

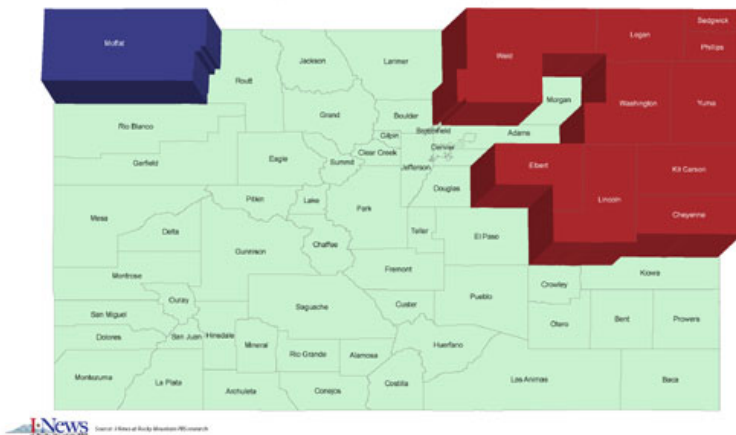
Should we stay or should we go?

Written by Steffanie Sperry

Wednesday, 16 October 2013 14:00 - Last Updated Thursday, 31 October 2013 06:39

A New Colorado Map?

Colorado's square state status would change if the northeastern counties and Moffat County seceded.



Should voters approve the ballot initiative for secession on Nov. 5? Moffat County would become part of Wyoming and the northeastern counties above would become the state of North Colorado.

**Map provided by INews at Rocky Mountain PBS Research
By Burt Hubbard**

I-News at Rocky Mountain PBS

Weld voters will decide Nov. 5 on secession movement

Colorado could stand to benefit financially and would see some improvement in the educational and economic standings of its remaining citizens if 10 northeastern counties should make good on their threat to secede and carve out a new state of North Colorado.

By those measures, Colorado's attitude might be, have fun out there, new state!

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But what's left of Colorado would also lose half of its lucrative oil wells, much of its prime farmland and some of the lowest crime areas in the state.

By those measures, Colorado's attitude might be, can't we just all get along?

In addition to the 10 northeast Colorado counties that have a secession vote on November's ballot, Moffat County in far northwest Colorado also will vote on whether to leave. But Moffat apparently wants to become Baja Wyoming.

I-News at Rocky Mountain PBS analyzed census, budget, crime and voter records to develop profiles of a new 51st state and a truncated Colorado. Suffice it to say, Colorado would no longer be considered a square state. And, of course, neither would Wyoming, with its new Moffat County panhandle.

Residents of the 11 counties will decide next month whether to start the fraught with difficulty political journey to leave Colorado and, in the case of the northeast counties, become a new state. West Virginia was the last state to manage such a separation, in 1863, during the American Civil War, a move validated solely by a proclamation from President Lincoln, according to a state Web site.

It isn't that easy today. One impediment: Both houses of the U.S. Congress would have to agree.

But proponents of secession said rural Coloradans are tired of having unpopular laws like stronger gun control and mandatory alternative energy standards forced on them by a Front Range dominated state Legislature.

"What has happened is the urbanization of America has disenfranchised the rural population,"

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said Jeffrey Hare, one of the organizers of the 51st State Initiative.

John Straayer, political science professor at Colorado State University, said bills from the last legislative session appear to have aroused animosity toward the legislature.

“In terms of the immediate trigger, guns and probably SB 252 (requiring use of alternative energy resources),” Straayer said. “They allege that it is more than that, not being treated properly by the legislature on a variety of issues for a long time.”

The eventual exodus, if the constitutional minefield could be navigated, would create a North Colorado of about 336,000 people, supplanting Wyoming as the least populous state in the U.S. It would leave Colorado with about 4.7 million residents, dropping it to the 23rd most populous state behind Alabama.

One of the key questions is the financial viability of a new state and its impact on the remainder of Colorado.

Financially, state government in Colorado would probably come out ahead if the 11 counties left, according to I-News estimates of how much revenue the state receives from the counties compared to expenditures there.

The counties generate between \$360 and \$400 million yearly for the state in sales tax, state income tax and the state’s share of vehicle registration fees. That accounts for about three-fourths of the revenue Colorado receives from those counties each year from taxes and fees.

Extrapolating forward, that would be the equivalent of between \$500 and \$560 million in revenue lost to the state from the 11 counties.

On the other side of the ledger, the state spends about \$520 million in the 11 counties for K-12

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school funding, incarcerating criminals from the counties, providing Medicaid, running the courts and the state's share of running one university and three community colleges.

Those costs equal about 84 percent of the state's overall general fund spending in the secession-voting counties. Extrapolating forward, that would come to total spending of about \$620 million. Bottom line: Colorado spends between about \$60 million and \$120 million or more a year in the 11 counties than the revenue it receives.

"There's still a lot of (state) money coming back to these counties," said Brian Lewandowski, economist with the Leeds Business School at the University of Colorado at Boulder.

By comparison, a similar analysis of Denver showed the county provides more tax and fee revenue to the state than it gets back in state funding for programs.

