

AGRICULTURAL EXPANSION IN NORTHERN ALBERTA

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ABSTRACT. Since the early 1980s some 40,000 acres of forested land have been cleared and placed under cultivation by Mennonite farmers near the small town of La Crete in northern Alberta's Peace River district. This incipient agriculture has been accompanied by dramatic increases in road building and home construction and by the establishment of churches and schools. The principal force behind the acquisition of land has been a desire of families to have homes in rural areas where they can enjoy lifestyles based on traditional Mennonite values. Because most new farmers cannot earn a living in the district from agriculture alone, they must rely on the wood industries to supplement their incomes. Demand is building for the province to open still more land, but disagreements between the government and the Mennonite community about the most appropriate location for developing new farms has put further expansion on hold until the conflict can be resolved. *Keywords:* agricultural expansion, Alberta, Canada, Mennonites.

As the twenty-first century begins, agricultural expansion in Canada's north is assuredly not at an end. In the lower Peace River country of northern Alberta, 500 miles toward the Arctic Circle from Edmonton, families are busy clearing land and creating farms on the fringes of existing settlement (Figure 1). Such activity is part of a process begun in the late 1970s, when the Alberta provincial government, in response to residents' demands, made available to beginning farmers better than 50,000 acres of raw land southwest of the small agricultural service center of La Crete. In the early 1980s, thousands of acres of forest were cleared and burned annually in preparation for crop production. Although the pace has eased, the process continues. Indeed, prospective farmers are demanding yet more land, but the government, citing economic and environmental concerns, is reluctant to open additional tracts.

What is taking place in Alberta's north is unique. Elsewhere in North America, farmers are giving up as commodity prices sink below levels necessary for small family operators to make a living (Economist 1999; Gorelick 2000; Lilliston and Ritchie 2000). In light of these conditions and the pervasive fact of farm abandonment at other fronts of western Canada's forest-farmland interface, it is astonishing that people in this northern region have established new farms and are urging the government to make additional land available (Vanderhill 1971, 1982). I examine the forces that have contributed to agricultural expansion southwest of La Crete, describe the remarkable transformation of this area, and assess the prospects for future development. A critical element of this process, in the past, at present, and in the future, are the cultural values of the area's Mennonite people, today numbering some 6,000, who account for the vast majority of the population in and around La Crete.

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