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U.S.

Wyoming, Long on Pride but Short on People, Hopes to Lure Some Back

By JULIE TURKEWITZ JULY 15, 2015

LARAMIE, Wyo. — Residents of Wyoming often brag about its status as the nation’s least populated state, boasting of its traffic-free highways and starry night sky — and taking pride in the fact that its cattle outnumber people by two to one.

Cattle, however, cannot open businesses or build homes, and so this spring, Wyoming embarked on a new quest: getting its young people back.

“We’ve got to make sure that we have the workers of tomorrow,” the governor, Matt Mead, said in an interview. The state seeks to fill open jobs in fields including nursing and teaching, he said, and to bring in people who will expand its new sectors, like technology.

This effort has taken the form of an Internet-based recruitment program called Wyoming Grown. Young Wyomingites who have left the state sign up on the program’s website, and quickly receive a call from a recruiter who helps link them to work here.

A snail mail letter from Mr. Mead follows. “It’s the personal touch that Wyoming can provide,” he said. “I didn’t want to just say, ‘We’re kind of interested in you coming back.’ I wanted to say, ‘I’m the chief executive of the

state — I personally want you to come back.’ ”

Wyoming has long struggled to keep young people within its borders. It has one of the least diversified economies in the nation, meaning those not interested in energy or agriculture often head elsewhere.

A postschooling trip down Interstate 25, to the bright city lights of Denver or Fort Collins, Colo., is practically a state tradition.

But as baby boomers age and retire, this exodus is of increasing concern to officials, who worry that Wyoming will not be able to care for its older residents or fill their jobs. The state has about 600,000 residents — Manhattan, by comparison, has 1.6 million — and recently had its slowest population growth rate since 2001, adding just 930 people in 2014.

The state is dotted by shrinking agricultural communities where the median age is well above 40.

Wyoming Grown is run by the state’s Department of Workforce Services and is modeled on similar programs in South Dakota and Idaho. The program welcomes non-Wyomingites, but targets those who grew up here, people who will not go running after their first winter of brutal wind and subzero temperatures.

The program’s website tugs at the heartstrings of those who have left. “You know the Wyoming spirit,” reads the front page, “low-drama, tenacious and independent.” But it also works to present a modern face. “We have yoga, microbreweries, triathlons and live jam sessions,” it reads. “Were you thinking Wyoming is all ATVs, fly fishing and rodeo? Well, they’ve gotten even better. But so have the lattes.”

Jordell Brady, 32, of Green River, Wyo., called the program “genius.”

Ms. Brady moved to Westminster, Colo., a suburb of Denver, in 2008, seeking excitement. But the area — with its soaring rents and traffic-clogged

streets — soon began to grate on her. “You can’t go to a lake without a million people there,” she said. “Life is easier in Wyoming. It’s slower. It’s a place where you actually appreciate the sunsets.”

She heard about the program from her mother and enrolled in May, on the day after it started. She continues at her job as an analyst at a supply company in Denver, while a recruiter works to help her find a job back home.

Wenlin Liu, a state economist, said that Wyoming’s dependence on coal and oil money had long made it vulnerable to boom-and-bust cycles. He applauded the state’s effort to diversify its economy, but cautioned that the recruitment program would have a limited effect.

“We have this chicken-and-egg problem,” he said, explaining that Wyoming struggles to lure new industries because it does not have qualified employees to fill their ranks, but has trouble recruiting qualified workers because it does not have companies that interest them.

“We’re trying to attract these people back,” he said of Wyoming Grown, “but we may not have enough opportunities for them.”

Dakota Roots, which helped inspire the Wyoming program, is credited with motivating about 4,000 people to relocate to South Dakota since 2006. The number does not include spouses or children who may have accompanied those people.

One hundred and five people enrolled in Wyoming Grown from May to early July, and seven have found jobs with the help of its recruiters.

Harrison Welshimer, 27, is among those spurred to return by the program. A classical saxophonist and a native Wyomingite, he left his home state in 2011, seeking a more cosmopolitan lifestyle, and tossed his outdoor gear into a trash bin. Eventually, he settled in Denver.

But he felt stifled by city life. In June, he moved back to Laramie, a

university city that many call Laradise, a place where bankers make house calls and residents occasionally hitch their horses outside downtown bars.

Mr. Welshimer has a paid internship and plans to open a Wyoming-based business that will bring singer-songwriters to Laramie, with the hopes of turning it into a music hub teeming with hip, up-and-coming independent artists. He also bought new outdoor gear, which he recently used to wrestle steers at a local festival.

“This is a very risky thing for me — to come back,” he said. “But that’s where the love of the state comes in: I don’t care. I’ll figure it out.”

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