

# A Report on Population and Ag Production in Phillips County, Montana

In this overview of current trends in Phillips County, Montana, we focus on three key areas: population change, agricultural production, and existing conservation practices. We draw on recent data collected from both the US Census Bureau's Population Estimates Program (2000-2020), the USDA's Land Values Survey and the USDA's Census of Agriculture (2002, 2007, 2012, and 2017).

## Population Trends: Declining and Aging

Figure 1: Estimated Population Change Since 2000

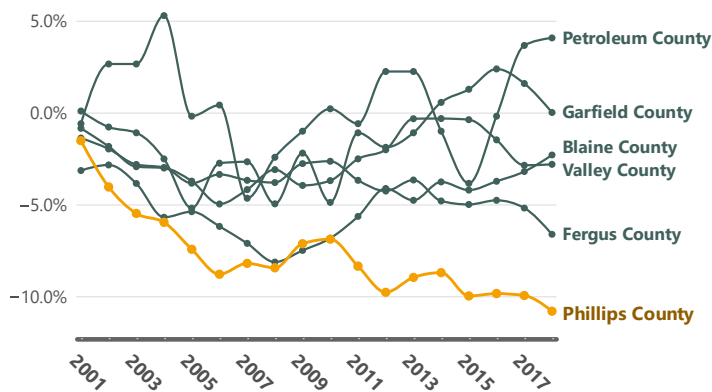
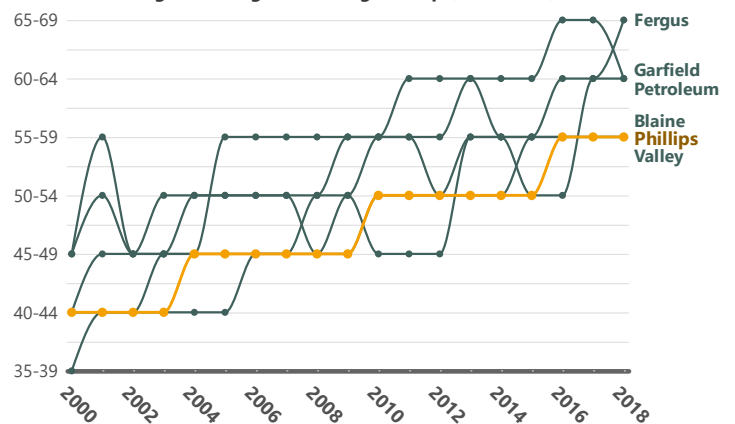


Figure 2: Largest Adult Age Group (2000-2018)



US Census data show that while the state of Montana experienced an overall increase in population since 2000, Phillips County and its surrounding counties lost population. Phillips County's *population* declined by approximately 11% between 2000 and 2018, decreasing from 4,568 to 4,074 (Figure 1). This same period witnessed an aging of the population. In 2000, the largest adult age group was 40-44, but by 2018, the largest age group increased to 55-59 (Figure 2).

# Overall Crop and Livestock Production: Fewer and Larger Operations

Figure 3: Total Number of Farm Operations

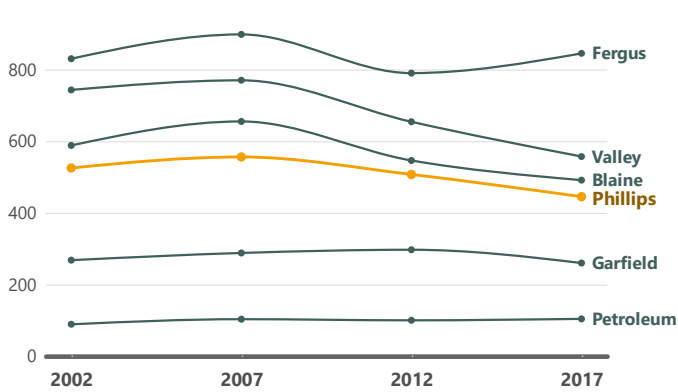
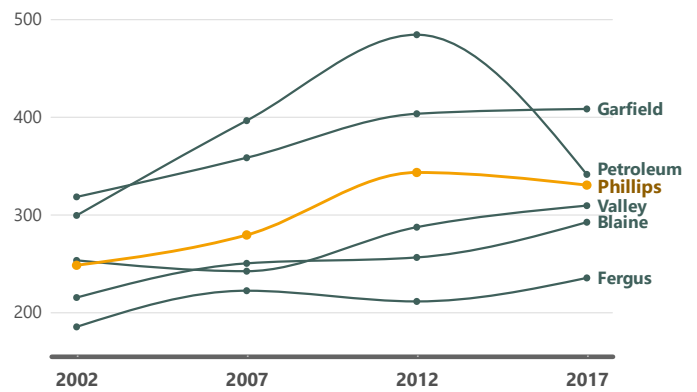


Figure 4: Average Number of Cattle per Producer



Phillips County experienced a modest increase in the *total number of farm operations* (both crop and livestock) from 2002 to 2007. However, the number of operations steadily declined after 2007, with 101 fewer farm operations (-20%) in 2017 than in 2007 (Figure 3).<sup>1</sup> This trend, paired with a stable number of acres in production, generated a substantial increase in the average farm size (12% since 2007).

