

Big Horn County's lowest elevation is at 2700 feet where the Big Horn County River exits the county and the highest point is at 9200 feet in the southwest of the County in the Bighorn Mountain Range. Big Horn County includes the Pryor Mountains, Bighorn Mountains, Wolf Mountains, and Pine Ridge Mountains. Rivers and streams flow from south-southwest to north north-east and include Tongue River, Rosebud Creek, Little Bighorn River, Lodge Grass Creek, Bighorn River and Pryor Creek.

Coal mining and agriculture both play major roles in Big Horn County's economy. Farms and ranches in the county produce mainly beef cattle, sugar beets, alfalfa, and small grains.

The County includes many historic and recreational features that attract visitors from around the world. The Bighorn River is a blue-ribbon trout fishery. Bighorn National Recreation Area and the Yellowtail Reservoir it encompasses include massive sheer rock walls and impressive vistas. The Tongue River Reservoir is a state park and another recreational destination. Historic resources include the single national monument listed in Montana – the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument, and two national landmarks—the Rosebud Battlefield and Chief Plenty Coups' home.



Fly Fishing in Big Horn County (photo: Montana Department of Commerce)

**Table 1: Key Dates in Big Horn County History**

|                  |   |  |             |   |
|------------------|---|--|-------------|---|
| <b>1450-1700</b> | Crow "Children of the Large Beaked Bird" arrive in area of Big Horn County  |  | <b>1913</b> | Big Horn County formed from Yellowstone and Rosebud Counties          |
| <b>1800</b>      | Crow Tribe population estimated at 8,000  |  | <b>1920</b> | St. Xavier town has a bank, grocery store, theater, two pool halls    |
| <b>1825</b>      | Rocky Mountain Fur Company expedition travels along the Big Horn River  |  | <b>1921</b> | Seven oil wells on Soap Creek Dome                                    |
| <b>1848</b>      | Chief Plenty Coups born, becomes a chief at age 25 and by the time of his death, has become recognized internationally.           |  | <b>1928</b> | Hardin gas field discovered   |
| <b>1864</b>      | Montana declared a territory and divided into eight counties  |  | <b>1929</b> | Bank in St. Xavier shuts down   |
| <b>1866</b>      | Pryor Creek Battle - Crow defeat Sioux who had come to annihilate the Crow  |  | <b>1932</b> | Chief Plenty Coups dies at his home near Pryor                        |
| <b>1866</b>      | Fort Smith erected as a post along the Bozeman Trail  |  | <b>1937</b> | Sugar Beet Factory north of Hardin constructed                        |
| <b>1868</b>      | Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868 - established the boundaries of the Crow Indian Reservation which were revised in 1882, 1891 and 1904 |  | <b>1939</b> | Tongue River Dam completed  |
| <b>1870</b>      | Crow Tribe population estimated at 2,000  |  | <b>1942</b> | Bentonite mine started west of Wyola but closes within a decade       |
| <b>1876</b>      | Battle of the Little Big Horn   |  | <b>1961</b> | Construction begins on Yellowtail Dam                                 |
| <b>1884</b>      | Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation established, boundaries revised in 1900  |  | <b>1966</b> | Yellowtail Dam and After Bay Dam are completed                        |
| <b>1887</b>      | Catholic Mission founded at St. Xavier  |  | <b>1966</b> | Big Horn Canyon National Recreation Area created by Order of Congress |
| <b>1893</b>      | Decker Post Office established  |  | <b>1971</b> | Sugar Beet Factor north of Hardin shuts down                          |
| <b>1894</b>      | Railroad line is completed from Wyoming border to Huntley, MT across Big Horn County  |  | <b>1974</b> | Westmoreland Resources begins mining in Sarpy Creek area              |
| <b>1907</b>      | Town of Hardin surveyed   |  | <b>1978</b> | Decker coal - largest strip mining operation in the US at the time    |
| <b>1907</b>      | Town of Hardin established  |  | <b>1980</b> | Spring Creek Coal mine begins operations                              |
| <b>1910</b>      | Wyola established as a railroad station stop  |  | <b>2009</b> | More than 900 Coal bed methane wells in southeastern Big Horn County  |



