947	2,209,596	2,889,733	3,294,394	4,301,261	5,160,600	6,068,900	7,160,400

Basins
Division 1: The South Platte and Republican River Basins
Historic Population Change
The Front Range population growth from 1950 to 2000 affected both the South Platte and the Arkansas River Basins. In the South Platte River Basin, the Denver-Boulder metropolitan statistical area (MSA) (as determined by the US Office of Management and Budget in June

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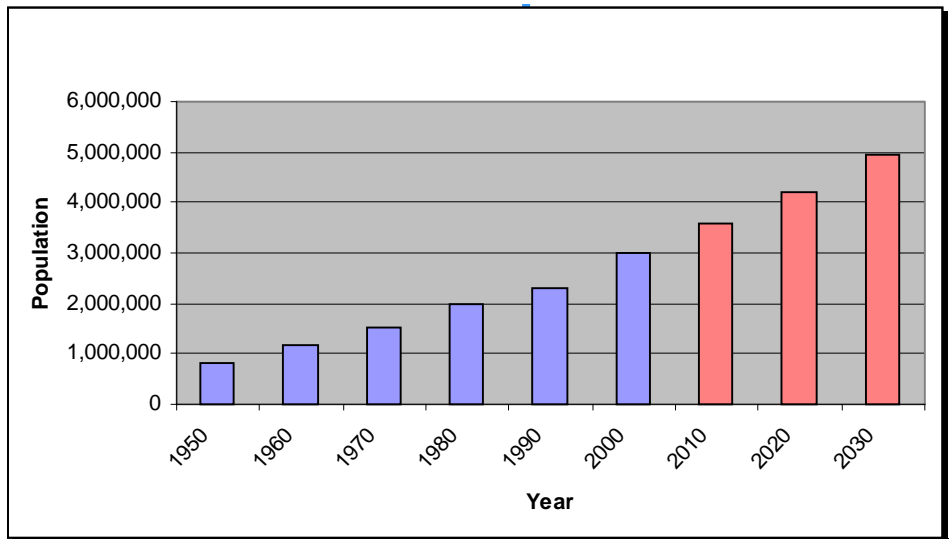**A Brief History from 1950 to 2000 and Forecasts from 2000 to 2030**

1993) population quadrupled, going from 600,000 to 2.4 million. Similarly, the North Front Range (with the Fort Collins and Greeley MSAs) more than quadrupled, going from 100,000 to 432,000.

Meanwhile, the Northeast and East Central agricultural regions of the Eastern Plains declined slightly by 1990 from a population of 86,000 in 1950 until suburban growth in the northwestern part of Elbert County in the 1990s boosted the area to 105,900. In sum, the population in the South Platte River Basin grew 264% between 1950 and 2000 (see Figure 4-2).

Figure 4-2:   Historic and Projected Population, Division 1

Projected Population Change
In the next thirty years, by 2030, the population within the South Platte basin is expected to grow another 65%. The fastest growing part of the basin will be the North Front Range, which will double during this period. In addition, the Denver-Boulder region will add another 1,300,000 to reach 3,700,000. Park and Teller counties, combined with Gilpin and Clear Creek counties will add another 100,000 (see Table 4-3 and Figure 4-2).

On the Eastern Plains regions of East Central Colorado and North East Colorado, growth will be modest and will occur mainly in Elbert and Morgan counties, which are located closest to the Front Range. Elbert County is expected to triple its population by 2030, while Morgan County will add 20,000 to a year 2000 population of 27,000.

Table 4-3:   Projected Population Change in Division 1

Division 1	2000	2010	2030	Annual Growth Rate '00-'10	'10-'30
North Front Range	436,700	557,000	902,400	2.5%	2.4%
Denver-Boulder Region	2,415,000	2,830,300	3,723,000	1.6%	1.4%
Gilpin, Clear Creek	14,100	16,500	24,800	1.6%	2.0%
Park & Teller	35,800	50,700	123,400	3.5%	4.5%
East Central Colorado	36,600	45,300	81,500	2.2%	3.0%
North East Colorado	70,100	79,700	107,000	1.3%	1.5%
TOTAL	**3,008,500**	**3,579,800**	**4,961,900**	**1.8%**	**1.6%**

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Division 2: The Arkansas River Basin
Historic Population Change

In the fifty-year period from 1950 to 2000, the population of the Arkansas River Basin increased 170%. Most of this increase occurred in the Colorado Springs MSA, which increased in population by a factor of seven, from a population of 74,500 in 1950 to a large metropolitan area of over half a million people by the year 2000. The Pueblo metropolitan area grew as well, though more modestly, from 90,000 to 150,000 during the period. Upstream, in the Central Mountains, the population more than doubled, partly because of the burgeoning prison industry in Fremont County, and partly from tourism in the upper parts of the river basin.

