



Policy Opportunity Snapshots



Context, Challenges, and Opportunities

Quality in Education
Stewardship of Natural Resources
Health of Our People
Investment in Our Communities

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for the National Rural Assembly
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Introduction

The National Rural Assembly is an opportunity to build a movement of people and organizations to create a healthier, more vibrant rural America. The goal of the Assembly is to identify critical policy needs and opportunities for rural America and raise national awareness about these issues.

In 2007, at the first gathering of the Rural Assembly, participants identified a broad range of issues they felt deserved attention. Working from this list, the Steering Committee for the 2008 Rural Assembly drafted a set of organizing principles called the Rural Compact (see page 4). This Compact names four policy areas where the Steering Committee thought there were special strategic opportunities or critical needs.

The Steering Committee commissioned four policy opportunity snapshots, each covering one of the issue areas named in the Rural Compact. The results of these snapshots are presented in this document. The four focus areas are the following:

- Quality in Education
- Stewardship of Natural Resources
- Health of Our People
- Investment in Our Communities

The purpose of these snapshots is to inform the discussion at the 2008 gathering of the National Rural Assembly. It is the Steering Committee's hope that these papers will be the starting point for effective discourse,

one that leads us closer to our goal of creating an agenda for positive change in rural America.

A brief word on methodology: The policy opportunity snapshots were prepared by collaborative teams, led by a member of the Steering Committee. Each team reviewed its field in several ways: 1. surveys sent to practitioners and others in the field, 2. individual interviews with practitioners, administrators, policymakers, and other stakeholders in the given field, and 3. a review of pertinent literature. Team members are identified at the conclusion of each policy opportunity snapshot. Additional information about the methods and sources for each policy opportunity snapshot are available online at www.ruralassembly.org.

2008 National Rural Assembly Steering Committee member organizations:

- Carsey Institute, University of New Hampshire, Durham, New Hampshire
- Center for Rural Strategies, Whitesburg, Kentucky
- League of Rural Voters, Minneapolis, Minnesota
- Llano Grande Center, Edcouch-Elsa, Texas
- National Congress of American Indians, Washington, D.C.
- Quitman County Community Development Organization, Marks, Mississippi
- Rural Policy Research Institute, Columbia, Missouri
- Stand Up for Rural America, Washington, D.C.
- Sustainable Northwest, Portland, Oregon

The Rural Compact

Rural America is more than the land. It is a way we are connected in culture, heritage, and national enterprise. While it may be vast, it is far from empty. Sixty million of us live in the American countryside, and far more grew up there. Rural Americans reflect the full diversity of the country in who we are, what we do, and what we want to achieve.

When rural communities succeed, the nation does better, and cities and suburbs have more resources on which to build. Conversely, when rural communities falter, it drains the nation's prosperity and limits what we can accomplish together.

We now face the challenges of how we sustainably fuel, feed, and nurture both ourselves and a fragile world. A vital rural America has a contribution to make in this effort and the responsibility to take on that endeavor.

We offer this compact as a set of principles on which to build the kind of rural America that is needed now and a rural America that is ready to face the challenges to come.

Quality in Education

Every child should have an equal chance to learn, excel, and help lead America to a better, brighter future. Education policy should recognize the distinctive challenges and opportunities for rural schools and reflect the unique needs of those students, families, and educators.

Stewardship of Natural Resources

Eighty percent of our country's land is rural. It is a heritage and a trust. We all have a responsibility to protect the environment and develop and sustain our natural resources in ways that strengthen rural communities for the long haul. Good environmental practices and responsive public land management provide the opportunity to promote energy independence, grow healthy food in a sustainable manner, mitigate climate change, and develop stronger natural-resource-based economies.

Health of Our People

All Americans deserve access to good, affordable healthcare. If we want small towns and rural communities to contribute to the well-being of the nation, we need rural healthcare systems that work. These should include preventive care, health education, and both community-based and high-tech delivery systems.

Investment in Our Communities

To fight poverty, create wealth, and build sustainable communities, all Americans need access to a safe and equitable system for saving, borrowing, and building capital. To fully participate in and contribute to the American economy, rural communities need public and private investment, access to philanthropic resources, and the tools to develop their own community-controlled assets.

Quality in Education

“Every child should have an equal chance to learn, excel, and help lead America to a better, brighter future. Education policy should recognize the distinctive challenges and opportunities for rural schools and reflect the unique needs of those students, families, and educators.”

--Rural Compact 2008

Context

It is easy enough to say that rural schools and communities are an integral part of the identity, history, and promise of this country, especially when you look at the statistics. Rural America comprises 80 percent of the nation’s lands, and more than one in five Americans live in communities across these vast areas. Moreover, almost one in three public schools in this country is rural, and 22 percent of our nation’s children attend these schools (using the National Center for Education Statistics definition of rural schools).

But a survey of leaders, teachers, students, and families about education in rural America paints a much different picture about how integral “rural” is considered by policymakers. As rural communities adapt to changing demographics, economic conditions, environments, and community investments, rural schools also have to respond to these issues as they emerge, too often with limited resources and policy support. It is a testament to many rural schools that in spite of unfavorable economies in their communities and burdensome educational policies from distant legislatures, they nevertheless display a determination and resiliency to provide so much for children.

Rural schools play a vital part of the physical, economic, cultural, and political landscape, so it is imperative that national policymakers understand the unique challenges and opportunities these rural schools face and enact policies that support their success. We need education policy that provides rural schools with the tools and conditions necessary to prepare every child to learn and lead. The future of rural communities, and America as a whole, depends on every child’s readiness to sustainably develop his or her community and participate fully in building a prosperous nation.

The information presented in this report exposes many of the problems present in our rural schoolhouses, but also points the way to many answers, including possible solutions to the nation’s educational plight.

Findings and Themes

For this review of the field, practitioners and stakeholders in rural education shared their insight about the current conditions, opportunities, and constraints for

rural schools. The nine findings presented here were repeatedly mentioned and represent some of the more pressing issues in rural education.

No Child Left Behind rarely fits in rural.

In 2001, President George W. Bush won bipartisan congressional support for the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). This legislation requires states to develop academic standards and assessments linked to those standards. Schools must demonstrate adequate yearly progress through those assessments, showing they are on track to have all students—with data disaggregated by race, ethnicity, poverty, disability, and English proficiency—meet or exceed standards by school year 2013-2014. Failure to demonstrate adequate yearly progress results in corrective action for schools, including requirements that they allocate up to 20 percent of their Title I funds to offer school choice and supplemental educational services to eligible students. Schools failing to meet adequate yearly progress within five years must relinquish school management to their state education agency.

Rural educators dismiss the idea that one-size-fits-all in education policy and argue that rural schools in particular are unfairly disadvantaged under the requirements of NCLB. With some rural schools having student populations smaller than the required test-group established by states to ensure statistical reliability of results, rural educators express concern about test score volatility and the misidentification of small schools as underperforming. Furthermore, rural schools are limited in meeting the school choice and supplementary educational services provisions of this law. It is a rural reality that distances between schools are often too great for families to seriously consider transfer options, and due to certification requirements of those offering tutoring services, small communities may not have access to the necessary vendors of these services. Perhaps the loudest public criticism leveled at NCLB is its failure to fully fund its mandates. “There just isn’t enough funding to meet every accountability measure demanded by the federal government, which adds to state and other accountability demands,” said a Texas school superintendent.

Many educators disagree with the punitive nature of this law and argue instead that education policy should offer program supports for schools needing improvement. One respondent urged all relevant stakeholders including parents, students, teachers, and administrators to voice their criticism of NCLB to federal officials, saying “If NCLB is not reauthorized in a way that better serves our needs, it stays in effect just as it is.” Another respondent advocates that the discourse move beyond the failed policy of NCLB to a critical analysis of the appropriate federal role in rural education.

Place-based learning empowers students and enables rural development.

Rural educators overwhelmingly agree that place-based learning is an effective way to engage young people in classrooms, schools, and communities. Place-based pedagogy is useful in various curricular subjects—offering students mastery of required content and skills by immersing them in the study of local history, conditions, opportunities, and landscapes. Proponents of place-based learning argue that students' engagement, academic achievement, and sense of stewardship for their community improve as a result of thinking critically and with authentic purpose about the issues that impact them directly.

Communities also benefit from this curricular approach through the contributions and impact of a young and active citizenry. A California advocate argued, "If learning is relevant and applicable to a region or community, students will have more opportunities to find meaningful education and occupations in their hometowns without feeling compelled to relocate." Place-based learning can have a positive long-term impact on improving the social conditions in rural communities, creating a culture of opportunity, and aiding in reversing the trend of rural outmigration.

Despite the benefits of place-based learning, rural educators argue that the assessment culture created by NCLB has led to a narrowing of curriculum, limiting the opportunity to study various subjects including the interdisciplinary study of place. Many schools feel compelled to redirect already limited financial and human resources to test preparation activities at the exclusion of other disciplines and real-world learning. While educators understand and appreciate the importance of assessments, there is concern that test-driven curricula restrict the holistic development of children. A Montana school teacher recognized, "Assessment is a good thing, but not when we rely on a single assessment. Our children are not being educated in a well-rounded way. Art, music, and community studies are being cut out of classrooms. Tests do not help prepare global thinkers."

Healthy rural communities and economies are critical to student success.

With increased globalization and continued underinvestment by government, rural communities have lost jobs, infrastructure, and necessary social services. This decline threatens the educational achievement of rural children. Repeated national studies have shown that public investment in families and communities provide far greater opportunities for student success than attempts to close the achievement gap through a singular focus on schools. And educators intimately understand the importance of vibrant economies and social services in getting students to school interested and ready to learn.

A rural superintendent acknowledged, "We need healthy communities if we are going to have healthier schools and more achieving students. Sometimes we need a reality check about what is relevant in a student's life."

