

By JANA G. PRUDEN
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Fasih Tunc smiles broadly as he scoops up a handful of split red lentils, showing off their colour and luster. The lentils are perfect, each one glossy and round and flawless, and Tunc is proud of them.

He travelled across the world for these beautiful Saskatchewan-grown lentils — leaving his home in Turkey and moving to Canada for a job at a lentil processing facility just outside Regina.

His wife and three children have joined him here, and Tunc says he may try to bring two of his brothers here in the future. The family is finally getting used to the cold winters, the vast space and the unfamiliar quiet, and will probably buy a house in Regina next year.

After four years in this country, Tunc is a skilled worker and a proud resident. He may also be Saskatchewan's future.

Immigration helped build Saskatchewan more than 100 years ago, when aggressive advertising campaigns drew new residents from Britain, Northern Europe and elsewhere in Canada with the promise of rich soil, safe communities and a prosperous life.

The appeal to immigrants brought people to the province in droves. At the time of the 1911 census, Saskatchewan was the third-most populated province in Canada as well as the country's third-wealthiest — due in no small part to the hard work and determination of immigrant communities.

But the growth didn't last.

In the decades that followed, Saskatchewan's population flat-lined, and today the province is only slightly more populous than Nova Scotia, with no sign of significant growth anywhere on the horizon.

Some people, like Alex Kelly, believe that's just fine.

Sitting inside a crammed office at the University of Regina, the economics professor says it's more important to consider the per-capita income of Saskatchewan's residents, or whether people are getting wealthier or poorer, than to focus on whether the population of the province is getting bigger or smaller.

"We have some industries that are world leaders. They are profitable, they don't provide a lot of employment ... but they provide wealth," Kelly says. "Adam Smith's book was not called *The Population of Nations*. It was called *The Wealth of Nations*, and for a good reason."

Kelly attributes the resilience of the population issue to "a macho political notion" — the idea that the government can't be doing its job if people are leaving.

But he argues there's actually very little an individual government can do to change the basic foundation of an economy. And Saskatchewan's economic foundation, he says, is not based on having a lot of people.

"It has nothing to do with who's in power, or how much money we spend ...," he says. "There are fundamental forces at work, far more important than the trivial policies of changing governments."

Those "fundamental forces" are that Saskatchewan's economy is based largely on industries which are not labour intensive. Farms, for instance, which once required many people to work the land, are now primarily capital intensive — needing a major investment in equipment, technology and resources but few people to make the business run.

Similarly, Saskatchewan's burgeoning potash, oil and uranium industries require large amounts of money and equipment, but operate with a relatively small amount of labour.

Murray Fulton, professor of agricultural economics at the University of Saskatchewan, says Saskatchewan's economic prospects are good, but admits it's likely never going to be a densely populated province.

"We're always going to be in a situation where we're not going to have a lot of people," he says. "It would be nice to have a few more, but we don't have the type of economy that generally initiates a lot of employment. That doesn't mean that the people that are living here aren't going to have very good lives and not that they won't feel very well off, far from that. In fact I think the sense is that this is a very good place to live."

But that doesn't mean the population issue doesn't matter.

Fulton says there's a need to foster a different mindset on the issue, accepting that no "magic bullet" will fix the decline, and working to understand the basic economic picture of the province and plan accordingly. This means encouraging growth and employment that will bring more people into the province in the long run, and looking at new ways of governing that will help us support what we have with a smaller population.

One way of doing this, Fulton says, is to be aware of what kind of infrastructure the province can maintain and ensuring the province is not building things that can't be supported by a smaller population base.

"We are always going to be constrained in terms of how big a population we can spread costs over ... (and) there are different decisions we have to make knowing we are not going to attract another half-million people into the province in the foreseeable future," he says. "That's, I think, where we should be aiming rather than getting fixated on. Well, we've fallen below a million, we're failures." That's not going to get us very far."

But while it's fine to have a smaller population base, there is a certain population that needs to be maintained for the province to operate properly, and for the economy to run at full capacity. If the population slips too much, Fulton warns, some services can no longer be provided because there is no one to provide them.

"And we're very close to that point," he says.

In some areas, that point has already been passed.

Schools, hospitals and businesses have been disappearing around the province for decades, and many small towns are dwindling to nothing.

And though many of Saskatchewan's major industries can operate with little manpower, today there are still far too many jobs for Saskatchewan workers to fill — and some companies are being forced to take extreme measures to find employees.

Northern Steel Industries in Tisdale, a manufacturer of steel bins, is one of many Saskatchewan companies which has been forced to look outside the border after aggressive searches for workers in this



DON HEALY/Leader-Post

Fasih Tunc (left) and Onur Ozdemir, both from Turkey, examine split red lentils at SaskCan Pulse Trading.

Looking Abroad to Fuel Growth at Home

Is a second great wave of immigration one of the strategies that will help overcome the economic realities that underlie Saskatchewan's stalled population growth?

One Million, or More Less

Today:

Reporter **Jana Pruden** examines the Saskatchewan economy and how it influences the province's population. She also explores whether or not our resource-based economy is well suited to sustain future population growth.

country came up short.

"There just aren't enough people that are in the trades," says the company's human resources manager, Rose Olson. "And a good many of them go to the oilpatch and the kind of wages no other business can compete with."