Little Big Horn National Battlefield National Monument (photo: Montana Department of Commerce)

### 3. TRENDS AND ISSUES

#### 3.1 DEVELOPMENTS AND TRENDS 2002-2012

The previous growth policy was adopted in 2002. At that time, the biggest change on the horizon was the potential for coalbed methane development in the southeast corner of the county. The county's population was projected to increase to approximately 15,600 by 2025. Housing, adequate infrastructure (water and sewer), and poverty were serious issues. There was need for improved coordination among the various jurisdictions, including the municipalities, Crow Indian Reservation, Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation, Bureau of Indian Affairs and Big Horn County.

Change has occurred, but not quite as anticipated. Since 2002, **coal bed methane** development boomed with approximately 1500 wells drilled, 900 of which were producing by 2008. By 2012, declining commodity prices and high production costs caused all but about 300 wells to be shut down.

By 2013, **population** projections had backed off substantially. Actual population increase for the county between 2000 and 2010 was 1.5%, compared to a projected increase in the 2002 Growth Policy of 7.6%. The basis for the projections for the 2002 Growth Policy and the 2013 Growth Policy is fundamentally the same – projections provided by the state of Montana. In 2013, the population projection for the year 2025 was 12,454, several hundred less than the 15,600 estimated in the 2002 Growth Policy. The 2010 census population for the county was 12,925. Population has shifted within the county—Lodge Grass population declined by 16% between 2000-2010; many of those persons moved to Hardin. At the same time there were also people leaving the county entirely, believed by many to have moved to Billings and elsewhere.

Some things have continued to progress along a fairly solid trend line. In 2002, the county's Native American Indian population was a growing proportion of total population, and the county had a much **younger population** than most of Montana. The proportion of Native American Indian population to the total population has increased by 4% on average over each of the past two decades and in 2010 comprised 64% of total county population. In 2010 approximately 36% of the total

#### KEY CHANGES/TRENDS SINCE 2002

- **Coal bed methane** development came and went
- **Coal production** strong and #1 in state, more production possible
- **Population** growth slowed
- Youthful population **36% under age 20** – and **drop-out rates** are high
- # of **seniors** over age 64 increased by 20%
- **Housing needs** still a major issue
- **Infrastructure improvements** made
- Significant **infrastructure needs** remain
- **High labor earnings** but many people unemployed
- **Poverty** remains an issue
- Still **need jurisdictional coordination**
- **Truck and rail traffic** increases
- Local **bus service** begun in 2011
- **Agriculture product** value increase
- **Tourism** strong, more potential
- A few **gravel operations** have created issues for residences
- **Crow Water Rights** Settlement finalized

population was less than 20 years of age. Unfortunately, Big Horn County has one of the highest school **drop-out rates** in Montana.

Number of **seniors** is increasing. There were 200 more persons 65 years or older in 2010 than there were in 2000, an increase of approximately 20%.

**Housing** quantity and quality remain issues in the county. In 2005, the most recent year that the state conducted a housing condition study, nearly half (48%) of all the housing units in the county were in “fair” condition -- usable but needing much repair. Another 7% were “poor” condition -- “undesirable and barely usable.” An additional 5% were in “very poor” or “unsound” condition -- “structurally unsound and practically unfit for use.” Approximately 60% of the county’s housing was in fair or worse condition.

Big Horn County does not operate or manage any water or sewer systems, nor did it in 2000, but the county continues to support and encourage efforts to improve these systems in the municipalities and on the Indian Reservations. Support from the county includes grant-writing and some limited funding assistance for **infrastructure**. The systems have seen significant improvements overall – new systems in Crow Agency and Fort Smith, for example. Aging systems in Hardin, Lodge Grass, and other locations are still needed despite upgrades and changes over the last decade.