To nurture the conditions necessary for rural children to succeed in school as well as later in life, investments in rural job creation, housing, health care, and community development are essential. While research shows that high school students prefer to stay in their hometowns, rural graduates typically do not, simply because of a lack of employment opportunities. A Wyoming educator commented about the impact of youth leaving communities in search of employment, "Everybody loses when we can't offer jobs to our graduates; the community suffers, the schools suffer, the kids suffer." It is a priority across many rural communities to create economic conditions which empower young people to remain and contribute to the civic and economic sustainability of their community.

School consolidation hurts rural economies and students.

For residents of rural America, it is easy to see how the economic, social, and cultural fabrics of their communities are woven together by the thread of a local school. Unfortunately, economic and political pressures sometimes force communities to enter into school consolidation, thus pulling out the thread and unraveling their ways of life.

"Economic development in rural communities is the most important issue impacting rural schools," said one West Virginia parent activist. "It's all connected. Schools and jobs are intimately tied." Her story of the school acting as the cornerstone of economic life is a common theme in many stories throughout rural America. "The coalmines closed and we suffered, but survived," she said, "but when the schools shut down in the name of consolidation, or in the name of saving money, the community then offered almost no viable professional jobs."

A study of the 1980, 1990, and 2000 census of population supports the parent's contention that when the schools shut down, so can the local economy. The census data show a clear picture of the impact of local schools on rural economies, particularly as it relates to the closing of those schools. Rural communities that have schools, for example, have more college graduates and professional jobs than communities without schools, such as those where consolidation has occurred. The data further show that rural communities with schools employ nearly 24 percent of residents, compared to only 10 percent employed in communities without schools. In short, viable schools equal viable economies for rural towns, whereas shutting down schools often leads to economic demise and the emergence of community distress.

High energy costs, the loss of a local job market, or dwindling populations are often mentioned as conditions

leading to rural school consolidation. Rural educators and activists urge more practical solutions, however, emphasizing that consolidation imposes higher costs on communities as they pay more to transport students greater distances to schools, strain students' academic achievement and extracurricular participation, and at the same time, strip communities of their identity and economic vitality. Small school settings, such as those found in rural campuses, allow for deeper relationships to be created between teachers and learners, providing students the opportunity to discover mentors and role models within their own communities. A rural educator said, "When you take school out of the community, you take the community center, sense of place and pride. Kids benefit from the personal small school; they get a sense of who they are and who their community members are." With research and practitioners pointing to the benefits of small schools, rural decision-makers should support and keep the small learning communities that already exist in rural schools.

Rural schools have difficulty recruiting and retaining teachers.

A multitude of factors affect rural schools' ability to recruit and retain teachers, and extenuating circumstances make this issue a top priority. While rural communities have access to local teachers who are passionate, effective, and dedicated to their profession, under the requirements of No Child Left Behind these teachers may not be "highly qualified." NCLB requires all teachers to be state certified in every subject taught. A New Mexico educator explained, "It is hard to find 'highly qualified' teachers in some of the most rural and isolated places in my state," recognizing the unique challenges rural schools face because they often rely on teachers to offer instruction in several subjects due to small faculty sizes.

In response to these pressures, many rural schools have turned to recruiting teachers from outside of their communities; however, even this approach proves arduous. An educator from Alaska stated, "Imported teachers stay for only a couple of years, and this creates the challenge of continuously recruiting teachers who may not be compelled to work in rural schools, where pay may not be as competitive or housing options as intriguing." For some educators, it is not desirable to work in geographically isolated communities perceived to offer less cultural amenities—especially when their decisions are complicated by the reality of less competitive salaries. According to the Rural School and Community Trust, rural teachers earn only 86 cents compared to the dollar earned by their urban counterparts.

The issue of finding and maintaining a "highly qualified" faculty is further complicated for rural schools because of the impending retirement of many teachers. Rural advocates urge for investment in local teacher development programs to increase communities' teacher pools, facilitate certification in subject areas, and prepare

incoming teachers with the knowledge and skills necessary to work in rural settings.

Technology access moves students and communities forward.

When rural schools are not granted greater access to technology, what we create is a nation where only pockets of students are prepared to lead a nation in an increasingly modern world. Access to broadband and technology hardware is not only critical for bridging the digital and geographic isolation many rural communities experience, but should be available to schools as a way of creating a more globally competitive America. Especially as different markets – commercial, social, information, even higher education – continue the trend toward technological integration, it becomes increasingly necessary for all students to be able to navigate within this new standard. A high school senior elaborated on the benefits technology yields, helping young people realize their global responsibility and connection with others. "We live in the technology age and with a click of a mouse you can see what people are doing in China, Japan, all over the world," he said.

Rural educators understand the immeasurable benefits of technology access in schools, using it to facilitate distance learning for students and professional development for teachers. Being networked allows rural schools to go beyond their standard curriculum, giving small campuses the opportunity to offer students or teachers online courses in subject areas that may not be available in their immediate community. While some rural schools have proven to be innovators in the use of technology, others continue their work without adequate access to this critical resource. A Texas educator argued, "Rural education should be a forward-moving institution, where all the amenities of big-town education are available or at least presented to be within the reach of all students. Technology enables rural students to aspire for professions requiring higher levels of education."

It is important to urge federal policymakers to further acknowledge the importance of addressing the digital divide, and to look at government and private sector partnerships to develop and enhance broadband infrastructures and technology access for rural schools and communities.

Equitable funding gives students a fair shot.

Like all schools, rural schools depend on a combination of local, state, and federal dollars to operate. However, rural advocates argue that their schools are fiscally disadvantaged by low, local property tax bases and state and federal funding formulas that favor larger schools. As some rural communities struggle economically, their schools are also affected because they depend heavily on local property taxes for funding. In addition, state and federal funding formulas are often based on student population, awarding funds on a per-

pupil basis. This disparity in school funding was cited by a majority of respondents, particularly in relationship to Title 1 funding.

Title 1 monies are federal funds allocated to schools in support of programs targeted specifically to meet the educational achievement of low-income students. Since the passage of NCLB, new formulas used to determine schools' Title 1 allocations have led to an overall decline in rural schools' Title 1 funding. Whereas many rural schools have higher percentages of students in poverty than larger schools, they receive less federal assistance specifically because of two weighted formulas that reward schools with larger student populations.

Although federal funding accounts for approximately 8 percent of school budgets, this issue illustrates the need to establish federal and state funding structures grounded in equity and excellence instead of efficiency and choice, which have guided former iterations of educational policy. The impact of inadequate funding and strained budgets is ultimately incurred by students as schools are forced to establish low per pupil expenditures, limit extracurricular programs, and even reduce faculty and staff positions. A respondent argued that it is critical for policymakers to “rethink equalization of funding and restructure regressive funding formulas,” in order to bolster rural students' achievement.

Changing demographics create a sense of urgency to meet the needs of diverse rural students.

Contrary to a persistent belief that rural America is monolithic in terms of its cultural and ethnic landscape, a look at the actual landscape shows a very diverse picture – one which rural schools must respond to. While the majority of people in rural America are white, almost a quarter of all students in rural schools come from minority groups, and enrollment for the same groups continues to grow, increasing by 55 percent between 1996 and 2005. The greatest boost in this increase comes from English language learners (ELL), with nearly half of all ELL students across the country attending rural schools.

One of the biggest challenges facing rural schools, then, is the lack of capacity they have for addressing the needs of these children, especially when current policy hasn't provided enough funding or support. The Rural School and Community Trust reports that a greater concentration of minority students attend school in the 800 poorest school districts in rural America. About 26 percent of the students in those schools are African American, 20 percent are Hispanic, and 10 percent are Native American. While certain pockets in rural America are marked by affluence, many communities across the national rural landscape are mired in conditions of poverty and underdevelopment. Educators in these schools say they are unprepared to modify their

instruction to meet the needs of diverse students, especially as the demographics change so quickly. Rural school administrators urge support to implement mechanisms, programs, and training to help them to respond.

A college professor from Texas suggested that one solution for rural schools is to have policy follow models that work. Rural schools, he said, “could improve greatly if they would implement some of the practices used in these successful schools with high numbers of minority students.”

Rural voices must be heard.

As several of those interviewed for this report have noted, the need for open discourse in rural America – not only from elected leaders, but from teachers, families, and even students – has never been as prominent as it is today, especially on the issue of providing education for our children.

“Policymakers lack the courage to make the tough decisions on policy and on funding to our rural schools,” one educational advocate from the South said, “but I place as much responsibility on school leaders and teachers.” Report findings show that educators understand the inadequacies that exist in educational policy, just as they know the injustices in the funding practices for schools, but oftentimes feel they aren't able to do anything about them.

There are many factors contributing to a lack of discourse, including misinformation, not enough information, over-burdened schedules, or just simply not knowing how to get involved. One of the biggest factors, though, is fear. With teaching jobs in rural communities generally being coveted positions, teachers often understandably go to great lengths to protect their livelihood. “Teachers seldom speak up if speaking up means they endanger their jobs,” said one educator.

When discourse is limited, we risk a persisting status quo. If changes are going to be made, informed by the expertise of educators, people must be willing to exercise the power of their voice.

Policy Priorities and Opportunities

The critical issues identified by practitioners and stakeholders suggest that rural schools need a range of policy supports in order to rectify their most pressing challenges, capitalize on their best practices, and nurture community conditions which support—instead of complicate—their efforts to educate America's rural children. The policy priorities that emerged from the field center on a fundamental shift in the role of the federal government in rural schools and communities. Respondents tended to agree that rural children would fare better if the federal role focused more on making equitable investments in schools and communities and less on imposing procedures and practices in schools. The overarching policy priorities include:

- Engaging practitioners, stakeholders, and policymakers in discourse about the proper role of the federal government in education.
- Increasing financial support for rural school innovation, research, and collaborative practices.
- Investing more deeply in rural community development.

Between the government, civil, and education sectors, much synergy and opportunity exist which can lead to real change within each of these policy priorities. In order to make this happen, however, there is a need for rural people and advocates to move these efforts forward in a deliberate and shared manner. The outcomes could mean improved conditions for all schools and an equal chance for rural children to succeed.

1. Engage practitioners, stakeholders, and policymakers in discourse about the proper role of the federal government in education.