"You've got densely populated areas where there is a lot of wealth like Denver County and Douglas County," said Lewandowski.

However, advocates of secession disagree with the I-News analysis and point to their own report that shows the counties break even with state government on spending and revenue.

The differences between the two analyses involved spending figures on K-12 education, revenue from the state income tax and severance taxes from oil and gas development.

Gov. John Hickenlooper's office had no comment on what financial impact the secession would have on Colorado.

The I-News analysis did not examine how much money the counties currently receive directly from oil and gas operations. That's money that would help run a new state.

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More than half of Colorado's oil and gas wells would reside in the new state, mostly in Weld.

"It's pretty amazing the amount of dollars that it generates," Lewandowsk said.

Weld County alone gets 55 percent of its property tax revenue from exploration. That has resulted in a current \$100 million county contingency fund and no debt, said Weld County Commissioner Sean Conway, a leading proponent of secession who previously was chief of staff to former U.S. Sen. Wayne Allard, R-Colo.

During the recent flooding, the county was able to re-open its roads on its own.

"We've done this on our own," Conway said. "We haven't got help from the state."

Not all politicians in Weld County want to secede. Tom Norton, the mayor of Greeley and former Republican president of the state Senate, wrote in a column in The Greeley Tribune this summer that, while some state decisions have hurt rural Colorado, collaboration with the state, not secession, is the solution.

Demographically and politically, the two states – North Colorado and Colorado – would look quite different, the I-News analysis showed.

North Colorado would be predominately Republican with the fifth highest ratio of Republicans to Democrats in the U.S.

Meanwhile, Democrats in Colorado would outnumber Republicans for the first time in years. "We would have a red state and a blue state," Straayer said.

The would-be exiting counties are generally poorer and less educated than the rest of Colorado,

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according to Census data. College education levels in North Colorado would be on par with those of Tennessee and Oklahoma, while college graduation rates would rise in Colorado to the second highest in the nation.

North Colorado would have among the lowest crime rates in the nation, ranking from fifth to 11th lowest among states for rape, robbery, burglary and car theft.

Colorado's overall crime rates would go up, with motor vehicle theft rates almost three times higher than those of the 51st state.

North Colorado would have a higher percentage of families among its households, be younger on average and have a higher percent of Latinos. In fact, the new state would have the 6th highest percent of Hispanics in the U.S. But its black population would only be about 1 percent, the fifth lowest in the U.S.

And then, of course, there are the issues of marijuana and tornadoes. Legal pot would stop at old Colorado's borders. About half of the state's tornados touch down every year in the counties that would leave Colorado.

Even if approved by the counties involved, secession would appear to remain a long shot, as it would require both Colorado and federal approval.

State ratification could come in a citizens' initiative – such as the one that legalized recreational marijuana – in a referred ballot measure from the legislature, or in an act of the legislature, said Richard Collins, professor at the University of Colorado School of Law.

If that happened, it would then need approval by both houses of Congress.

In the meantime, the effort has drawn national publicity and its share of political quips.

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Last month, when Hickenlooper was looking at flood damage in Julesburg, which would be part of the new state, he assured officials there that all Colorado would be working together to overcome the disaster, before quipping, “then you all can get back to seceding.”

And Conway could not resist a dig at his two least favorite counties when talking about interest in secession being voiced elsewhere – including in some counties not involved in the current effort.

“When we’re done, we might be voting Denver and Boulder off the island.”

I-News is the public service journalism arm of Rocky Mountain PBS and collaborates with news outlets across Colorado. To read more, go to inewsnetwork.org . Contact senior reporter Burt Hubbard at bhubbard@inewsnetwork.org.

County Council to discuss vote's legality Monday

The Johnstown Breeze

GREELEY - The Weld County Council’s regular monthly meeting will be at 6:30 p.m. Oct. 21 at the Weld County Administration Building, 1150 O Street, in Greeley.

The program will be a follow-up to a request made by three individuals (Robert Ruyle, Stow Witwer and Chuck Dickson) for the County Council to investigate the powers of the Board of County Commissioners relative to action they are taking regarding the secession of Weld County from the State of Colorado.

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The County Council has invited them, as well as Bruce Barker, County Attorney, to present their cases regarding such legal authority.

After their presentations there will be a short period for them to answer questions relative to such legal authority.

After the above-mentioned presentation period, Weld County residents are welcome to make short comments relative to any concerns or ideas they may have regarding Weld County Government.

Created by the Weld County Home Rule Charter in 1976, the County Council consists of five nonpartisan elected members, one representing each district and two at-large members.

For more information, contact the Council via email at countycouncil@co.weld.co.us or by phone at 336-7247.

By the way, this is not the first time that Weld County has been in the forefront of secession movements.

According to the Greeley History Museum, back in 1854, the area now known as Weld was divided between the Kansas and Nebraska territories.

But five years later, gold miners and settlers wanted to break away and formed their own territory, called Jefferson Territory.

However, Congress never recognized Jefferson Territory, and in 1861, the present day Weld area jumped ship again and became one of the 17 counties in the newly formed Colorado Territory.