Following this trend, the *number of cattle-producing operations* declined (-20%) as the *average number of cattle per producer* increased (+17%) (Figure 4). As a result, fewer operations were producing more cattle in Phillips County in 2017 as compared to 2002. This trend toward growth in the average number of cattle per producers reflects the statewide pattern.<sup>2</sup>

Figure 5: Total Cattle Inventory

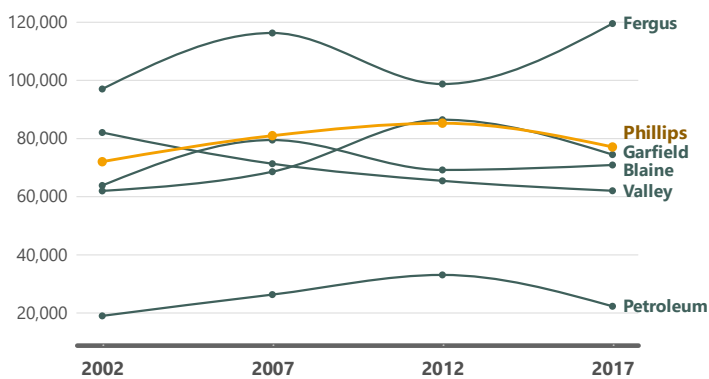
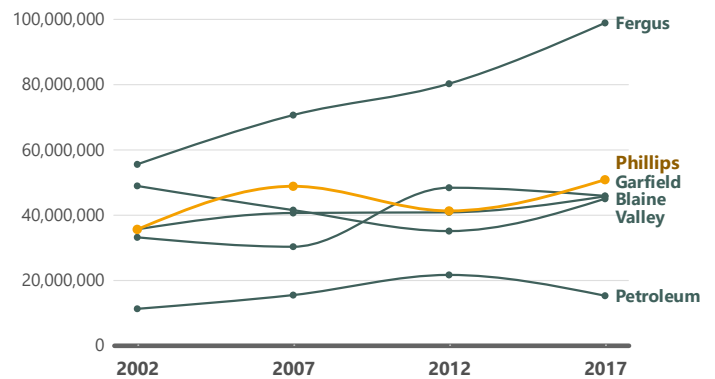


Figure 6: Sales from Cattle and Calves



Phillips County's *total cattle inventory* grew between 2002 and 2012, but fell by 9% in 2017—consistent with the change in neighboring counties (except Fergus County) as well as national trends in cattle inventory (Figure 5). Similarly, total cattle sales have steadily increased since 2002 (+44%) (Figure 6).

## Conservation: CRP Enrollment and Agritourism Declining

The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)—a USDA program through which producers contract with and receive payments from the federal government to retire endangered and erodible farmland—has been a conservation mainstay since the 1980s.

However, in Phillips County, the *number of acres enrolled in federal conservation programs* has declined dramatically since 2002 (-65%) (Figure 7). In addition, there has been a decrease in the number of operations enrolled in these programs (-53%). Similarly, there has been a decline in CRP enrollment in the surrounding counties, the state, and the nation.<sup>3</sup>

Figure 7: Acres Enrolled in Federal Conservation Programs

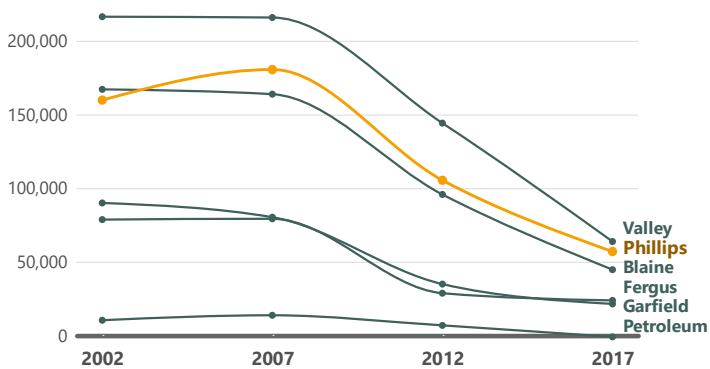
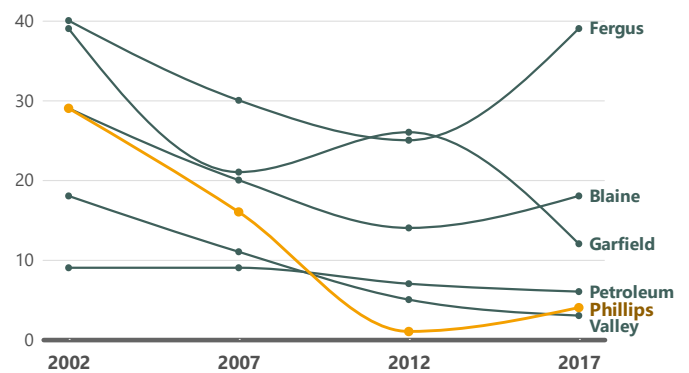