A shared belief among respondents was the notion that the federal government does not have the right to dictate school methods or strategies, as has become common practice since the passage of No Child Left Behind. Rural educators agree that local communities and states should share those responsibilities, while the federal government should support and supplement schools' capacity to offer an appropriate and adequate education for all children.

Policy change opportunities:

- Follow up on the administration's recently announced changes to NCLB by U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, opening opportunities for additional discourse and debate on the federal mandates in education.
- Voice concerns with representatives about the upcoming reauthorization of NCLB by the U.S. Congress.
- Open up a dialogue on the course of America's public schools with the twenty-fifth anniversary of the *Nation At Risk* report.
- Highlight the findings in the Rural School and Community Trust's recently released report, *Why Rural Matters 2007: The Realities of Rural Education Growth*, showing that Title 1 guidelines disadvantage rural schools with the highest percentages of students in poverty.

2. Increase financial support for rural school innovation, research, and collaborative practices.

Successful practices and outcomes are occurring in rural schools across the country, though limited opportunities exist to share these best practices because of inadequate investment in rural school research and

programs which enable school collaborations. Rural educators seek support and systems to establish strong partnerships with rural public schools and local or state colleges for the purpose of training, development, and research. These partnerships would serve to inform the practice and development of teachers and schools, as well as the formation of education policy giving legislators increased access to scientific research on the issues critical to rural schools.

Policy change opportunities:

- Support programs like the New York legislature's recently established *Center for Rural Schools* at Cornell University as a means of offering support and resources to strengthen rural schools.
- Support the Rural Teacher Retention Act of 2007, which is up for consideration by the U.S. Congress. This legislation provides funding for rural districts to create strong practices and incentives for teacher recruitment.
- Advocate for increased funding for professional development so teachers can modify instruction for diverse populations of students, including low-income students, those with disabilities, and English language learners. With the quickly changing demographics in rural communities, there exists a sense of urgency for these increases.
- Use the Rural School and Community Trust's new project, *The Rural 800* -- which will offer technical assistance to the 800 poorest rural school districts in the country -- as a model for rural school-to-school networks.

3. Invest more deeply in rural community development.

To create the conditions enabling rural student success, the federal government must work harder to alleviate the conditions of poverty that exist in many rural communities by making sound investments in education as well as in health care, housing, economic development, and community development. There is a need for a comprehensive investment framework that builds upon the local assets of communities, invests in schools as multipurpose facilities, and responds to broader community needs.

Policy change opportunities:

- Support the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Reauthorization Act of 2007. This law allows a percentage of revenues from national timber sales to be invested in schools located in counties that host a national forest. Investments are also made for road improvements and forest stewardship in these communities.
- Support the reauthorization of the Full-Service Community Schools Act of 2007. This legislation

aims to improve the academic achievement of students by providing funding for schools to coordinate social and health services to be offered to students and their families within school facilities.

- Pursue the idea created at the first National Rural Assembly to develop a Department of Rural Affairs as a possible solution for responding to the comprehensive community and economic development needs in rural communities.
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The Rural Schools sector team consisted of Olga L. Cardoso-Vasquez, Llano Grande Center, Edcouch, TX; Francisco J. Guajardo, University of Texas—Pan American, Edinburg, TX; Miguel A. Guajardo, Texas State University, San Marcos, TX; Delia Pérez, Llano Grande Center, Edcouch, TX; Juan Ozuna, Llano Grande Center, Edcouch, TX.

Stewardship of Natural Resources

“Eighty percent of our country’s land is rural. It is a heritage and a trust. We all have a responsibility to protect the environment and develop and sustain our natural resources in ways that strengthen rural communities for the long haul. Good environmental practices and responsive public land management provide the opportunity to promote energy independence, grow healthy food in a sustainable manner, mitigate climate change, and develop stronger natural-resource-based economies.”

–Rural Compact 2008

Context

Rural communities are the centers of significant human and natural capital and must play a critical role in our nation’s responses to global climate change, diminishing energy supplies and rising costs, public and private lands and water management, declining health and increasing hunger, and assuring our safety and security.

Across the sectors that encompass environmental and natural resource issues, many believe we have entered a new era of collaboration, an observation particularly emphasized by the policymakers and congressional representatives interviewed. There is recognition of a shift away from the old “economy vs. environment” debate to discussions about how to marry the two with less of a “blame game.” There is agreement that people must work together to find win-win solutions that reflect common ground across diverse interest groups, urban and rural.

However, the emphasis on a paradigm of collaboration is not seen as a replacement for current legislative and/or regulatory frameworks; instead collaborative decision-making is seen as a strategy to build on environmental laws and regulations to improve how we achieve their intended outcomes. Movement toward collaborative decision-making has also created recognition of the roles rural communities fill as protectors and stewards of our nation’s natural assets.

Across rural America, we know that healthy rural communities are not an accident. Communities that focus and commit to innovative approaches are able to build their capacity to face new challenges and are often best positioned to face the environmental and natural resource issues of this century. Rural communities in public and private land settings are focused on building their capacity to manage conflicts, engage youth, increase civic participation in democratic decision-making, improve quality of life issues, build creative economies, and establish pathways to energy self-reliance. Rural communities increasingly embrace diversification, but are concerned about becoming service economies to wealthier absentee owners, in-migrants, and tourists.

Instead, they want to design their own future and make positive economic and environmental contributions to the nation.

Findings and Themes

The interviews, survey, and materials gathered for this review of the field showed that there are many issues affecting the environment and natural resources in rural America. Not surprisingly, many of the respondents emphasized that addressing these issues requires using a framework of integration; environmental, social, and economic factors all shaped how people talked about these issues. Of the many themes that emerged from this process, we have chosen to highlight six which received the most emphasis.

Sustainable rural development is an overarching priority across the country.

Sustainable rural development promotes the use of local assets to create diversified economies, green jobs, value-added products, and recognition of the integration of rural and urban systems. It depends upon creating and supporting local infrastructure and businesses so dollars spent will circulate in the local economy bringing benefit to the community. Communities look to their natural assets to power their economic development by creating rural enterprises and jobs related to the management, restoration, and manufacture of renewable natural resources while also providing amenity and environmental services.

For many of the respondents, the issue of scale emerged as a defining characteristic of the various approaches to sustainable rural development. Regardless of the environmental issue (e.g. forest, food systems, energy production), respondents specified that for most rural places, a community-scaled approach is most appropriate, and that integrated systems were needed to create resiliency. Community-scaled facilities are designed to adapt to changes in the volume and type of inputs being supplied to accommodate limitations in transportation distances and other inefficiencies. This approach can avoid the historical “boom and bust” of conventional extractive industries and current trends which outsource or ship jobs overseas.

“These green collar jobs are needed to create an economy that relies less on imports for energy, food, and other natural resources, making rural communities the lynchpin of our country’s efforts to reduce global climate change, reduce foreign energy dependence, and create sustainable, lasting jobs.” – Western survey respondent

Current policies and practices do not support integrated sustainable rural development. Significant federal, state, and private sector investment and incentives are needed to develop new technologies, infrastructure, and innovations that focus on environmental and natural resource stewardship. In addition to these investments, federal and state entities must create and fund programs that deliver technical assistance and grants. Federal and state programs are best suited to provide the catalyzing funding and technical expertise to stimulate natural resource-based, value-adding businesses, as well as build local infrastructure, entrepreneurial leadership, access to markets, and related capacity to sustain natural resource management and local community benefits. Economic development policies need to be retooled to couple enterprise development with environmental stewardship.

Global climate change is affecting environmental, social, and economic systems and natural resource conditions; rural America is uniquely positioned to address this problem.

There is a strong and growing awareness in rural America that global climate change is affecting the frequency of severe weather and is introducing unprecedented stress on ecosystems and communities. From impacts on overall ecosystem health, to changes in sea-level, storm impacts, wildfires, species migration, and increased drought, to consequences for forestry, agriculture, recreation, and tourism, climate change is a major concern for rural communities.

The potential impacts of climate change on rural communities and landscapes may have significant consequences, including loss of life and livelihoods, and degradation of natural resources and ecosystem services. Rural communities and landscapes have roles to play in preparing for and adapting to the impacts of climate change, and in reducing greenhouse gas emissions through mitigation measures. As federal policies allocate resources for adaptation and mitigation, rural communities must be included in the dialogue and be considered a critical part of the response. Rural communities have the natural capital and expertise to help formulate and implement sustainable solutions to global climate change.

The essential role of federal policymakers is to provide leadership, especially with respect to federal lands and agencies, incentives, facilitation, and improved administrative systems to catalyze and support ecosystem service markets, which will be needed to successfully address climate change. There seems to be growing agreement on the need for “cap and trade” systems at the state and federal levels to limit carbon emissions. The complexity of economic, governance, and environmental systems affected by global climate change will require solutions across these systems and at

various scales, including solutions that integrate the needs of both urban and rural communities.

“Bar none, effective and forceful climate change legislation represents the greatest federal legislative opportunity.” –Western survey respondent

“National policies related to climate change have the opportunity to engage rural communities in understanding the threats from climate-related hazards, as well as the opportunities rural communities have to be part of the solution around climate adaptation and mitigation.”

–Western survey respondent

Renewable energy holds significant potential for rural communities and their economies.

Increasing energy costs in rural areas are placing severe burdens on families with limited incomes and economic opportunities. This is coupled with a desire to develop environmentally appropriate renewable energy sources and technologies. There is broad recognition that we need to significantly reduce our energy consumption through increased efficiency, insulation, and conservation, at the same time as we change our energy production to focus more on energy self-reliance, including electricity, thermal energy (heat), and liquid biofuels. Rural communities are uniquely placed to capture wind, solar, and biomass for the generation of energy. From a carbon perspective, wood fuel, including the by-products of forest restoration efforts, can be used to displace the use of heating oil, natural gas, coal, or propane in public facilities in some rural towns.

