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UM REPORTS ON IMPACT OF EASTERN MONTANA COAL DEVELOPMENT

MISSOULA--

Although coal development has brought about some significant economic and social changes in Rosebud County, a University of Montana economist concluded in a recently published article that Rosebud County "does not appear to be an economy gone awry" and that "things are proceeding in an orderly fashion."

Paul E. Polzin, research associate at the UM Bureau of Business and Economic Research, examined published data to analyze the impact of coal development during the 1970s on eastern Montana. Writing for the autumn issue of the Montana Business Quarterly, Polzin specifically focused on Rosebud County because it is the site of Colstrip electric generating plants 1 and 2, but he also included data for Carter, Custer, Fallon, Powder River, and Treasure Counties.

Polzin said two of the most obvious changes in Rosebud County between 1970 and 1980 were the increases in population and employment. Rosebud County's population grew from 6,000 people in 1970 to about 9,900 in 1980, a 65 percent increase and the greatest percentage increase of any of Montana's counties. But Polzin added that the increase in Rosebud County of approximately 4,000 persons was only a small portion of the state's increase of 92,700 persons over the decade.

(over)

Looking at employment, Polzin said that estimates of total employment in Rosebud County over the decade showed patterns corresponding to the construction of Colstrip units 1 and 2. Polzin said there was a peak of 5,200 workers during mid-1975, at the height of construction activity, followed by a downward movement to 3,500 workers in early 1977. Total employment rose again to 4,200-4,600 workers during 1978 and 1979.

Polzin said there is no complete explanation for the rebound in employment figures, but added that most of the increased jobs appear to be in retail trade and services and may reflect a delayed reaction to the growth in the economic base of the county.

Polzin also discussed the impact of energy-related development on the social makeup of Rosebud County, although he said reliable statistics reflecting social change are even more scarce than accurate economic data. He did, however, present figures for marriage dissolutions (which include divorces and annulments) as well as available crime rates for Rosebud County and the five other eastern Montana counties covered in his analysis.

In Rosebud County there was a clear upward trend in marriage dissolutions during the 1970s. But Polzin said energy development was probably not the major culprit behind the increases because a similar trend is apparent in the data for Montana as well as the five other eastern Montana counties. In addition, there was a sharp upward jump in all areas in marriage dissolution in 1975, the year when "no fault divorce" became effective.

Polzin said there were also increases in criminal activity in Rosebud County during the 1970s, but that the crime rate in Rosebud County was still far below the average for Montana.