

The Rural West in the 21st Century: A Plan for Action

A Five-Year Strategic Plan for the Western Rural Development Center

Special Thanks to the Farm Foundation

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The Rural West

The rural West is at a crossroads economically, demographically and ecologically. Many of the traditional sources of employment for rural residents, such as agriculture and the natural resource extraction industries of forestry and mining have been declining for several decades. In addition, the steady decline of manufacturing makes it increasingly unlikely that communities will be able to attract industry to offset declining resource-based employment. The skills developed by rural workers for employment in the resource-based and manufacturing industries do not translate easily into 21st century jobs. Yet at the same time, there are numerous opportunities for rural communities that simply did not exist in years past.

In order to more effectively address the issues and concerns facing the residents of the rural West, the Western Rural Development Center (WRDC) conducted a series of 15 rural development roundtables, one in each of the 13 states comprising the western region and an additional session with the WRDC Board of Directors. The purpose of these roundtables was to prioritize the issues and concerns confronting the rural West, and then to develop a strategic plan to address these issues. This publication details the feedback from our stakeholders and then outlines our strategic plan.

Before we discuss the priorities of our rural communities let us first share what the roundtable participants said were the most positive features in the rural West:

1. An extensive and diverse natural resource base that includes areas with high-amenity values, open space, and provides the basis for economic opportunities.
2. Independent people with a strong work and stewardship ethic.
3. A strong sense of community where people care for one another.
4. Cultural diversity.
5. Safety.
6. Lack of congestion.

Roundtable Participation by State

State	Location	Date	Number of Participants	Extension Liaison
Hawaii	Kihei, Maui	January 7, 2009	8	Linda Cox
Colorado	Denver	April 8, 2009	18	Jan Carroll
Wyoming	Cheyenne	April 9, 2009	12	Duane Williams
Board of Directors	Salt Lake City	April 30, 2009	13	--
Alaska	Anchorage	May 6, 2009	18	Pete Pinney
Montana	Bozeman	May 13, 2009	10	Paul Lachapelle
New Mexico	Albuquerque	May 26, 2009	12	Michael Patrick
Arizona	Casa Grande	June 4, 2009	21	Cynthia Flynn and Cathy Martinez
Nevada	Carson City	June 11, 2009	22	Tom Harris
Oregon	Corvallis	June 17, 2009	11	Bruce Weber
Utah	Richfield	June 24, 2009	16	Chuck Gay
Washington	Spokane	July 1, 2009	6	Rob McDaniel and Vickie Parker-Clark
Idaho	Boise	September 8, 2009	14	Priscilla Salant
Navajo Nation	T'Saile, AZ	June 12, 2010	14	Benita Litson
California	Davis	September 17, 2009	21	Dave Campbell
		TOTAL	216	

Table 1. Roundtable Participation by State

As shown in Table 1, the roundtables were held between January 2009 and June 2010. Participants included representatives from the Land-Grant University system and other educational institutions, officials from federal, state, tribal and local governments, philanthropic organizations and foundations, nonprofit organizations and representatives from the private sector.

A summary of each roundtable is available for download on the WRDC website (wrdc.usu.edu).

Positive Features and Top Priorities Identified by Roundtable Participants

Positive Features	AK	AZ	CA	CO	HI	ID	MT	NV	NM	OR	UT	WA	WY	Board
Sense of Community	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X
Independent and Strong Work Ethic	X			X		X	X		X		X	X	X	X
Natural Resource Base/Amenities	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Cultural Diversity	X	X	X			X						X		
Connection to Land and Environment	X						X			X	X		X	
Relaxed Lifestyle		X			X									
Economic Opportunities from Resources		X	X	X	X			X	X		X			
Generational Ties to Home				X										
Progressive Ideas										X		X		
Diverse Recreational Opportunities											X			
Commitment to Environmental Stewardship												X		
Collaboration – Political Influence			X											
Problems or Concerns	AK	AZ	CA	CO	HI	ID	MT	NV	NM	OR	UT	WA	WY	Board
Resource Conservation		X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Economic Development	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	
Improve Human Capacity	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X
Public Policy Voice									X					X
Food, Health Security	X													
Diversity/Inequality				X										
Rural/Urban Interface; Growth Mgmt.		X								X				
Infrastructure, Telecommunications	X		X			X		X			X		X	X

Table 2. Features and Priorities Identified by Roundtable Participants

Table 2 illustrates the generalized results from the roundtables. As is apparent from this table, there was widespread agreement on both the most significant positive features about the rural areas in the West and the most pressing issues and concerns. Consequently, selecting the areas of focus for the WRDC Strategic Plan was relatively straightforward.