With the pressure from increasing energy prices, in some circles coal, uranium, and natural gas are seen as potential “clean energy” sources. However, respondents highlight that these discussions are occurring without adequate consideration of the environmental impacts on water quality, the disposal of spent uranium, and safe mining practices. For example, clean coal advocates look primarily at the environmental impacts of coal at the smoke stack, ignoring or minimizing the impacts of strip mining, mountain top removal, and underground coal mining which remain the dirtiest and most destructive ways of making energy. For coal-fired plants, no matter how “cap and trade” schemes and new technologies pan out in the distant future, the costs of extraction to our forests, soils, waters, and communities will remain high.

Global climate change, diminishing energy supplies, and rising costs are impacting Native American tribes significantly as they own and manage about 50 to 75 percent of all non-renewable energy resources (coal, oil, uranium, natural gas). The predominance of these resources on tribal lands is resulting in extractive industries and multi-national corporations engaging Indian country at unprecedented levels, often with

negative consequences to their environments and communities.

Emerging as part of the discussions about energy development and production is the concept of *dispersed systems of community-scaled facilities*. In these scenarios, energy is produced closer to the point of consumption, decreasing the use of fossil fuels for hauling either inputs or outputs and avoiding the need to expand or build transmission lines to carry electricity to distant locations. Furthermore, utilizing local resources for local energy eliminates the leakage of community dollars to outsiders to pay for importing energy, while providing new markets and jobs for local residents. More flexible grid access is essential to the success of dispersed systems. The need for rural America to have the authority and means to own, protect, and manage its own energy resources is critically important.

Agricultural production and adding value to foods is shifting to family farms linked to regional markets.

Consumers are becoming more aware of what they eat and are making choices accordingly. Recent scares about food safety and increasing understanding about the impacts of farm practices on our health and the environment is translating into a demand for “local,” sustainably produced foods. Markets for locally grown products, pasture-based meat and dairy, and organics are growing exponentially. Among the people interviewed, the focus is on ensuring regional food security, where adequate supplies of food are sustainably produced and consumed in the same region – rather than products produced globally at the lowest price possible. Diversification, dispersed production, and adding-value at the local level are central themes, thereby strengthening communities’ options and ability to respond to rapidly changing economic and climatic conditions and reducing threats to our security and public safety. There is a need to link family farm businesses with new markets and distribution networks at the local and regional levels.

However, food systems continue to be dominated by corporations, commodities, and federal policies and programs that marginalize sustainably produced and organic foods, grass fed meat and dairy products, and vegetables, fruits, and specialty crops (e.g. nuts). Subsidies to commodity producers continue to go to corporate agriculture instead of to family farms (almost 50 percent of all commodity subsidies went to 5 percent of eligible farmers in 2005) and marginal investment is made in sustainable agriculture and expanding access to healthy and local foods. Subsidies to corporate agriculture do little – if anything – to spur the local economy. Growth rate for jobs trailed the national average in nearly two-thirds of the counties receiving heavy subsidies in 2000-2003. There is recognition that both commodity production for an export market and sustainably grown fruits and vegetables for regional

markets are needed. The two are not in competition; there is room for both.

There are widespread concerns about corn ethanol, including the negative environmental impacts of intensive farming on marginal lands, increased use of water in the shadow of looming water shortages, questionable climate benefits, and the use of food and feed crops for energy, which is contributing to increased food prices, with negative consequences for many low-income consumers, including those dependent on corn for animal feed and other products. In its place, respondents advocate for careful analysis of the production life cycle of ethanol and increased support for research, development, and implementation for producing cellulosic ethanol and additional biofuels (including biodiesel) from agricultural and wood residues and perennial crops that can also provide needed environmental services.

“There are serious questions related to the level of carbon released throughout the lifecycle of gasohol. In addition, increased prices for and decreased availability of some food crops as a result of their diversion to energy uses is having negative effects on low-income consumers.”

–Eastern survey respondent

Increasingly, marginal lands, often spurred by the growing demand for corn, soybeans, and other commodity crops, are being put into production, with the result that even more fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides are being used, with negative effects on water quality. In addition, large-scale confined animal feeding operations (CAFOs) are polluting the air and water sources, affecting rural communities’ access to clean drinking water.

“Strengthen agriculture by focusing on strong economic development incentives for communities to pursue agriculture and food enterprises. Federal legislation should shift to small-scale, diversified agriculture with a focus on local markets and direct marketing.”

–Eastern survey respondent

Public lands management, restoration, and protection are vital to developing ecosystem services and products and maintaining rural economies.

The health and productivity of public lands is inextricably linked to the health and well-being of the rural communities adjacent to these places. There is increasing recognition that restoring our forests, rangelands, and waterways is critical to maintaining the health and vitality of rural communities, and to ensuring

that the full range of ecosystem services and products are available to the American people and global marketplace.

Federal investment in comprehensive restoration and stewardship on public lands has declined steadily over the last several years limiting the ability of the land management agencies to fully engage in restoring and managing America's public lands. This lack of investment prevents communities and enterprises, which have long played a stewardship role on these lands, from contributing to their restoration and management. With few exceptions, the programs administered by the land management agencies that were designed to help rural communities to develop their capacity to meet new management objectives were dismantled and de-funded over the last eight years. These cuts have occurred as increasing amounts are spent on fire suppression rather than forest management and restoration, resulting in public land management agencies with diminished capacity to effectively take care of our public lands. Our nation, rural communities, and the public lands deserve better.

The land management agencies, communities, businesses, and workforce that perform the work on public lands must have the capacity to manage our nation's forests and grasslands in a manner that ensures ecological health and productivity. In the American West, where wildfires are part of the natural processes that shape the majestic landscape, the connections to global climate change cannot be underestimated. Restoring our forests so that wildfire can play an appropriate role on the landscape (rather than the current trend of increasingly intense wildfires which only add to the problem of climate change) should be a national priority. The role that our nation's forests will need to play in mitigating climate change is significant.

Reinvestment in public lands should be accompanied by investments in the neighboring communities. People living and working on public lands provide many vital assets, including skilled labor, technical and historical knowledge of the land and its management, businesses that add value to forest products, and an ability to leverage private sector funds. Collaborative processes to support restoration, stewardship, and monitoring of land management practices on federally managed lands need to be strengthened and supported. This will also require investments in businesses and infrastructure that improve the land and provide quality jobs for local communities. Federal stewardship contracts, which are awarded based on the ability of the contractor to achieve the ecological and community benefit objectives of a project, were mentioned as an effective mechanism for restoring public lands and providing products for local value-adding and/or energy production. The potential for renewable energy production from public lands should be explored, and policies and incentives created, to ensure that ecological objectives and community benefits can be achieved.

“National policy must be changed to focus on reinvestment in public lands and the communities adjacent to them to provide ecosystem services. Clean air, water, and other natural resources provided by public lands will be critical for our country's environment and the vitality of rural America.” – Western survey respondent

Conversion of private lands is threatening environment and community vitality.

Private working lands need protection. The long-term health of our rural landscapes and communities depend upon the protection and productivity of private working lands, which are increasingly under threat as land is subdivided, sold for real estate development, and crisscrossed by infrastructure corridors. Throughout rural America, privately owned forests, ranchlands, and agricultural lands have been vital components of a working landscape supporting rural economies and providing wildlife habitat, clean water, economically and culturally important recreational opportunities, and sequestering carbon for climate change mitigation, among other valuable ecosystem services. However, demographics are changing dramatically, with youth leaving and retirees and urban constituents moving in. On one hand, this is helping to break down the old frames of “us against them.” On the other hand, as people move beyond the suburbs, sprawl takes over farmland and forests, undermining their long-term potential for providing public benefits, and with these our rural heritage and local knowledge.

Increasingly, communities are addressing access to open space and fragmentation. There is a huge growth in land conservation organizations and transactions as communities work together to preserve open space. Supporting conservation of private lands by funding programs such as the Forest Legacy Program, the Land and Water Conservation Fund, and tax credit programs that encourage landowners – including Timberland Investment Management Organizations (TIMOs) – to put their land into community and conservation-minded ownership would help maintain working landscapes.

In addition to preserving open space, it is equally critical to support private landowners of working landscapes. Programs should include support for active management and sustainable practices; comprehensive, integrated, and coordinated awareness-building and technical and financial assistance; and financial and tax incentives for land conservation and keeping land in working farms and forests.

“The U.S. is losing its forestland to development at an alarming rate. Nationally, 10 million acres of forestland were developed between 1982 and 1997. What were once strong, natural resource-based rural economies in all corners of the country – Georgia, Maine, Minnesota, Oregon, New Mexico – now have similar concerns about long-term community health and

viability due to the loss of resource-based industry.” – Western survey respondent

Policy Priorities and Opportunities

Throughout the interviews and the survey responses, there were a few ideas that emerged that can best be described as core principles for the development of rural policies. Many respondents expressed the sentiment that **how we drive and shape public policy is just as important as the policies themselves.** These principles should be considered and used to guide the development of environmental and natural resource stewardship policy recommendations and priorities for the National Rural Assembly participants:

- **Devolution of decision-making** to the appropriate level (state, watershed, and county levels), depending on the issue, will enable rural communities to find solutions to their issues within local variations in ecological and social systems and communities.
- **Integration of policies and programs** reflecting the interconnected nature of rural ecological and human systems is needed for effective and efficient public policy and investment.
- **Development of appropriately scaled solutions** is essential to achieving sustainability goals.
- **Collaboration between diverse stakeholders** is essential to developing durable solutions and ensuring that environmental and natural resource policy and management meet the ecological, social, and economic needs of the nation and its rural communities.

“We need to be using a systems-based approach to the issues of environment and natural resource policy that integrates with social and economic policy.” – Eastern survey respondent

With these principles as a base, several policy goals can be developed in the areas of sustainable rural development, global climate change, renewable energy, agricultural production, public lands management and restoration, and private lands conversion.

1. Sustainable Rural Development: Create programs and incentives for integrated approaches to environmental and natural resource issues, including assistance to low-income and under-served communities, economic development policies that couple enterprise development with environmental stewardship, and integrated business models focusing on environmental services and products.