Downstream in the southeastern agricultural portion of the Eastern Plains, the population actually declined, from 65,000 in 1950 to 52,400 in 2000 (see Figure 4-3).

Projected Population Change

In the thirty years from 2000 to 2030, the population is expected to increase 52%, going from 812,000 to 1,242,000. Most of this growth will occur in the Colorado Springs and Pueblo metropolitan areas of the South Front Range. However, the Upper Arkansas Area is expected to increase 77% adding another 57,100 to its population of 74,200. The South Central counties of Huerfano and Las Animas will grow slightly and the South East (Plains) Region will add only 4,500 people (see Table 4-4 and Figure 4-3).

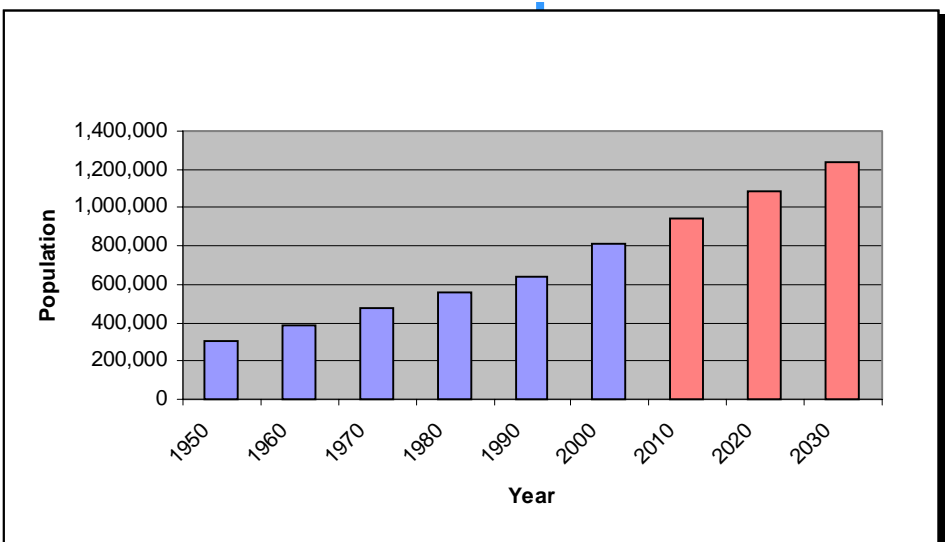**Figure 4-3:   Historic and Projected Population, Division 2**

Table 4-4: Projected Population Change in Division 2

Division 2	2000	2010	2030	Annual Growth Rate '00-'10	'10-'30
Upper Arkansas	74,200	86,700	131,300	1.6%	2.1%
South Central Colorado	23,100	27,600	37,000	1.8%	1.5%
South Front Range	662,600	779,800	1,016,400	1.6%	1.3%
South Eastern Plains	52,300	53,000	57,700	0.1%	0.4%
TOTAL	**812,200**	**947,100**	**1,242,400**	**1.5%**	**1.4%**

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Division 3: The Rio Grande River Basin
Historic Population Change
The population of the San Luis Valley of the Rio Grande River Basin has increased only slightly in the fifty years between 1950 and 2000. The population actually declined between 1950 and 1970 to a census low of 37,500 in 1970, increased only slowly in 1990, and then began to grow again at a rate of 1.4% through the 1990s. The largest county and the regional center, Alamosa County grew the most over the fifty-year period. Rio Grande, the next largest county with both an agricultural and tourism economy, declined in population from 1950 to 1980, then recovered most of that loss by 2000 (see Figure 4-4).

