Energy Boom Boosting The West

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WASHINGTON (AP) — America's energy boom is fueling population growth west of the Mississippi River.

New 2013 census information released Thursday shows that 6 of the 10 fastest-growing metropolitan areas and 8 of the 10 fastest-growing counties in the country are located in or near the oil- and gas-rich fields of the Great Plains and Mountain West.

More and more oil and gas drilling is being done in those regions, drawing people from around the nation looking for work, the Census Bureau said.

Neighboring cities Odessa and Midland, Texas, show up as the second and third fastest-growing metro areas in the country. Sara Higgins, the Midland public information officer, has a one-word explanation: oil. "They're coming here to work," Higgins said.

Energy production is one of the fastest-growing industries in the United States, the Census Bureau said. The boom in the U.S. follows the use of new technologies, such as hydraulic fracturing and horizontal drilling, to tap oil and gas reserves.

According to its data, revenue for mining, quarrying, and oil and gas extraction grew 34.2 percent to $555.2 billion from 2007 to 2012. It also was among the fastest growers in employment as the number of employees rose 23.3 percent to 903,641.

"Right now our economy is booming due to the increased oil and gas activity here in town," Higgins said. "We have great business opportunities here in Midland."

It does come with some challenges, said Andrea Goodson, the public information coordinator in Odessa, including the need for quick improvements to city infrastructure and housing to deal with the influx of new people.

With the population increase "comes a unique set of circumstances to deal with, so it's been a double-edged sword," Goodson said.

The data shows that more and more people are heading to places like Midland to take advantage of those opportunities, said Census Bureau Director John H. Thompson. "Mining, quarrying, and oil and gas extraction industries were the most rapidly growing part of our nation's economy over the last several years," Thompson said.

While energy exploration is drawing people to the Great Plains and Mountain West,

Florida is still the one of the top destinations in the country, as it shows up again and again in census data for population growth. The fastest-growing metro area in the country is the retirement community The Villages, boasting a 5.2 percent increase in population between 2012 and 2013. Its surrounding county, Sumter County, also shows up as one of the fastest-growing counties in the country with a 5.2 percent increase during the time period.

Following The Villages, Odessa and Midland were Fargo, N.D.-Minn. (3.1 percent); Bismarck, N.D. (3.1 percent); Casper, Wyo. (2.9 percent); Myrtle Beach-Conway-North Myrtle Beach, S.C.-N.C. (2.7 percent); Austin-Round Rock, Texas (2.6 percent); Daphne-Fairhope-Foley, Ala. (2.6 percent); and Cape Coral-Fort Myers, Fla. (2.5 percent).

The fastest-growing counties were Williams County, N.D. (10.7 percent increase from 2013); Duchesne County, Utah (5.5 percent increase); Sumter County, Fla. (5.2 percent); Stark County, N.D. (5.0 percent); Kendall County, Texas (5.0 percent); St. Bernard Parish, La. (4.6 percent); Wasatch County, Utah (4.4 percent); Meade County, S.D. (4.3 percent); Fort Bend County, Texas (4.2 percent) and Hays County, Texas (4.1 percent).

The Census Bureau also found:

—The nation's fastest-growing city by number of people was Houston, which gained 138,000 people between 2012 and 2013. The surrounding county, Harris Country, also showed the fastest numerical population increase at almost 83,000 people.

—New York was the nation's largest metropolitan area, with 19.9 million residents.

—Los Angeles was once again the nation's most populous county, with a population of more than 10 million.

The census estimates are based on local records of births and deaths, Internal Revenue Service records of people moving within the United States and census statistics on immigrants.

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