Sustainable rural development is a way to focus on the inextricable linkages between the health of the environment and the health of rural communities. The policy goals and opportunities for this theme are perhaps the most crosscutting. Current policymaking structures and government agencies are not designed to support integrated activities; rather they are designed to stove-pipe issues. The frameworks that house most federal programs are a result of old models of governance and increasingly do not work in rural areas, particularly when addressing environmental and natural resource policy issues. The challenge in developing sustainable rural development policies will be to reform government delivery, funding, and decision-making processes to support a more holistic and integrated approach to environmental and natural resource issues, ensuring that social and economic objectives are also met.

Policy change opportunities:

- Create a Department of Sustainable Rural Affairs that focuses on providing financial and technical assistance aimed at integrating environmental, social, and economic outcomes.
- Advocate for full funding of technical assistance and grant programs within the land management agencies and Department of Energy to assist rural communities and enterprises in building their capacity to protect, restore, and steward public and private lands.
- Ensure support for the development of community-scaled value-added products, processing facilities, and business models that enable rural communities to utilize and market environmental services and natural resource products.
- Fully fund Community Development Block Grants and ensure they are flexible and their purpose broadened to include restoration on public and private lands.
- Ensure that laws aimed at protecting those who work on public and private lands are fully enforced and that job training programs reach the full diversity of people who work on public and private lands.

2. Climate Change: Ensure that federal policies and investment aimed at addressing global climate change integrate environmental and social equity objectives, provide access to existing and new technologies and markets for rural communities, consider the contributions of rural landscapes, and include rural communities in climate adaptation strategies.

Global climate change has the potential to affect every aspect of environmental and natural resource policy. Like sustainable rural development, by its very nature it is a crosscutting theme. However, policies should focus on the role of rural communities in adapting to and

mitigating climate change, while also addressing the links between energy consumption and production and the role of ecosystem service markets. Furthermore, while there is significant research and coverage of the ecological impact of climate change, there is nascent information or policy dialogue regarding the potential social and economic impacts on rural communities in the U.S., or their role in addressing climate change. We need solutions that focus on understanding and using climate change science to create policies that are socially responsible, economically equitable, and environmentally sustainable, and that enable rural America to shape this rapidly developing policy arena.

Policy change opportunities:

- Ensure that public and private forest lands and grass lands are adequately integrated into climate change policy proposals.
- Support major national investment in development of new technologies that will mitigate climate change.
- Comment and engage in discussions about the Lieberman-Warner Climate Security Act of 2008 (S. 2191).
- Institute a carbon tax to encourage energy efficiency and to fund development of efficient, carbon-neutral energy technologies.
- Expand carbon cap-and-trade systems to drive energy efficiency and carbon reduction strategies.

3. Renewable Energy: Ensure the development of dispersed renewable energy production systems by developing technologies that are community-scaled and linked to environmental stewardship; increasing rural enterprise access to markets; supporting research that integrates energy production, fair market access, and environmental improvement; and supporting energy conservation and efficiency programs.

There is broad recognition that we need to change our energy production and use to focus more on energy conservation and self-reliance, including electricity, thermal energy (heat), and liquid biofuels. Rural communities are uniquely placed to capture wind, solar, and biomass for the generation of energy. In addition to promoting renewable energy production, policies need to be based on a careful analysis of the environmental and social impact of these alternatives across their full lifecycle.

Policy change opportunities:

- Advocate for the passage of energy production tax credits for all renewable energy sources, including thermal energy and community-scaled energy applications that are scaled to small- and medium-sized enterprises.

- Advocate for the inclusion of thermal energy as part of the federal Renewable Portfolio Standards.
- Increase federal investment, through the Department of Energy and U.S. Forest Service Woody Biomass Grant program, for applied research in the development and use of biofuels (including biodiesel) from agricultural and wood residues that are community-scaled and explicitly address environmental concerns.
- Create a “Rural Community Energy Independence Act” which will support the development of technologies, systems, and markets needed to advance renewable energy production and energy conservation in rural America.

4. Agriculture: Ensure local and regional food security by creating sustainable food production and value-added opportunities, developing local processing and distribution infrastructure, increasing access to healthy and local foods and markets, providing technical and financial assistance to small and low-income farmers and businesses, and supporting on-farm energy production and efficiency improvements.

Our public policies and investments have helped create global, industrial food systems that have broken the connections between family farms, sustainably produced non-commodity crops, and local and regional food security. The next generation of agricultural policies must focus on developing integrated systems of sustainable production and distribution that will enable food producers, distributors, and consumers to support community-scaled sustainable agriculture.

Policy change opportunities:

- Support the retention and development of family farms by lowering the cap on subsidy payments in traditional commodity programs.
- Develop federal procurement guidelines to increase purchase and sourcing of local and regional agricultural products.
- Support on-farm energy production equipment and energy efficiency improvements, especially those that encourage state rebate programs.
- Establish food and grain reserves to assure food security in times of crop failure and high prices, and less volatility in farm commodity markets.
- Advocate for the enactment of the Farm Flex program, which would reform the “base acres” system to allow fruits and vegetables to be grown on base acres without penalties, while maintaining eligibility for future direct payment subsidies.
- Increase funding for the Community Food Projects Program.

- Develop and support federal grant programs to spur farmers markets and other farmer-to-consumer marketing innovations.
- Promote investments in research and extension to support beginning farmers, new and ethnic markets, sustainable agriculture, and on-farm energy production and conservation.

5. Public Lands: Improve public land management and restoration through collaborative, place-based programs; a focus on restoration and ecological integrity, not just outputs; improved social and economic conditions in rural public land communities; incentives for developing markets for traditional underutilized or low-value materials; small and local businesses contract awards; and collaboration with diverse stakeholders.

Our nation’s public lands are not being managed in a manner that protects natural assets or benefits the rural communities that live adjacent to them and serve as their stewards. There is a need for clear direction and commitment to approaches that will result in comprehensive, integrated restoration and long-term maintenance of our public lands and community vitality. There is a need for new legislation that will provide the authority and direction to land management agencies to build a comprehensive and consistent program of work around restoration and sustainable management that is structured to benefit, and meaningfully involve, rural public land communities.

Policy change opportunities:

- Support legislation that will result in landscape-scale restoration and community development, such as the Forest Landscape Restoration Act (S. 2593 and H. 5263).
- Develop and advocate for new legislation to support sustainable forest management.
- Develop and advocate for new legislation to authorize and fund the land management agencies to provide technical and financial assistance to rural communities and businesses.
- Advocate for the reauthorization of stewardship contracting and related policies to ensure rural communities, businesses, and workers have access to safe, durable, and family-wage jobs.
- Work to find a long-term solution and reauthorize and fund the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self Determination Act of 2000.

6. Private Lands: Protect private lands through full fee and easement acquisition; support of good stewardship and best practices; incentives for private landowners to maintain open space and working farms,

ranches, and forests; and investment in community ownership and management of working lands.

Privately owned forests, ranches, and other agricultural lands are vital components of maintaining a healthy, biologically rich working landscape that can support rural economies and provide wildlife habitat, clean water, recreational opportunities, and other valuable ecosystem services. Conversion of working landscapes has detrimental consequences for rural communities and urban areas that depend on ecosystem services and the products they produce. Federal policies and investments need to be constructed to ensure that our nation’s private lands are protected and can continue to play a vital role providing the numerous ecosystem services and products we all depend on.

Policy change opportunities:

- Advocate for full funding of technical assistance and private landowner education programs such as the Forest Stewardship Program of State and Private Forestry in the USDA Forest Service State, and the Farm and Ranch Land Protection Program of the Natural Resource Conservation Service.
- Support existing and newly proposed programs such as Forest Legacy and the Community Forests and Open Space Conservation Program to ensure communities have the full range of tools to maintain the working forests and farms that are inextricably linked to their local economies.
- Create tax credits to encourage Timberland Investment Management Organizations (TIMOs) to sell their land to communities.
- Fully fund the Land and Water Conservation Fund to support conservation of private (and public) lands.
- Fund and implement stewardship, incentive, and economic development programs in the 2008 Farm Bill including the Forest Stewardship Program, Urban and Community Forestry Program, cooperative extension forestry programs, Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program, Forest Land Enhancement Program, and the Economic Action Programs (Rural Community Assistance).

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Health of Our People

“Americans deserve access to good, affordable health care. If we want small towns and rural communities to contribute to the well-being of the nation, we need rural health-care systems that work. These should include preventive care, health education, and both community-based and high-tech delivery systems.”

--Rural Compact 2008

Context

Health care is a critical issue for rural America. It is a major determinant of the quality of life for rural people and whether they are able to stay and thrive in their communities. Moreover, the health-care sector is an important generator of economic opportunity and income for many rural regions, the hospital or clinic being one of the anchor institutions that support vibrant communities.

Rural America faces many challenges in providing quality and affordable health care for its people. These challenges are often a function of:

- Low density and remoteness that push up health-care delivery costs;
- Policies that apply universal, mainly urban-determined, funding and service formulae to rural institutions and systems that are inappropriate to rural contexts; and
- Under-investment in infrastructure, especially in qualified personnel and information technology, which inhibits innovation in rural health care.

There is no shortage of creative responses to these challenges, but federal policy has to be shaped to remove barriers and inflexibilities in current policies and programs, and provide appropriate, tailored resources to support quality and affordable health care across rural America.

Findings and Themes

There were nine main issues identified during the course of the review of rural health care. They are presented below in the order of priority determined by the open survey responses.

The number one priority is to recruit and retain a quality rural health workforce.

Across rural America, there is a critical shortage of health-care professionals – physicians, nurses, dentists, pharmacists, radiology and laboratory technicians, mental health professionals, and many others. For instance, even though 20 percent of the U.S. population lives in rural America, less than 9 percent of physicians

practice there. The National Rural Health Association has estimated that about half of the health-care workforce is 45 years old or older, and by 2010, 40 percent of all registered nurses will be 50 years or older. The Health Resources and Services Administration projects the nation’s nursing shortage will grow to more than one million nurses by 2020, a shortage likely to be felt particularly severely in rural areas.

This shortage is the result of many factors – an aging workforce with high rates of retirement, difficulties in retaining and recruiting workers, high vacancy and turnover rates, lack of opportunities for education and training and for career advancement, concerns over pay and benefits, and increasing workloads.