Figure 4-4:   Historic and Projected Population, Division 3

Projected Population Change
The population of the Rio Grande River Basin is expected to grow more steadily, at approximately 1% per year over the next thirty years. The region expects to maintain its agricultural base, but more importantly expand its opportunities for tourists and retirees. Alamosa County, at the center of the region is expected to grow the most. However, all other counties of the region should benefit

from new opportunities leading to a population increase of 37% (see Table 4-5 and Figure 4-4).
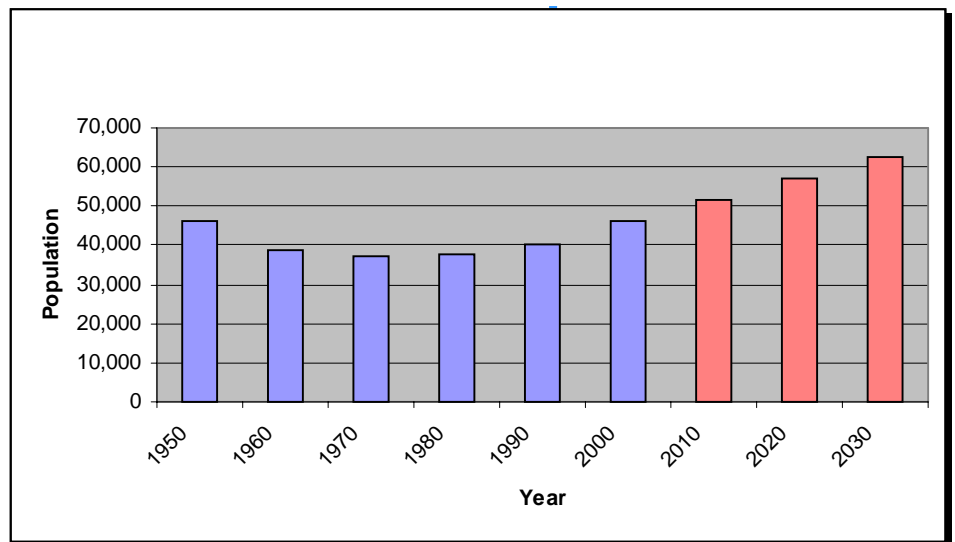
Table 4-5:   Projected Population Change in Division

Division 3	2000	2010	2030	Annual Growth Rate '00-'10	'10-'30
Mineral County	800	1,000	1,200	1.7%	1.0%
Rio Grande County	12,434	13,400	15,900	0.8%	0.8%
Saguache County	5,954	7,100	8,700	1.8%	1.0%
Alamosa County	15,139	17,300	23,100	1.3%	1.5%
Conejos County	8,400	8,800	9,900	0.4%	0.6%
Costilla	3,675	4,000	4,600	0.9%	0.7%
Total	**46,435**	**51,600**	**62,400**	**1.1%**	**1.0%**

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Division 4: The Gunnison River Basin
Historic Population Change

The Gunnison River Basin consists of the five counties of the west central part of the Colorado Western Slope: Delta, Montrose, Ouray, Gunnison, and Hinsdale counties. During the fifty-year period from 1950 to 2000 its population increased 84% with most of the growth occurring in the 1970s and the 1990s. Delta and Montrose Counties are the largest and the fastest growing counties; combined these counties grew by nearly 50% in the past fifty-year period.

Projected Population Change

The population of the Gunnison River Basin is expected to continue to grow in the next thirty years to 2030 from 80,200 to 147,500. Its major drivers will be tourism and retirees. All five counties are of exceptional beauty with many scenic public lands. As the baby-boomers approach retirement age, the area's population growth will remain steady, above 2%, and will be fairly independent of national economic downturns (see Table 4-6 and Figure 4-5).

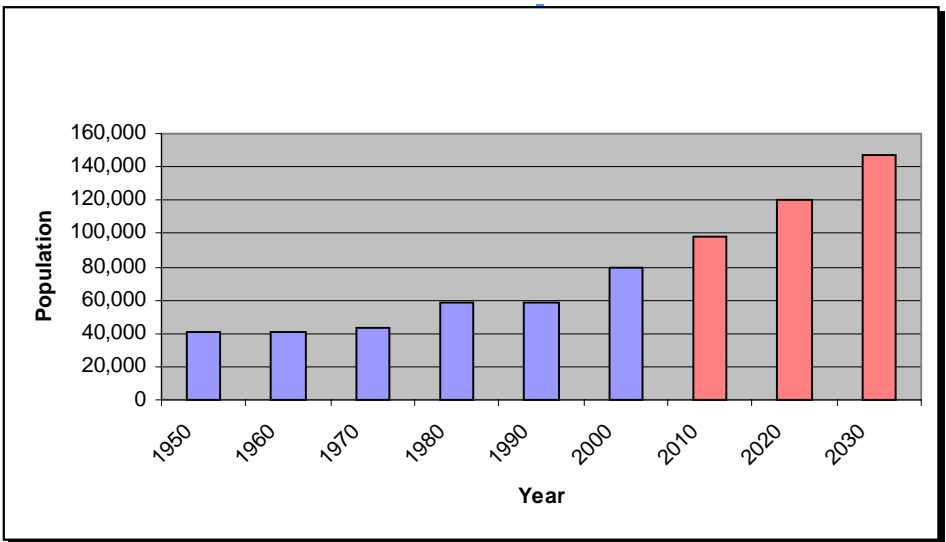**Figure 4-5:   Historic and Projected Population, Division 4**

