

Beyond the “Old West” and “New West”: Changing People, Places, and Power in High Amenity Rural Areas

Special Issue of *Rural Sociology*

Special Issue Editors: Beth Bennett (Idaho State University), Kristal Jones (JG Research and Evaluation), & Jessica Schad (Utah State University)

The rural United States (U.S.) is highly dependent upon its natural resource base for employment as well as community identity and wellbeing. However, the relationship to the environment has shifted over the past half-century, with more rural places depending upon their natural resources for non-extractive purposes like recreation and ecosystem services. The concepts of “New West” and “Old West” have most recently been used to describe the ways that changes in how natural resources are valued relates to changes in population density and demographics in natural amenity rich rural areas of the American West. New West typically refers to relatively wealthy urban and suburban migrants drawn to natural amenity-rich communities by scenic landscapes, outdoor recreation, and a slower pace of life. Old West refers to longer-term residents, often connected to extractive industries like timber, agriculture, and mining. These groups are often framed as in conflict over community identity, land use, development, and who has the authority to decide what the rural West should become.

However, decades of demographic, economic, environmental, and political change have revealed important nuances, and for many of these places, Old West and New West identities and patterns no longer capture the complexities of high natural amenity rural places. These transformations are also not limited to the American West. Rural communities rich in environmental, recreational, cultural, or scenic amenities across the U.S. and around the world are navigating similar tensions involving growth and decline, belonging and exclusion, preservation and development, and local control and external influence. High-amenity rural places therefore offer an important lens for examining broader questions about rural restructuring, migration, inequality, governance, identity, and wellbeing.

Rural Sociology will publish a special issue focused on examining the changing social landscapes of high amenity rural areas, with a focus on updating and expanding concepts related to the New West/Old West framework. We invite empirical, methodological, and theoretical contributions that illuminate the diverse people, institutions, relationships, and power dynamics shaping these communities. We welcome studies of the American West as well as research from other U.S. regions and international contexts where similar dynamics are at play, including papers focused solely on rural places and those making rural-urban or cross-place comparisons.

Papers may address one or more of the following topics, as well as other relevant topics not listed here:

- Beyond the New West-Old West
 - New conceptual frameworks for understanding difference, change, and continuity in high amenity rural places
 - Additional categories to reflect timing and motivations for migration to the New West
 - The heterogeneity and intersecting identities of newcomers, long-term residents, Indigenous peoples, seasonal residents, and other groups
- Migration, Housing, Work, and Inequality
 - Considerations of second homes and part-year residents, as well as land and housing as a financial investment rather than a place to live and work
 - Precarity of service-industry work needed to sustain the ‘Rarefied West’ of ultrawealthy individuals
 - Impacts of “spillover” from high amenity areas to emerging amenity destinations
- Place, Belonging, Nostalgia, Conflict, and Community Wellbeing
 - Making new meaning out of Old West identities
 - Reflections on changing racial and ethnic composition of rural communities
 - Consequences of rapid growth, seasonal fluctuations, population turnover, or uneven development for individual and community wellbeing
- Land, Environment/Natural Resources, Governance, and Power
 - Learning from points of overlap and collaboration between extractive and recreational interests in natural resource management
 - Inclusion of pre-settler land rights and contemporary power relations between Tribal and Native nations and communities, and White settler institutions
 - Community responses to climate change, wildfire, drought, water scarcity, and other environmental pressures that threaten the amenities on which local identities and economies depend
- Methods, Measurement, and Representation
 - Updated conceptualizations of rurality, connectedness, and associated demographic change
 - Ongoing challenges of accurately depicting demographics and change in small and low-population density areas
 - Research that elevates populations often missing from scholarship and public debate about amenity-driven population change

Submission Information

Prospective contributors should submit an extended abstract no later than 5 PM ET on November 1, 2026. Abstracts can be up to two pages, single spaced, and must include a 3-5 sentence summary about how their study fits with the special issue theme. Submissions should be sent to the guest editorial team (elizabethbennett@isu.edu, kristal@jgresearch.org, and jessica.schad@usu.edu).

We will consider two types of submissions: research articles and research notes. Review the [Rural Sociology Author Guidelines](#) for descriptions of each. Specify in your abstract which type of paper you plan to submit if invited for full paper submission. All submissions must be original work that has not been previously published.

The special issue editors will review abstracts and extend invitations for full paper submissions by December 15, 2026. Papers invited for full submission must adhere to *Rural Sociology's* [Author Guidelines](#) and must be submitted via the journal's website by April 1, 2027. Additional instructions for full paper submission will be provided at the full paper invitation stage. All papers will undergo the journal's peer review process. The special issue will include approximately 8-12 papers.

Timeline

November 1, 2026	Abstract proposals due
December 15, 2026	Selected abstracts invited for full paper submission
April 1, 2027	Full papers due
June 1, 2027	Peer reviews completed
August 1, 2027	First revisions due
September 1, 2027	Second review completed (if necessary)
October 1, 2027	Final revisions due
December 2027	Full special issue published