There have been some important steps taken to address these challenges, including the National Health Services Corps, HRSA Health Profession programs, and state-based loan repayment programs. There is also interest in finding ways in which the health-care workforce can be applied in more flexible and creative ways such as allowing paramedics, physicians’ assistants, dental technicians, and other qualified personnel to play larger roles in patient care in areas of professional shortages. Expansion and permanent reauthorization of the J-1 visa program to encourage international medical graduates to practice in rural and underserved areas is also being pursued.

Adequate and flexible health-care finance is the critical prerequisite of all attempts to improve quality and affordable health care in rural America.

Financing of rural health care directly influences all aspects of health in rural America. Approaches that have been developed to address the particular needs and challenges of rural communities are difficult to implement and sustain as they do not fit traditional, urban-centric models of health-care finance. These models assume a certain volume of patients that is not to be found in rural areas, and the inflexibility of many programs undermines the ability of rural facilities to meet the needs of their patients.

The characteristics of rural populations add pressure for struggling providers. There is more chronic disease associated with aging, racial and ethnic health disparities, and higher rates of poverty, and as a consequence, there are more patients on Medicaid. Recent changes to Medicare intended to introduce more market competition, drive down costs, and alter payment structures have had a number of unintended negative consequences for rural areas, including insufficient resources to help people navigate the complexities of the new arrangements. The result is inadequate coverage and higher costs for many.

Steps have been taken to introduce flexibility in financing and reimbursement schedules for Medicare and Medicaid which have yielded positive effects. Critical Access Hospitals represent one example. There are nearly 1,300 Critical Access Hospitals, which are small facilities located in rural areas generally at least thirty-five miles from other hospitals. These are eligible for cost-based reimbursement from Medicare to provide financial stability and provide for flexible staffing and services and networking with acute care hospitals.

Health information technology has considerable potential for improving the delivery of health care in rural communities.

Health information technology is increasingly impacting health care in the areas of electronic health records, electronic transmittal of medical tests, confidential access for consumers to their personal health information, communication between patients and providers, electronic prescription of medications, treatments, and tests, and decision support systems. Advocates point to many opportunities to improve rural health care by helping providers coordinate patient care across distances, and by enhancing disease surveillance and providing tailored preventative health services and health education.

Lack of access to broadband service is a critical barrier to the widespread adoption of health information technologies. Few small rural communities have access to either telephone DSL or cable modem services. As a consequence, 75 percent of rural hospitals have not fully or partially implemented any electronic health record use, and 82 percent of all community hospitals not currently considering health information technologies are rural. There are also related challenges associated with the ability to pay for the necessary hardware and software as well as the availability of staff with the appropriate information technology skills.

President George W. Bush issued an Executive Order in 2004 calling for most Americans to be connected to an electronic health record within ten years.

Rural America provides an excellent proving ground for innovation and experimentation in health care.

Part of the challenge in achieving quality and affordable health care in rural America is finding ways in which the various components of health-care delivery can be brought together in coherent and effective systems – essentially, “connecting the dots.” As referenced above, such an approach requires flexibility in program financing and rules, as well as specific investments in the introduction and evaluation of new models.

One model that has attracted a lot of attention in recent years is the “medical home.” One of the proponents, the American Academy of Pediatrics, describes the model as coordinated and family-centered

care. Within the model are elements of preventative care, coordination of appointments with specialists, interaction with schools and workplaces, maintenance of complete and central medical records, management of chronic conditions, counseling on health behaviors, links to community resources, prescription management, and overall navigation of an increasingly complicated health-care system. Obvious impediments apart from funding include the fostering of cooperation among multiple providers and the availability of health information technology.

The pursuit of collaborative innovation has the potential to ensure better health care for rural patients and better management of chronic conditions, reduce health disparities across geography, race, and ethnicity, and help to recruit a quality workforce.

Rural communities need encouragement to adopt and sustain healthy behaviors.

Healthy behaviors contribute significantly to the health of Americans wherever they live. Behaviors such as smoking, drug abuse, poor nutrition, lack of exercise, and unintentional injuries are the leading cause of deaths. In rural areas, these occur at higher rates as a result of poverty, racial and ethnic disparities, and lack of education. Rural residents are more likely to smoke, have higher rates of obesity, and have higher rates of occupational injury.

There are some specific challenges in addressing preventative diseases and injuries in rural America – for instance, absence of opportunities for exercise and recreation, and occupational hazards associated with agriculture, forestry, and manufacturing – but opportunities for community engagement in fostering healthy behaviors are substantial.

Across rural America there are community-wide partnerships that are geared to improving the health of both the community as a whole as well as the health of individuals. Where these efforts are integrated with health-care services, the potential for improving health outcomes and reducing costs appear to be significant.

Quality improvement is an essential component of rural health care.

Quality is defined by the Institute of Medicine (IOM) as the degree to which health services for individuals and populations increase the likelihood of the desired health outcomes and are consistent with current professional knowledge. The institute’s six aims for the improvement of quality are that health care should be safe, effective, patient-centered, timely, efficient, and equitable.

IOM’s report on quality challenges in rural communities presented a five-point strategy to address current deficiencies. These included the adoption of an integrated approach to addressing personal and population health needs at the community level, the

introduction of a stronger health quality improvement infrastructure to assist rural health systems and professionals in acquiring the necessary skills to improve quality, efforts to enhance human resource capacities in rural communities both among health-care professionals and rural residents, the monitoring of rural health systems to ensure they are financially stable, and investments in information and communications technology.

The decreasing availability of pharmacy services is becoming critical for many rural areas.

Nationally, the demand for pharmacists exceeds their supply as their role in patient treatment and managing chronic disease has expanded. There are a number of particular challenges for rural America. Only 12 percent of pharmacists practice in rural areas, part of the broader issue of recruiting and retaining health-care professionals. Some of this is due to the fact that the ability of pharmacies to continue in operation in the face of financial pressures is increasingly difficult -- economies of scale are harder to achieve as the number of prescription medicines increase, mail-order pharmacies and large retail stores provide stiff competition, and reimbursement rates for prescriptions change. All these eat away at profit margins. Moreover, rural areas have lower rates of insurance coverage than those in urban America thus reducing their capacity to pay for medication, and smaller rural pharmacies have less ability to negotiate steep discounts from pharmaceutical distributors. An additional concern is the growing elderly population who tend to require more and increasingly complex prescription medication than younger populations, and who rely on assistance from their pharmacists in managing multiple prescriptions.

There are, however, promising practices that might help to reverse the above trends. Collaboration between nursing facilities, hospitals, and other providers to meet regional needs through centralized pharmacy services, pharmacy technicians and nurses supervised by pharmacists using videoconferencing and other technologies, targeted training programs for soon-to-be professionals in the special needs of rural areas, and recruitment of potential pharmacy students from rural communities, are examples of these practices.

As the population of rural America continues to age, there is a growing need for support for family caregivers.

According to the National Advisory Committee on Rural Health and Human Services, "families, not nursing homes, social services agencies or other formal programs, provide the most long-term care to older persons with disabilities." The impact on caregivers in terms of balancing work, home, and care, and of susceptibility to depression is well-documented. There is also a substantial financial impact on employers through

workday interruptions and employee turnover created by the demands on caregiving employees.

Rural (nonmetro) areas have a larger share of older people (15 percent who were older than 65 in 2004) than the country as a whole (12 percent). A 2004 study by the Caregiver Alliance identified a lack of resources, the need for occasional respite from the responsibilities of caregiving, the lack of awareness of caregiver issues and programs, the shortage of providers, and limited access to health-care services, as issues for family caregivers. For caregivers in rural areas, these challenges are magnified by lack of transportation and the issues of rural health-care delivery and financing referred to earlier. There are, however, a number of existing family caregiver assistance programs and faith-based organizations that provide a general support service in rural communities.

One special group, returning veterans, places particular demands on rural health care.

Nearly a quarter of all veterans live in rural areas, yet Veterans Administration (VA) services are generally located in urban settings. In Minnesota, it was estimated that over 5,000 veterans would be returning to their communities from Iraq and Afghanistan at the end of 2007 but only 28 percent would be able to receive services from the VA system.

Distance to facilities is a particular challenge with veterans less likely to travel for outpatient psychiatric care than for outpatient medical care. Studies have shown some complexity in use patterns depending on distance, availability of other medical facilities, and age, but barriers to travel as well as the physical and financial status of the veteran are important.

In 2008, the VA introduced a Rural Health Initiative that increased mileage reimbursement rates for patients, encouraged the use of telehealth devices, and expanded programs such as services to Native American veterans, mental health, and long-term care.

Policy Priorities and Opportunities

The future of health care in the United States has been and will continue to be a major political talking point in the presidential elections. The debates range over many different aspects of health care -- wholesale or incremental reform, private or public insurance, universal access or market mechanisms, prevention or healing. Determining what might be appropriate and achievable policy priorities in rural health care is particularly difficult, although views expressed during the preparation of this policy assessment suggest two main thrusts.

First, there is a possibility that a new administration will seek to pursue significant if not fundamental reform of American health care. Escalating costs, rising expectations, and increasing inequities in access and insurance coverage may well force such a reform. However, given the range of strongly held views and the

power of vested interests inside and outside the health-care sector, it can be anticipated that reaching any consensus for action will be hard to achieve. From a rural policy perspective, it will be critical that the voices and concerns of rural America are not drowned out by these interests, or diluted by an inability to present an effective case across the organizations, sectors, professions, and geographies that comprise rural health care. In other words, rural America has to be ready to participate in the reform debates, bring ideas to the table, and be able to respond with rigorous analysis of proposals that impact rural communities and families.