So, while advocating for new trades programs in the province, the company also began looking for workers in Ukraine. Since 2005, the company has brought in 42 Ukrainian welders through Saskatchewan's

immigrant nominee program to top off its workforce.

Olson says the company is extremely happy with the workers, and the community has been very welcoming and supportive of the new residents.

But there have been struggles. The workers came without their families, and bureaucratic delays with the federal government mean some of them have been in the country for more than a year, and their wives and children haven't yet been able to join them.

Still, if the process can be improved, Olson says workers from countries like Ukraine could be a boon for Saskatchewan — just as they were at the beginning of the last century.

Already, bringing 40 new people into Tisdale, a town of about 3,500, has been significant. And once those workers' families join them, the population will grow even further.

"It churns out more students for the school system, more business for the business community, overall growth in your population, a reason for certain services and businesses to even start," Olson says. "There's a lot of benefit from a growing community."

Pat Lorje, a public policy consultant and a former MLA, says the



TROY FLEECE/Leader-Post

Sena Debia (left to right), Lori Latta, Asfaw, Keneni and Samuel Debia in their front yard.

province should be looking to immigrants as a way of building the population and dealing with a massive impending labour shortage, which could see the province in dire need of about 50,000 workers in the next few years.

"Saskatchewan has a real population crunch problem and there's no sugar-coating that," Lorje says.

"We've got too many people dying, retiring or moving to Alberta to pretend otherwise. We are sitting next to a very hot economy, but we ourselves are a very hot economy. We're one of three 'have' provinces, and we're probably the only 'have' province that walks around with a 'have-not' attitude."

Saskatchewan may find a model next door in Manitoba, where an aggressive immigration policy in the last decade has succeeded in bringing 10,000 new residents into that province every year. In 2003, Saskatchewan processed 77 new immigrants.

But the number of applications under the province's immigrant nominee program has been rising, and is expected to increase from 450 last year to more than 800 this year, and up to 1,200 and 1,500 after that.

Lorje says she'd like to see the government continue decreasing the processing time for new immigrants under the nominee program, and says changes have to be made to help professional people who arrive from other countries attain their credentials and licensing in Canada.

She says the new immigrants should be brought from all corners of the world, and must be met with welcoming, supportive communities if they are expected to stay in the province in the long term.

"Saskatchewan has lots of opportunities for everyone," she says. "We have an extensive mining sector, a good agriculture sector, good manufacturing opportunities, incredible water and clean air. People could come here and really make this a much more dynamic place than it is."

Tunc's employer, SaskCan Pulse Trading, has taken advantage of the nominee program since the company started — bringing in tradesmen who have decades of experience in splitting lentils and using the workers' expertise to make the company a major player in the global pulse market.

Corporate development manager Omer Al-Katib praises the nominee program as a forward-looking way of growing the province's population and bringing new families into "the hidden gem of Canada." It is also an essential part of the company's operation.

SaskCan Pulse Trading has brought nine lentil splitmasters and their families into the country so far, and the workers have, in turn, helped the company expand into three facilities with 80 employees, generating opportunity in the province's struggling agricultural sector and creating economic stimulation in other areas.

Al-Katib says the company will likely bring more skilled workers into the province in the future, and notes each employee comes with family members who also become part of Saskatchewan's economy — and its population.

"I think Saskatchewan can become a very, very attractive place for immigrants to come because there is a job market here ...," he says. "I think that there's a lot of real opportunity here, and I think immigrants are going to help us renew this province built by immigrants all over again in the new millennium."

But unlike the first wave of immigrants to Saskatchewan 100 years ago, modern immigrants to Saskatchewan have a greater ability to leave the province if they are unsatisfied here, and many are quickly pulled to major centres like Toronto or Vancouver, which have larger ethnic communities and a more moderate climate.

Still, Asfaw Debia, who came to

Regina from Ethiopia in 1993, says Saskatchewan can definitely compete with the appeal of larger centres by focusing on its strengths — an unsurpassed quality of life, top-rate educational opportunities and a community that is small enough for people to get involved and make a difference.

"The province has a lot to offer to keep people here," says Debia.

Since most immigrants who leave do so within the first six months to a year, Debia says their first impression of the province and its people is vitally important. He recalls travelling in rural Saskatchewan during his early days in the province, and remembers how the kindness of farmers and rural residents — many of whom were immigrants or the descendants of immigrants themselves — made him feel at home.

"One thing that made me stay in Saskatchewan is that those people were so welcoming," he says. "Those little things make a big difference, they make you feel like you are part of the community."

Since then, Debia has taken full advantage of all his new home has to offer. Living in Regina with his wife and three children, Debia works in marketing at SaskTel and is actively engaged with the community, including serving as president of the African Association. He also ran as a candidate in yesterday's civic election, finishing in the middle of the pack in a nine-person race in Ward 1.

He obtained a masters degree at the University of Regina, and received a Centennial medal last year for his contributions to the province.

Debia has already helped one of his sisters move from Ethiopia to Regina, and is working on bringing another sister and brother here as well.

"This is where we call home," he says. "This is where we live, and this is, I hope, where our children will live as well. This is where we will stay."