

Population revival in the regions

BOOM TIME

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REGIONAL South Australia has recorded a significant population increase for the first time in more than 40 years, because of strong and widespread economic growth.

Buoyant times for industries including food, intensive livestock, aquaculture, wine, forestry and mining are being credited for the country revival.

Populations in the Yorke and

Lower North, Murraylands, South-East and Eyre statistical areas all grew strongly in the five years to 2006, new Australia Bureau of Statistics figures show.

The strongest growth was recorded on the fringes of Adelaide – in the Barossa, Kangaroo Island, Fleurieu and Mount Lofty Ranges – where the population has grown by a total of 24,591 people since 1996.

Only the Far North continued its long-term decline, despite Roxby Downs' rapid growth. The area's population has fallen by almost 10,000 people since 1991.

Australian Population Institute chairman Michael Hickinbotham said regional SA's resurgence could be significantly credited to Adelaide having "regional status" under the Skilled Regional Migration Program.

"Adelaide is the only mainland state capital with regional status, making it the front door for people coming to Australia who want to live in a capital city," said Mr Hickinbotham, who is also a member of the state Economic Development Board.

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Regional population revival

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"Quite often, migrants come to Adelaide and filter out to the regions from there.

"In Mt Gambier, for instance, there are 990 new people ... that reverses a long-term negative trend."

Mr Hickinbotham, also the Hickinbotham Group's managing director, said the State Government had maximised the benefits of Adelaide's migration status to attract people from overseas to settle across all regional SA.

The state's regional cities – Mt Gambier, Murray Bridge, Port Pirie, Port Augusta, Whyalla and Port Lincoln – all grew in the five years to 2006.

The ABS figures show a dramatic turnaround in Whyalla, which grew by 200 people between 2001-2006 after falling by 2200 during the previous five years.

Similarly, Port Augusta's population rose by 600 people, reversing a decline of 500 in the previous five-year period.

The northern Spencer Gulf region's population is expected to surge further as a result of the state's mining boom.

The Far North and Roxby Downs, in particular, are expected to benefit greatly from BHP Billiton's proposed expansion of the Olympic Dam mine.

But the population in several smaller country towns and inland dryland areas is continuing to fall.

SA Farmers Federation president Wayne Cornish said he believed most country areas were growing due to a combination of economic and lifestyle factors.

"It will be interesting to see if those areas continue to grow away from the mining sector," he said. "The mining industry is putting very significant pressure on housing, and their requirement for people will also affect some of those regional centres for some time."

Mr Cornish said most of

regional SA's revival had been spurred by the growth of the major regional centres, such as Mt Gambier, Murray Bridge, Port Augusta and Port Lincoln.

The Bureau of Statistics figures show the fastest-growing area on Adelaide's fringe was the Light Regional Council, which includes part of the Barossa Valley. It recorded an average annual growth rate of 5 per cent.

The Freeling-Kapunda area is expected to become a major growth region following the construction of the Northern Expressway.

Light Regional Council chief executive Brian Carr said the expressway would bring Freeling to within 45 minutes of Adelaide.

"We are talking about a significant growth spurt in the next five to 10 years, but it could double again in the following 10 years," Mr Carr said. "Parts of regional Australia are alive and well. The

Barossa belt and the outer metropolitan area is on the brink of thriving."

The strong growth in the Light Regional Council area includes 1000 allotments to be released in the next five to 10 years.

"We're projecting the (present) Light population of 12,846 will be 15,500 within a decade," Mr Carr said.

The Murraylands region, including Murray Bridge and the Mallee, is also projected to grow despite the impact of drought and uncertainty on the amount of water available from the River Murray.

A survey of business in the region, commissioned by the Murraylands Regional Development Board, predicts 2597 new jobs in the three years to the end of 2008.

The prime drivers of the growth are expected to be manufacturing and retail.

COUNTRY BOOM

AREA	1991	1995	2000	2006
Yorke and Lower North	43,996	44,335	44,218	45,589
Murray Lands	68,012	68,271	68,487	69,479
South East	62,855	62,769	62,784	64,615
Eyre	33,165	33,039	33,489	34,760
Northern	88,479	84,531	81,847	78,720