Second, there will be other opportunities that fall short of overall reform that may yield improvements in rural health care. Among these is the upcoming reauthorization of Titles VII and VIII of the Public Health Services Act. These cover a variety of initiatives for training programs and students to improve the geographic distribution, quality, and racial and ethnic diversity of the health-care workforce. Title VII programs support physician, dentist, and allied professional training, and Title VIII programs fund advanced and basic nursing education and nursing workforce diversity. The president's budget for FY 2009 proposed \$110 million for both titles, which is a reduction of \$240 million from the \$350 million available in FY 2008. The implications of these cuts include eliminating programs in primary care and dentistry designed to increase the number of primary care providers in rural and other under-served areas, and all inter-disciplinary programs, including Area Health Education Centers, the geriatric training program, and allied health programs, which emphasize caring and training for underserved populations.

Whether as part of major reform or minor regulatory adjustments, the nine issues outlined in the previous section comprise a working agenda that would inject rural health priorities into the national debate. The results of this policy assessment suggest that four key principles should guide legislative action:

- Flexibility in financing and program rules is required to encourage and enable responsiveness to local needs and to promote innovation in service delivery to different populations and communities.
- Tackling the shortages of health-care professionals in rural areas requires openness to creative responses while ensuring quality patient care.
- Access to broadband communications throughout rural America is a prerequisite for the adoption of health information technologies that are themselves crucial to achieving quality and affordable health care.
- Collaboration across health-care providers and between health-care and other sectors, both at regional and local levels, is critical to making the best use of limited resources and to fostering creative responses to diverse community needs.

Using these four key principles and the major themes outlined in the previous section, several priorities and related opportunities can be developed:

1. Enhance programs that recruit and maintain a quality health-care workforce, including physicians, nurses, dentists, pharmacists, and other health-care professionals.

Policy change opportunities:

- Support and expand upon programs such as the National Health Services Corps, HRSA Health Profession programs, and state-based loan repayment programs.
- Expand and permanently reauthorize the J-1 visa program to encourage international medical graduates in rural areas.
- Support the upcoming reauthorization of Titles VII and VIII of the Public Health Services Act in order to develop educational programs to train qualified health professionals for rural clinics, practices, and hospitals.
- Encourage collaboration among practitioners to meet regional pharmacy needs. Use videoconferencing and other technologies and targeted training programs to recruit and retain pharmacists in rural areas.
- Allow new workforce initiatives to be applied in creative and flexible ways to address patient care in areas of professional shortages.

2. Support changes in health-care finance policy to address the needs of rural America.

Policy change opportunities:

- Use the upcoming change in administration to prepare for and promote change in health-care policy that acknowledges the rural-specific challenges in health-care delivery.
- Enhance programs that support flexibility in financing and reimbursement schedules for Medicare and Medicaid, for instance Critical Access Hospitals.

3. Invest in new and innovative programs, particularly those that have the potential to improve health-care delivery in rural communities and promote healthy behaviors.

Policy change opportunities:

- Use the administration's call for most American's to be connected to an electronic health record by 2014 to expand broadband and information technologies to rural America, and ensure that policies and financing adequately address post-implementation needs.

- Develop policies that allow the use of the “medical home” as a model to coordinate health-care delivery in rural areas.
- Create community-wide partnerships, integrated with health-care services, with the goal of improving health in communities as well as individuals.
- Design health-care policy strategies that meet the Institute of Medicine’s goal of quality to increase the likelihood of the desired health outcomes consistent with current professional knowledge.

4. Invest in programs that support family caregivers and veterans.

Policy change opportunities:

- Expand existing caregiver assistance programs to a sufficient level to provide needed support to caregivers.

- Support the Rural Health Initiative introduced in 2008 and similar initiatives that provide services and programs to rural veterans.

The Rural Health Care sector team consisted of Brian Dabson, Rural Policy Research Institute (RUPRI), and Dana Hughes and Caren Bacon, Institute of Public Policy (IPP). Both RUPRI and IPP are located within the Harry S. Truman School of Public Affairs, University of Missouri, in Columbia, MO.

Investment in Our Communities

“To fight poverty, create wealth, and build sustainable communities, everyone in America needs access to a safe and equitable system for saving, borrowing, and building capital. To fully participate in and contribute to the American economy, rural communities need public and private investment, access to philanthropic resources, and the tools to develop their own community-controlled assets.”

--Rural Compact, 2008

Context

Asset based development practices and strategies grow out of the life experiences of rural people. Assets are built up over time, shared and passed on to the next generation. Assets are both financial and cultural. Those with assets participate in community affairs, and assets help families and communities weather hard times and advance faster when times are good.

Community asset development focuses on revitalizing rural communities through investment in housing, community institutions and facilities, and local businesses. It requires three interlocking sectors: 1) community economic development, housing, and finance institutions; 2) basic physical and telecommunications infrastructure; and 3) philanthropic resources. Community development finance institutions and networks such as Rural LISC, NeighborWorks Rural Initiative partners, and the Housing Assistance Council have successfully built housing assets, invested in community institutions and enterprises, and revitalized communities. Both these community-level development investments and individual asset programs for families and children, such as the Earned Income Tax Credits and Individual Development Accounts, often receive bipartisan support. *Today rural leaders see a renewed focus on three factors that impact development strategies and opportunities: sustainable development of natural resources, the renewed value of ties to place, and advantages in investing in regional economies.*

Rural development practitioners and advocates recognize that a community asset approach can yield practical, measurable outcomes: widely shared economic success, renewed environmental sustainability, a stronger connection to place and region, and a vibrant social fabric, including the full measure of diversity. Community asset development provides a context in which rural innovations can be brought to scale and community residents invest in and feel connected to the community. This commitment to the common good is at the heart of the Rural Compact.

Findings and Themes

There is consensus that asset based rural development is an effective strategy to build rural communities. Rural development practitioners understand what works and see strong potential for a sustainable and vibrant rural America. Misconceptions about the capacity and value in rural communities mean they confront shortfalls in both philanthropic and for-profit investment. With policies that support investment in rural America, they can take what they have learned about development tools and strategies and build sustainable rural communities across the country.

- *“We know what needs to be done; we see what works in our communities.”*
- *“We could do far more with the right supports and policy partnerships.”*
- *“A community asset approach projects the enduring values that speak to rural realities and conditions.”*

Several themes emerged from the review of the field:

“Triple Bottom Line” principles of economic opportunity, social equity, and sustainable environmental practices are becoming more widely adapted.

Triple bottom line (TBL) principles and practices that strive to make investments that improve economic opportunity, protect the environment, and contribute to sustainable economic growth are spreading from alternative economic development strategies such as local food systems to innovative housing projects, health care, fisheries, and ecotourism. TBL approaches require deep capacity from intermediaries and policies that offer new incentives and support for this more complex approach to investment. Local and state fiscal pressures often block local innovation from getting to scale.

The sustainable development of rural natural resources is growing, and a related new vision of what characterizes rural life and development is emerging.

Many rural development practitioners are talking about the opportunity to re-vision rural America, emphasizing revitalized connections between sustainable use of natural resources and economic opportunity. They also talk about the qualities that make rural distinct, emphasizing the role of place and natural resources in a renewed rural identity that does not rely on traditional industrial agriculture, resource exploitation, or low skill manufacturing. They strive to approach their work in a regional context, to better manage operations now too expensive to fund on the individual community level.

They also find that regional collaboration can serve as an economic buffer to the tidal forces of a global economy.

Rural America may be in the early stages of a robust new vision that takes advantage of growing interest in environmental stewardship and local or regional economic production and markets, perhaps analogous to the new urbanism practices and principles appearing in urban development. Anita Brown Graham, director of the Institute for Emerging Issues at North Carolina State University, noted that “rural places hold great promise for the reemergence of America. Two decades ago, many proclaimed city centers as wastelands. Today, they are the source of revitalized urban economies. The rebirth was no accident. It reflects the partnerships of creative public leaders and opportunistic private developers. The same rethinking of place must occur across rural America.”

Innovations in community economic development, housing, and finance offer the potential for scaling up.

Rural development institutions are strong and effective. There are innovations across rural America. Rural Opportunities Incorporated partnered with Ebay and Hewlett Packard to teach rural small businesses to market their work through Ebay; McIntosh SEED, in Darien, Georgia, is developing heritage-based tourism and public/private equitable community development; First Nations Oweesta Corporation has designed and deployed financial literacy programs and community development finance institutions in numerous tribal communities; MACED, in Berea, Kentucky, has facilitated a deal between the newly created Chicago Climate Exchange and Kentucky timber owners that generates new revenue. Rural development practitioners and networks such as Rural LISC and the Housing Assistance Council have built nearly 400,000 affordable homes and invested \$429 million in venture equity, and helped businesses create 416,000 jobs over the past twenty years, but far more could be done. The Community Reinvestment Act and an array of federal and state financing mechanisms have been critical. However, there is a need and opportunity to develop new policy and market structures that would enable development efforts to reach scale. Fiscal pressures at the state and local levels provide a constant brake on expansion of development efforts.

Health care is critical.

Many practitioners highlighted the health-care industry as a key economic driver for rural communities. The lack of health insurance is a serious barrier to extending entrepreneurship and small businesses.

New investment is needed to shore up rural America’s physical infrastructure and increase access to technology.

In small town and rural America, roads are in disrepair, bridges need shoring up, and water systems need upgrading. In very isolated communities basic indoor plumbing is still unavailable. Despite excellent local development work, the federal partnership with rural America has lost momentum, and the failure to adequately invest in water, wastewater treatment, and roads undermines current and future development efforts.

Widespread and affordable internet broadband access is critical for economic opportunity, and undergirds all community asset development practice and strategies.

Philanthropy both provides resources for local investment and offers a vehicle for moving national philanthropic assets to the most pressing rural needs and opportunities.

Both local and national philanthropic assets are necessary in rural America. Lorna Bourg of the Southern Mutual Help Association in New Iberia, Louisiana, noted that “Community philanthropy has been engaged in creating centers of learning and arts – charity and service, but not rural development. Philanthropy needs to be broadened to include development and ending poverty; I am in fear and trembling of just creating more traditional community foundations doing the same old thing.” A growing number of communities across rural America are engaging in rural development philanthropy, encouraging grassroots and traditional philanthropic institutions to partner in rural community economic development.