From Discussion to Action

The heady task of assimilating the feedback gathered at each roundtable, and formulating core activities for the WRDC, was initially handled by the Center staff. Additional insight will be sought from the WRDC's Board of Directors and WERA 1005. These groups will review the top three priorities that emerged from the roundtables and then assess how the WRDC, in collaboration with the western land-grant universities, and its other public and private sector partners can support these priorities. As the core activities for each priority area are defined and finalized, special attention will be given to the Center's staff and fiscal resources. The priorities and their respective activities will then be reviewed and approved by the WRDC Board of Directors.

Mission

The WRDC collaborates with its public and private sector partners to promote excellence in research, education and Extension for the prosperity of western rural communities.

Goals

The WRDC strengthens rural communities by sharing scientific discovery and application of sustainable practices with rural citizens via conferences, trainings, Web 2.0, and publications. The Center aims to help rural communities prosper, thrive economically, and become self-sustaining.

PRIORITY ONE

Enhance Human Capacity through People-Based Rural Development

With a decline in traditional sources of rural employment, such as agriculture, natural resource extraction, and manufacturing, it is increasingly apparent that the education, skills and training of many rural workers do not translate easily into the education, skills and training needed for employment in the 21st century. Rural communities are in need of improved K-12 schools and adult education and workforce training programs that will provide them with the necessary skills to gain quality employment in a post-industrial economy. Training programs geared toward underserved, low income and minority populations are essential.

There is also a great need to foster and improve leadership capacity. Without strong leaders, communities lack direction and therefore are at a disadvantage to deal with the many questions and concerns that confront them. The lack of youth involvement in community leadership positions is of significant concern.

In the coming years, the WRDC will collaborate with western land-grant university faculty and its other public and private sector partners to launch efforts to strengthen and increase the availability of training programs to ensure prosperous and self-sustaining rural communities. In addition, the Center encourages its partners to conduct research that uncovers key factors contributing to or inhibiting education, workforce and leadership development in rural areas.

Core activities will focus on the following topics:

1. ADDRESSING THE ADULT EDUCATION AND WORKFORCE TRAINING CHALLENGES, ESPECIALLY AMONG UNDERSERVED POPULATIONS:
2. IMPROVING SCHOOLS AND EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES IN RURAL AREAS:
3. STRENGTHENING LEADERSHIP-TRAINING PROGRAMS FOR YOUTH AND ADULTS: Inventory existing successful leadership training programs for adults and youth and make information available to stakeholders.

4. **INCREASING ACCESS TO AFFORDABLE E-COMMERCE TRAINING:** Utilizing existing resources in the National E-Commerce Extension Initiative and the WRDC's training program, engage our partners to take advantage of these resources and refine existing programs to inform and educate the rural West on the myriad of opportunities available to them as a result of this enhanced broadband and cellular connectivity.

PRIORITY TWO

Create Vibrant Rural Economies through Place-Based Rural Development

In recent decades there has been a steady decline in employment in agriculture, the natural resource extraction industries and manufacturing, which have always been the mainstays of the rural economy. Subsequently, traditional approaches to improve economic opportunities in rural areas are much less successful now than in the past. When most nonmetro jobs were in agriculture and the natural resource industries, community development efforts tended to focus on enhancing the supply of or demand for natural resources. Then with the growth of manufacturing, the most common rural development path was to entice industrial firms to build or relocate to their community.

In the 21st century economy, the opportunities for resource development are limited, and the traditional "buffalo hunt" for industrial firms is more costly, the odds of success are greatly reduced, and overall today this approach is much less effective as a community development strategy. At the same time, there are development opportunities that simply did not exist in the past. With computers, the Internet and cell phones, it is now possible for individuals and firms to be connected to the global economy while enjoying the benefits of rural living.

However, a significant obstacle to economic development in many rural communities involves infrastructure that is often significantly inferior to the infrastructure available in urban communities. Thus, it is imperative there is improved infrastructure and specifically improved telecommunication infrastructure in the rural communities of the West. Much of the rural West is inadequately served, and the obstacles for achieving better service are extensive. These obstacles include great geographic distances between communities that increase costs; mountain ranges that make connections more challenging; and right-of-way issues on public land unique to the Western U.S. Therefore, the WRDC will be working with its partners in the coming months and years to increase broadband and cellular connectivity to our rural communities.

There was widespread agreement among our roundtable participants that achieving economically vibrant communities in today's global economy will be dependent on developing new approaches for enhancing high quality employment opportunities. Utilizing modern information and communication technology, several options are available. These include:

1. Foster the entrepreneurial skills of our citizens and encourage communities to create entrepreneurial-friendly cultures. Emphasis should be placed on retaining existing businesses and developing new homegrown businesses through entrepreneurial development. The Center encourages its partners to conduct research that uncovers key factors contributing to or inhibiting community capacity building as it relates to enhancing an entrepreneurial culture, entrepreneurial skills education, and factors that relate to business retention and recruitment

2. Enhance local and value-added production. The most fundamental aspect of economic growth involves taking resources and rearranging them in ways that make them more valuable. For example, raw materials such as wheat, trees and cows are transformed into loaves of bread, furniture and hamburgers. Today, a much larger share of this value-added production can be conducted locally in rural communities. This includes activities such as increased local food and energy production.
3. Attract individuals with geographically mobile or creative class occupations to reside in rural communities and conduct their work utilizing modern information and communication technology.
4. Encourage clustering or regional development.

