



FROM THE DIRECTOR

The Rural West: Daring to Innovate Job Creation

Now is not the time for “business as usual”

BY DON E. ALBRECHT

During the nation’s westward expansion of the 1800’s, settlers were attracted to areas where available natural resources such as forests, minerals, soil, water, and climate conducive to agricultural production allowed them to earn an economic livelihood.

Areas with the greatest concentration of relevant resources were in greatest demand as these areas could support the largest popula-

tions and life could be lived more abundantly. As resource-based industries such as logging, mining, and agriculture were the most significant economic enterprises, it logically followed that the job creation and community development efforts of that era focused on locating and developing resources, and building a transportation infrastructure to more efficiently get these resources to market.

The middle decades of the 20th century saw a major transformation in the U.S. economic structure. Technological advancements in equipment were the major impetus for this transformation, and improved agricultural

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technology meant that each producer could operate a much larger farm. As a consequence, the size of the average farm increased greatly with a corresponding decline in the number of farms. Similarly, technological advancements in the other natural resource industries were also causing reduced employment, and with labor needs in these industries reduced, millions of rural people migrated to the city to seek employment in the booming manufacturing sector. In time, manufacturers began moving to rural areas where they could employ displaced farm and resource workers while avoiding unionization and keeping labor costs low. This increased availability of manufacturing jobs in rural areas slowed the pace of rural-to-urban migration, and eventually manufacturing employment far exceeded both agricultural and resource employment, even in rural areas.

During this era, the most common approach to job creation and community development was the attempt to induce an industrial firm to build or relocate in the community. Known as the “buffalo hunt,” this approach to community development made sense at the time as manufacturing was the growth industry and success meant that a community could attain a significant number of stable, middle-income jobs that often matched the skill-set of the local labor force.

In the beginning of the 21st century we are now in the midst of a second major transformation in the nation’s economic structure. In this transformation, agricultural and natural resource employment continue to decline and is compounded by the number and proportion of manufacturing jobs in the U.S. that began an initial decline in the late 1970’s and has since increased in scope and magnitude. Some manufacturing jobs were lost because of technological advancements where machines replaced human labor in the production process. The improved technology meant factories could produce more than before with a much smaller work force. Also adding to the reduction in U.S. job opportunities was the reduced labor costs in other countries as multinational corporations chose, and continue to choose, to take advantage of the workforce available in these lower wage-earning nations.

Nationally, job losses in natural resource industries and manufacturing have been more than offset by significant increases in service

sector¹ employment. This transformation in economic structure is important because natural resource jobs are fundamentally different from industrial jobs, which in turn are fundamentally different from service jobs. Different industries have different wage structures and different work schedules; they require different levels and types of education, training, and skills; they differ in the types of relationships that exist between owners and workers; and they vary in the proportion of the workforce that is either male or female.

These and other factors are likely to have major implications for numerous aspects of life including individuals, families, community institutions, and political outlooks. The relationship between natural resources, and job creation and community development is also fundamentally different as a result of this transformation. Simply put, the value of resources for traditional extractive uses like logging and mining has declined while the value of resources for amenity purposes has increased.

Today we are faced with very different economic circumstances than in the past and it is critical that in response to these new circumstances we change our approaches to job creation and community development. Communities that go forward in a “business as usual” manner are likely to suffer as traditional approaches to community development are no longer effective. With the decline of the traditional mainstays of the rural economy, rural communities need to establish new ways for people to obtain high quality employment: they need to become daring in their community development efforts.

In this issue of *Rural Connections*, researchers and Extension professionals describe innovative and successful approaches to job creation and community development that are more applicable in today’s economy. It is our hope that community leaders, Extension professionals, and others will carefully examine these articles and utilize suitable ideas in their communities. ●

¹The service sector provides intangibles rather than the physical products that result from agriculture, the natural resource industries, and manufacturing. Generally, services are intended to make one’s life more comfortable or fulfilling and include entertainment, education, and health care.