Figure 8: Operations Involved in Agritourism



Conservation (such as CRP) is often associated with *agritourism and ecotourism*, which serve as supplemental forms of income for agricultural producers.<sup>4</sup> According to the Census of Agriculture, the number of operations that obtained money from agritourism and other forms of recreation has decreased substantially since 2002 (-86%) (Figure 8).

## Sales and Assets: Increasing Values of Commodity Sales and Pastureland

Figure 9: Total Value of County-Wide Commodity Sales

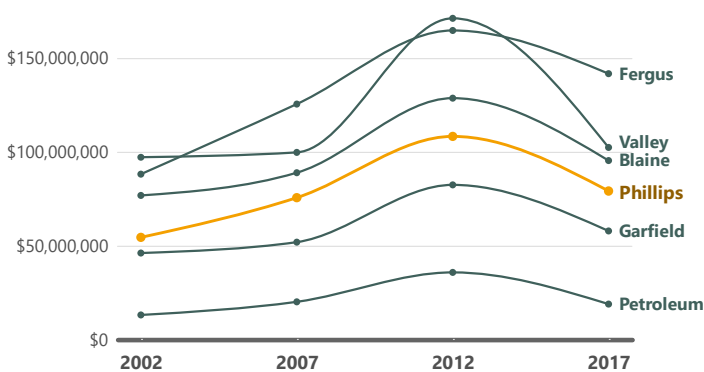
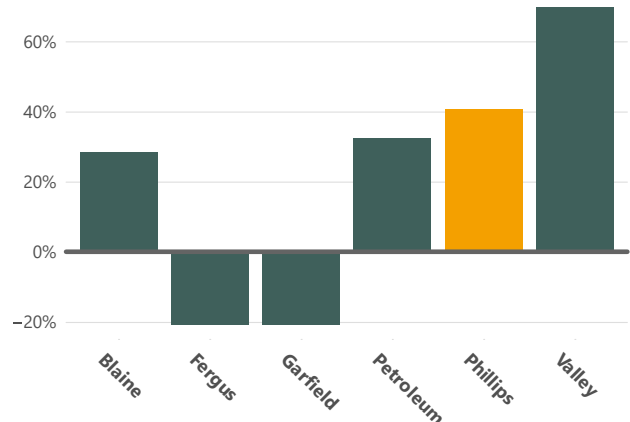


Figure 10: Percent Change in Value of Pastureland Rents (2009-2019)



Both commodity sales and land asset values have increased in Phillips County. Between 2002 and 2017, the *value of county-wide commodity sales* increased, with sales peaking in 2012 (Figure 9). Although more variable from year to year, the *value of pastureland* between 2009 and 2019 also experienced an overall increase in price and peaked in 2012 (Figure 10).<sup>5</sup>

## Endnotes

1. Even with this decline in total operations, Phillips County is still considered a farm-dependent county, which the USDA defines as one in which at least 15% of the labor force is involved in agriculture (see [USDA ERS Typology Report](#) for further data on county typologies).
2. Despite this increase in average herd size, the consolidation of cattle operations is minimal compared to that of crops, chicken, or hogs nationwide, as [MacDonald, Hoppe, and Newton's \(2018\)](#) comprehensive study documents.
3. These declines are likely due to changes in the 2007 Farm Bill, which limited the total acres available for CRP enrollment ([National Sustainable Agriculture Report](#)).
4. We determined that the variable "Agri-tourism and Recreational Services" encompasses both agritourism and ecotourism (see the [CRP Environmental Impact Statement](#) for the association between CRP and ecotourism income).
5. All dollar values have been converted into 2020 dollars. The Census of Agriculture does not differentiate between different types of commodities (i.e., grain and cattle). Furthermore, pastureland rent values are only available for the years 2009-2019.

## Contact Information

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