Table 4-6:   Projected Population Change in Division

Division 4	2000	2010	2030	Annual Growth Rate '00-'10	'10-'30
Delta County	28,000	34,400	50,900	2.1%	2.0%
Montrose County	33,700	42,900	66,600	2.4%	2.2%
Ouray County	3,800	4,700	7,000	2.3%	1.9%
Gunnison County	14,000	15,600	21,800	1.1%	1.7%
Hinsdale County	800	900	1,100	1.4%	1.8%
TOTAL	**80,200**	**98,600**	**147,500**	**2.1%**	**2.0%**

Division 5: The Colorado River Basin
Historic Population Change

The population in the Colorado River Basin quadrupled from 1950 to 2000. The basin consists of five resort counties and the Grand Junction metropolitan area (Mesa County). The resort counties increased five times between their 1950 population of 23,000 to 136,300 in 2000. The Grand Junction metropolitan statistical area population tripled its 39,000 1950 population to reach 116,300 by the 2000 census (see Figure

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4-6).

Projected Population Change

The population in the Colorado River Basin is expected to double again by 2030 from gains both in tourism and in its retirement population. Grand, Summit, Eagle, Pitkin, and the eastern end of Garfield Counties will continue to thrive from tourism and, in particular, activities related to second homes. Again, many of these occupants will make these homes a temporary, if not permanent, place of retirement.

Figure 4-6:   Historic and Projected Population, Division 5

Mesa County is already a major retirement center with retirees accounting for nearly half of its economic base. This industry will continue to expand further as baby-boomers in the Western United States consider the area's mild climate and access to public lands. Western Garfield County, with the world's largest supply of oil shale, holds a small though significant potential of exploding all population forecasts for the area (see Table 4-7 and Figure 4-6).
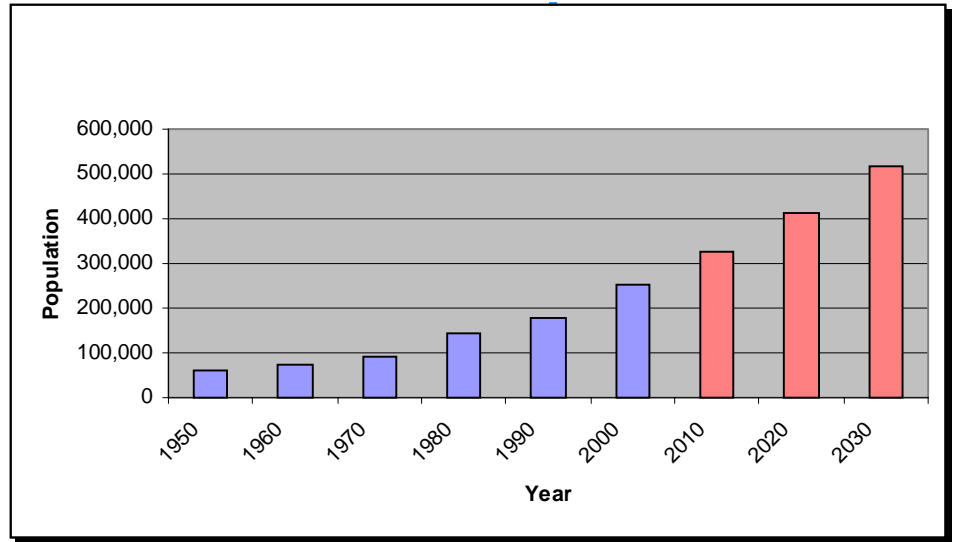
Table 4-7:   Projected Population Change in Division 5