Core activities will focus on the following topics:

1. **BUILDING ENTREPRENEURIAL-FRIENDLY COMMUNITIES:** Promoting the use of the USDA RD curriculum created during the Regional Economic Development Strategies project.
2. **ADDRESSING THE NEED FOR BROADBAND AND CELLULAR CONNECTIVITY:** Working with our partners the WRDC will initiate conversations with policymakers, land agencies and service providers to identify and overcome the challenges of connecting the rural West to broadband and cellular services.
3. **ENCOURAGING COMMUNITIES TO PROMOTE THEMSELVES TO NEW RESIDENTS:** Individuals with geographically mobile or creative class occupations can utilize modern information and communications technology to establish their home in a rural community. Potential targets include employees who wish to work from their home or establish an office away from company headquarters and persons with creative class jobs, such as writers and designers, who are able to live where they wish and still work for companies located elsewhere.
4. **ENCOURAGING VALUE-ADDED AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT:** Promoting the use of the Community-Business Matching Model and leveraging funds to train Extension specialists in its use and application.

PRIORITY THREE

Promote Sustainable Natural Resource Development

From the time of initial settlement, residents in the Western U.S. were attracted to areas where available natural resources allowed them to earn an economic livelihood. In time, communities emerged to meet the needs of these settlers. Areas with the greatest concentration of relevant resources were in greatest demand as these areas could support the largest populations and life could be lived more abundantly.

Much has changed in recent decades. The West experienced a decline in many of the traditional resource-based industries as technology replaced human labor in the production process. In certain cases, legal and cultural changes have greatly limited the access of rural residents to utilize these resources for their economic livelihood. Additionally, population growth and an improved standard of living have significantly increased demand for some resources such as water and open space. Several resources including forests and rangelands were not always used sustainably and consequently supplies

are now limited. When it comes to conserving or developing the rural West's vast natural resources, the residents of these rural areas have endured hardships and engaged in debates that have often pitted neighbor against neighbor. These debates often resulted in litigation with decisions that were unsatisfactory to all involved.

Fortunately, in many instances there is a sustainable balance that can be achieved through open dialogue and thoughtful community development planning. It is a time for ready access to research and people skilled in community economic development, land-use planning, natural resources, and conflict resolution. And as the West's rural communities consider their natural resources, they need to know that in recent decades the best predictor of economic and demographic growth is the presence of natural amenities. These amenities may be one of their community's most valuable commodities.

The WRDC and its partners will be working in the coming years to provide citizens and policymakers with timely, research-based information and provide balanced forums for discussion so our rural communities and its leadership can effectively debate and take action on these issues.

Core activities will focus on the following topics:

1. **CONVENING GROUPS FOR DIALOGUE AND REPORTING:** These groups of scientists, policymakers and other persons who have expertise in natural resources and land-use planning will form to discuss and disseminate unbiased and balanced publications on these issues. These publications will serve to increase knowledge and awareness of our policymakers and citizens.
2. **BUILDING MULTISTATE AND MULTIDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH AND EXTENSION TEAMS:** These teams will address critical natural resource issues. Regional teams will increase the likelihood of grant funding and will assure that unique aspects of the issues in different parts of the region are considered.
3. **ENCOURAGING THE PRESERVATION OF NATURAL AMENITIES:** There exists a large body of research on the community and economic benefits of natural amenities. The WRDC seeks to increase awareness of the benefits of amenity-based rural development.
4. **ADVANCING DEVELOPMENT OF RENEWABLE ENERGY RESOURCES:** Sharing research with communities so they can best assess their assets and determine how they can adapt their current resources to a) develop renewable energy, b) purchase energy from renewable sources.
5. **ENCOURAGING THE ADOPTION OF ENERGY CONSERVATION PRACTICES:** Work collaboratively with WRDC partners to educate and promote energy conservation via its website and publications.

What Can You Do?

Supporting Our Mission and Responding to the Call of the Rural West

As the Center implements its strategic plan, careful attention will be paid to ensure its mission, "to collaborate with its public and private sector partners to promote excellence in research, education and Extension for the prosperity of western rural communities," is strengthened and further advanced. It was crucial that our region's land-grant institutions participated in the strategic planning process. And the ability of the Center to provide timely, research-based information to our stakeholders will require their continued involvement. Putting these ideas into practice, the WRDC will rely on Extension educators who are committed to advancing the quality of life for our rural citizens.

The WRDC's success in implementing and carrying out the strategic plan will depend on the help provided by our many community partners to respond to the challenges identified by our stakeholders. Is our region up to the challenge? Are you ready to join with the WRDC to ensure our rural communities prosper?

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