**Poverty** remains an issue. Although labor earnings are higher in Big Horn County than the average for the state of Montana, many people do not have paying jobs. The unemployment rates were high in 2000 and still high today. The unemployment rate in 2011 was 12%, 3-4% higher than in 2000 and nearly twice as high as the rest of the state.

There is still room for improvement for **coordination among jurisdictions**. Law enforcement coverage has improved somewhat, but is still an issue, particularly on the Crow Indian Reservation with a patchwork of ownership and jurisdictional questions. The patchwork ownership also creates issues for land use regulation. Although county subdivision regulations generally apply to parcels that are recorded in the county court house, the regulations do not apply to tribal lands or parcels that are not recorded. Consequently, unless the county and tribal governments adopt similar land use policies, it is entirely possible that restrictions apply on one parcel, but not to the adjoining parcel.

Development has occurred in Hardin (such as the annexation around Watson Drive) that affects or could affect irrigation outside of the city-county planning area.

**Gravel pits** have been developed next to residential areas in the county, affecting public health and safety and reducing residential property values. The location of sand and gravel resources is similar to the location of residential development in the county—along rivers. The gravel operations can be noisy, dusty, and trucks hauling the gravel impact local roads with dust and increased wear and tear.

**Rail traffic** has increased in the county with increased coal shipments. **Highway traffic**, including heavy semi-trucks and coal trucks, has also increased. Locals believe that people travelling to and from jobs in

the Bakken oil fields in eastern Montana and Western North Dakota is a factor in the increased highway traffic.

Crow Nation Transit began **bus service** from Wyola to Billings and Pryor to Billings in the spring of 2011. The service is available to anyone in the county, not just tribal members. In prior years, the bus system across the state had been declining with fewer routes. This service is a great benefit for the many in the county who do not have their own transportation.

Another bright spot is that the fundamental bases of the county's economy – **agriculture, coal mining, and tourism** -- remain strong. The market value of agricultural products sold increased by 43% between 2002 and 2007, according to the Census of Agriculture. The county is the state's number one coal producer, with over 22 million tons in 2012. Hundreds of thousands of visitors come to see the county's public historic and recreation sites annually. On average visitor groups in Montana spend \$195 per day.

Additional resources could also come into play with the **Crow Tribe water rights settlement**. The Crow Tribe Water Rights Settlement and Compact was signed into law by President Obama in 2010 and ratified by the Crow Tribe in 2011. Together, the Settlement Act and the Compact quantify the Tribe's water rights and authorize funding of \$131.8 million for the rehabilitation and improvement of the Crow Irrigation Project and \$246.4 million for the design and construction of a water system to serve numerous reservation communities, as well as funding totaling more than \$81 million for tribal water administration and for a portion of costs for the irrigation and municipal water systems. The Settlement also provides funding to boost energy development projects such as hydropower generation at Yellowtail Afterbay Dam, clean coal conversion, and other renewable energy projects.

The Crow Tribe continues to work on purchasing lands for the tribe, focusing particularly on parcels that are jointly owned by many individuals, who have inherited the property over decades from the original Crow individual owners. A single parcel may be jointly owned by dozens of individuals, who often rent the property out for agricultural purposes.

## 3.2 RECENT TRENDS/ISSUES

Hardin conducted a housing study focused on affordable and senior housing and instituted a housing authority in 2013.

On June 20, 2013, Crow Tribal Chairman Darrin Old Coyote announced that the Bureau of Indian Affairs approved a leasing agreement between the Crow Tribe and Cloud Peak Energy. The deal is approximated to encompass 1.4 billion tons of coal.

Reduced federal funding in 2013 could jeopardize the clinics and ambulance service in Lodge Grass and Pryor. The county provides the ambulance service throughout the county, but is subsidized with payments from Indian Health Services (HIS). With federal funding cutbacks, Big Horn County will be unable to sustain the service at the current levels with county funding alone.