Division 5	2000	2010	2030	Annual Growth Rate '00-'10	'10-'30
Grand County	12,900	16,800	29,700	2.7%	2.9%
Summit County	25,700	32,500	50,600	2.4%	2.2%
Eagle County	43,400	57,100	90,000	2.8%	2.3%
Pitkin County	15,900	18,700	27,600	1.6%	2.0%
Garfield County	44,300	58,700	99,000	2.9%	2.6%
Mesa County (Grand Junction)	117,700	144,100	220,400	2.0%	2.1%
TOTAL	**259,800**	**327,700**	**517,300**	**2.3%**	**2.3%**

Division 6: The Yampa, White and North Platte Basins
Historic Population Change

In Jackson County (the entirety of the North Platte River Basin in Colorado), the population in 2000 was only 1,577, having declined from 1,976 in 1950.

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In the Yampa and White River Basins, the 1950 population of 18,000 of the three counties in Division 6 more than doubled to 39,000 by 2000. Most of this growth occurred in the 1970s because of the development of the recreational resort industry in Steamboat Springs (Routt County) and the energy industry in neighboring Moffat County. Further growth of tourism, especially related to second homes in the 1990s in Routt County contributed to the additional population growth in these basins during this fifty-year period (see Figure 4-7).

Projected Population Change
The Yampa and White River Basins are expected to grow another 60% mainly due to the continued growth of second homes and the work force they require and because a number of their occupants may stay, making the basin a part of their retirement. Routt County will receive most of these new residents adding 15,000 of the area's overall increase of 23,000.

Figure 4-7:   Historic and Projected Population, Division 6
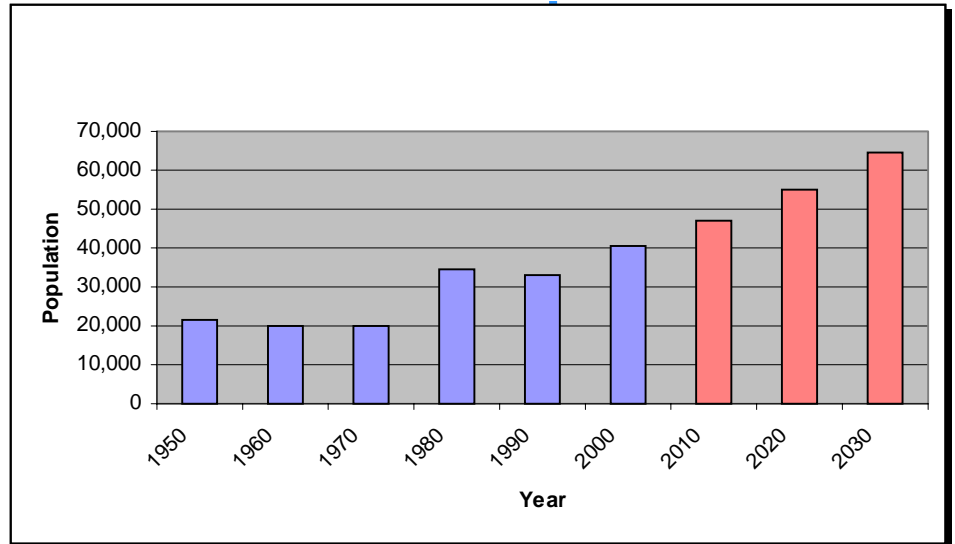
Jackson County is expected to grow back to over 2000 by 2030 at a slow rate of just under 1% (see Table 4-8 and Figure 4-7).

Table 4-8:   Projected Population Change in Division 6

Division 6	2000	2010	2030	Annual Growth Rate '00-'10	Annual Growth Rate '10-'30
Routt County	21,100	24,200	35,600	1.9%	1.9%
Moffat County	13,200	14,700	17,600	1.1%	0.9%
Rio Blanco County	6,000	6,800	9,100	1.3%	1.5%
Jackson County	1,577	1,600	2000	0.1%	1.0%
TOTAL	**39,300**	**45,600**	**62,300**	**1.5%**	**1.6%**

Division 7: The Dolores and San Juan Basins
Historic Population Change
The Dolores and San Juan River Basin consist mainly of six counties in southwest Colorado: the larger of which are La Plata (Durango), Montezuma (Cortez), and Archuleta (Pagosa Springs). Other counties include San Miguel (Telluride), Dolores, and San Juan (Silverton). The population for the six counties increased 155% increase over the fifty year period from 1950 to 2000 with the largest growth occurring in La

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Plata and Montezuma counties (see Figure 4-8). San Miguel County's growth occurred sporadically in the 1970s and the 1990s due the development of tourism around Telluride.

