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REUTERS 

U.S. population to top 300 million this month

By Deborah Zabarenko, Environment Correspondent *1 hour, 44 minutes ago*

Some time this month, the number of Americans will surpass 300 million, a milestone that raises environmental impact questions for the only major industrial nation whose population is increasing substantially.

The U.S. Census Bureau predicts the 300 million mark will be reached in mid-October, 39 years after U.S. population topped 200 million and 91 years after it exceeded 100 million.

This will make the United States No. 3 in population in the world, after China and India.

Most of the growth is taking place in the South and West, according to the Census Bureau. From 2004 to 2005, U.S. population had a natural increase -- births minus deaths -- of 1.7 million and international migration of 1 million.

Whether the 300 millionth U.S. person is added by immigration or by being born in the United States, the expected absolute number of Americans prompted a report by the non-profit Center for Environment and Population.

The report's author, Victoria Markham, noted that the United States is the only industrialized nation with significant population growth. The vast majority of the world's population rise -- about 98 percent -- is in poor countries, she said.

"In combination with our very high rates of natural resource consumption and the associated pollution, that results in America having the highest per capita environmental impact in the world," Markham said in a telephone interview.

NUMBERS DON'T TELL THE WHOLE STORY

Sheer numbers of human beings don't necessarily have the heaviest impact on the environment; instead, environmental impact is a calculation that involves population, affluence and technology, the report said.

In the areas of land-use, water, biodiversity, forests, fisheries and aquatic resources, Americans are consuming more than they did in the past. The report found:

-- Each American occupies 20 percent more developed land -- housing, schools, shopping and roads -- than 20 years ago.

-- Each American uses three times as much water as the world average; over half the original wetlands in the United States have been lost, mainly due to urban and suburban development and agriculture.

-- Half the continental United States can no longer support its original vegetation; nearly 1,000 plant and animal species are listed by the U.S. government as endangered or threatened, with 85 percent of those due to habitat loss or alteration.

-- The United States consumes nearly 25 percent of the world's energy, though it has only 5 percent of the world's population, and has the highest per capita oil consumption worldwide.

-- Each American produces about 5 pounds (2.3 kilogram) of trash a day, up from about 3 pounds (1.4 kilogram) in 1960; the current rate is about five times that in developing countries.

After U.S. population hit 200 million in 1967, Paul Erlich gained notoriety with a book called "The Population Bomb," which predicted mass starvation due to population growth.

No such dire warnings accompany the center's report, Markham said. "We aren't saying there's too many of us," Markham said. "We were trying to step back and take a look at the broad picture and at the population trends and the scientific data."

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