Figure 4-8:   Historic and Projected Population, Division 7

Projected Population Change
The population of the Dolores and San Juan River Basin is expected to nearly double in the next thirty years. The driving forces will be tourism in La Plata and San Miguel counties and growth in the retirement populations in those two counties as well as Archuleta and Montezuma counties. Archuleta County, with a current population of 10,000 is expected to more than double by 2030, mostly from

retirement related populations (including necessary workforce populations) (see Figure 4-8 and Table 4-9).

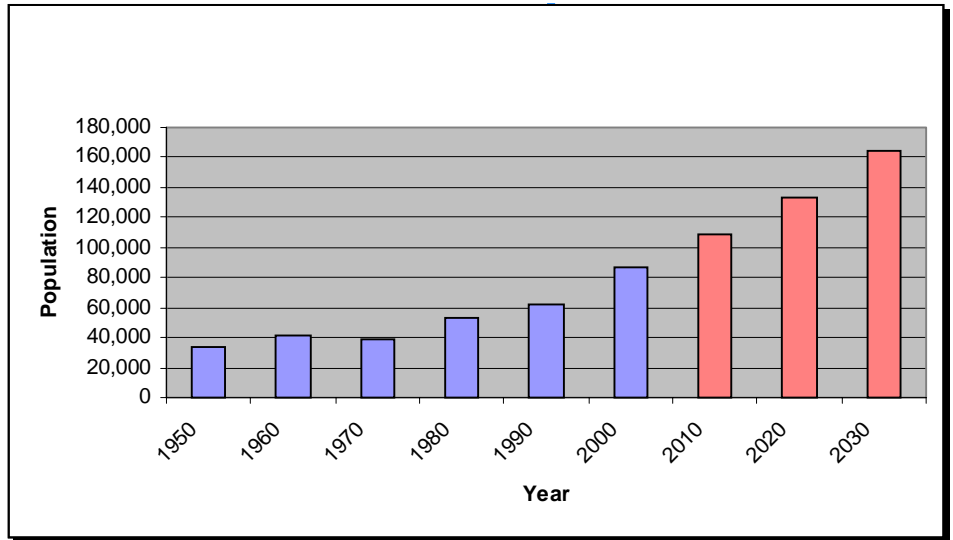**Table 4-9:   Projected Population Change in Division 7**

Division 7	2000	2010	2030	Annual Growth Rate '00-'10	'10-'30
San Miguel County	6,700	8,900	13,700	3.0%	2.2%
San Juan County	600	600	800	1.0%	1.4%
Dolores County	1,800	2,100	2,800	1.4%	1.3%
Montezuma County	23,900	28,100	40,000	1.7%	1.8%
La Plata County	44,600	54,400	80,400	2.0%	2.0%
Archuleta County	10,000	14,400	26,700	3.7%	3.1%
TOTAL	**87,500**	**108,600**	**164,400**	**2.2%**	**2.1%**

Discussion
The figures and explanations of population change in Colorado presented in this chapter clearly show that Colorado has a growing population. Several themes emerge that are important to water planning scenarios:

1. Population is growing and will continue to grow in all seven major river basins; however, that growth is higher in certain basins. Among the fastest growing basins are the San Juan River, South Platte/Republican River and the Colorado River basins. In particular, the fastest growing areas into 2030 are projected to be

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East Central Colorado, and Park, Teller, Garfield, Grand, and Archuleta Counties, which are all projected to have over 2.5% growth over the period from 2000 to 2003. This growth rate translates into more than a doubling of population in these areas over the planning period. In order of projected growth, Table 4-10 shows how the divisions rank.

2. Growth will be fueled by a combination of factors such as growth in jobs, a population shifting into retirement and the growing importance of tourism-related jobs in the scenic areas of the state.

Table 4-10:   Ranking of Divisions by Annual Growth Rate and 2030 Projected Population

Ranking by Annual Growth Rate		Ranking by Projected Population in 2030	
Division 5	2.3%	Division 1	4,961,900
Division 7	2.1%	Division 2	1,242,400
Division 4	2.0%	Division 5	517,300
Division 1	1.6%	Division 7	164,400
Division 6	1.6%	Division 4	147,500
Division 2	1.4%	Division 3	62,400
Division 3	1.0%	Division 6	62,300