Philanthropic assets are small compared to private financial capital and local, state, and federal public capital, but they nonetheless play a critical “steering” function. Local philanthropy acts as social venture capital to nurture and sustain “innovation platforms” that not only develop good ideas and practice, but can work to bring them to scale. The role of philanthropy goes beyond the endowments created or grants paid out.

Policy Priorities and Opportunities

Economic Development, Housing, and Finance.

Community asset development has been a critical policy development in the United States over the past twenty years. The field of practice in housing, enterprise, community facilities, and individual asset development programs is deep and can move to greater scale with stronger state and federal policy partnerships.

Rural America requires new forms of investment capital to match its entrepreneurial energy. Dennis West of Northern Initiatives in the Upper Peninsula of

Michigan adapts the traditional business venture capital model to local businesses through *venture funding*, appropriately scaled financial, long-term “patient” capital with equal amounts of close-at-hand business development technical assistance. Small scale equity investment programs and angel investors are new innovations. Deborah Markley of the RUPRI Rural Entrepreneurship program notes that rural America is the “tip of the arrow” in addressing the transition to a global marketplace because innovation can be tested and refined in small rural places.

The triple bottom line (TBL) field of practice is a new framework that is successfully guiding development to creatively but practically respond to rural environmental, equity, and economic issues. In communities of color, TBL also links with culture and history. John Littles of McIntosh SEED, in Darien, Georgia, explained, “With all the rapid development we have, holding on to land, and land that can be used to sustain culture, is critical. Developers are searching out prime land here in coastal Georgia. African Americans are confronted with the choice, ‘Do I try and scratch out a living, or do I cash out to the developer?’ People need to be educated and make an informed decision on what an asset land is, both economically and as a tradition that stabilizes families. By keeping and shaping the use of African American owned land, we control the narrative of our history and hope for the future.”

The presence of quality rural housing, both rented and owned, provides a practical baseline necessary for all other forms of asset building. The nation’s rural housing advocates have an annual struggle to retain the federal resources that make adequate housing a reality for rural households and families. The trend line for this challenge has increased dramatically in the past eight years as national and state fiscal conditions have deteriorated. There remains tremendous regional variation in challenges, capacity, and opportunities.

All of these efforts are placed within a growing movement to reassert the connection between rural places and their natural asset base, and to the very question of “What is rural?” There is a growing concern that while life in rural America is valuable and distinct, federal definitions are defining rural out of existence.

Physical Infrastructure. Rural water infrastructure is critical for human health and community development. While less than one percent of rural households nationally are without indoor plumbing, it is far higher in the most vulnerable and isolated communities on tribal lands. More pervasive is the huge deferred investment in water infrastructure necessary for sustaining economic and community development.

New infrastructure demands are growing in importance. High speed internet access is a critical element of rural economic development strategies, education, and health care. USDA notes that in 2006 there were broadband loans of \$210 million, though a

2007 publication notes that pending fund requests were \$981 million. Rural access to broadband is growing dramatically according to research by the Pew Internet and American Life program, but lacks a state and regional frame to understand gaps in service.

Rural Philanthropy. In recent years, rural communities have begun to build their own philanthropic institutions. Networks of mature and emerging community foundations and intermediaries have recently formed to better link local/regional philanthropy to community development practices and strategies. California’s Humboldt Area Foundation and Alabama’s Black Belt Community Foundation are examples of leaders linking development efforts with philanthropic resources. While homegrown philanthropy is increasing, analysis of grant-making patterns suggests under-investment in rural America by the nation’s largest foundations. Rural America must make a stronger, insistent pitch for philanthropic investments and partnerships that build rural community assets.

Based on these findings, the following policy priorities and opportunities are suggested:

1. Promote individual asset policy to benefit children and families.

Policy change opportunities:

- Promote Children’s Savings Accounts, financial support for rural youth post-secondary education, and the Assets for Independence Program to support growth of Individual Development Accounts. Provide key set-asides for rural regions of special need.
- Institute a national/federal anti-predatory lending platform, including limiting payday lending through national and state banking laws.
- Strengthen and extend the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). Protect against Rapid Advancement Loans.

2. Support investment and innovation through new forms of rural venture funding.

Policy change opportunities:

- Increase development finance funding, including Community Development Finance Institution (CDFI) funding to meet rural demand and build on growing capacity of CDFI institutions. Level the playing field for rural applicants competing with urban by considering a rural set-aside within the fund. Increase Native American set-asides within the program and consider geographic targeting to other rural regions of greatest need. Build on recent statutory changes to target 20 percent of cash benefits of the New Markets Tax Credit to rural communities by maximizing its

value to smaller scale rural-oriented economic development projects that embody TBL outcomes.

- Support increased funds for small business investments. Provide federal tax incentives similar to emerging state tax incentives for angel investors that support rural business. Support learning networks of practice for individuals who wish to become supportive angel investors to rural entrepreneurs and small businesses. Deploy and secure additional appropriations for the newly authorized microenterprise program within the USDA Farm Bill reauthorization. Establish a federal microenterprise refundable tax credit. Extend incentives for businesses that locate or expand in areas of high unemployment or high underemployment through the SBA HUB Zone program.
- Strengthen the Community Reinvestment Act.

3. Support rural small business and entrepreneurial development.

Policy change opportunities:

- Make affordable health insurance available to the self-employed, entrepreneurs, and small businesses.
- Link workforce development programs with investments in existing businesses in small communities.

4. Provide incentives for “Triple Bottom Line” investment.

Policy change opportunities:

- Encourage efforts within HUD, USDA, and other agencies to incorporate TBL principles and practices within their programs.
- Strengthen and expand the Triple Bottom Line Collaborative of nine CDFI’s led by Coastal Enterprises, Inc., and Shorebank Cascadia, to influence practice and policy within the larger CDFI network.
- Support the development of trading exchanges designed to reduce greenhouse gasses and provide carbon credits – an emerging source of revenue for rural landowners. Foster a national discussion that connects terms of engagement between climate change and rural communities that have restorative, carbon absorbing potential, thus creating a remunerative market for rural assets.
- Develop sustainable energy systems.
- Expand youth engagement and community service programs, with a focus on the environment and health.

5. Make federal policy more supportive of rural housing programs.

Policy change opportunities:

- Support vital rural housing programs, including the USDA 515, 502; USDA Rural Community Development Initiative; and HUD Rural Housing and Economic Development Program. Revise the Low Income Housing Tax Credits to be a more accessible financing vehicle for smaller scale rural projects. Create a national housing trust fund that is responsive to rural community development needs, such as H.R. 2895, the National Affordable Housing Trust Fund Act of 2007, or the recently approved Senate Banking Committee version of this bill.
- Test and support the expansion of L3C, Low Profit Limited Liability Corporations, as a vehicle for philanthropic capital to economic development activities of private businesses whose projects have clear public benefit.
- Create a National Disaster Recovery Bond Fund modeled after World War II War Bonds. Such a disaster bond fund can generate billions of dollars to respond to a national disaster.

6. Establish consistent definitions of rural places and encourage regional collaboration.

Policy change opportunities:

- Establish consistent policy definitions of rural people and places to reflect different rural realities and strategic understanding of places and regions.
- Encourage regional identities and regional collaboration in economic development strategies; strengthen regional connections between rural and urban through encouraging local and regional food and energy production.
- Restructure USDA to shift away from agriculture commodity programs and support rural development more broadly. Move nutrition programs to the Department of Health and Human Services. Rename and restructure the U.S. Department of Agriculture to the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Rural Development.

7. Invest in rural water and wastewater programs and provide rural broadband access.

Policy change opportunities:

- Preserve and increase federal allocations for HUD Small Cities Community Development Block Grants

and USDA/EPA water and wastewater infrastructure programs.

- Support the Water Infrastructure Network’s S. 1400, the Water Infrastructure Financing Act, to create a national rural water trust fund – similar to the National Highway Trust Fund.
- Encourage regional solutions in construction and management to bring efficiency and cost effectiveness to rural water projects. Restore critical funding for small water and wastewater management technical assistance.
- Encourage USDA’s Economic Research Service to undertake an analysis of the challenges of internet broadband expansion in isolated and economically distressed areas; research and practice early in the decade on e-commerce should be reexamined and expanded. Support full funding for the USDA Rural Utility Service rural broadband and telemedicine programs to meet growing demand.

8. Support community endowment building and rural development philanthropy, expand the efforts of national philanthropy to rural America, and protect the federal regulatory base that stimulates charitable giving.

Policy change opportunities:

- Make rural community philanthropy development an eligible activity in federal rural development capacity building programs, such as the USDA Rural Community Development Initiative.
- Replicate initiatives in Iowa and elsewhere that provide state revenues as match to increase investments in local community foundations.

Appropriate funds to implement the language in USDA’s Farm Bill Reauthorization to develop a match support program for rural community philanthropy.

- Continue to advocate with allies within the Council of Foundations and other philanthropic associations to strengthen the critical partnership between major foundations and rural America. Promote a major commitment by national philanthropy to seed and accelerate development of rural philanthropic endowments.
- Advocate with appropriate House and Senate committees that IRS 990 forms reflect the spatial distribution of foundation grant making to better track philanthropic investments in rural America.

Jason Gray, Southern Rural Development Initiative, Raleigh, NC, conducted the interviews, analyzed the results, and wrote the report. The Community Investment Sector team include Katharine Pearson Criss, Center for Rural Strategies, Whitesburg, KY; Mil Duncan, Carsey Institute, University of New Hampshire, Durham, NH; Robert Jackson and Carol Blackmon, Mississippi State Senator, Quitman County Community Development Corporation, Marks, MS; Anita Brown-Graham, Institute for Emerging Issues, NC State University, Raleigh, NC; Sandra Rosenblith and Daniel Stern, Rural LISC, Washington DC; and Peter Morris, National Congress of American Indians, Washington DC.

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Environment and Natural Resources Appendix:

Methodology

The team that created this snapshot of environmental and natural resource issues used a combination of telephone and in-person interviews, a web-based survey, and review of materials and policy recommendations produced by a number of groups in its development. Individuals were identified for interviews or to be sent the electronic survey through the networks of the team conducting this review; criteria to select individuals was focused on gaining expert opinion from a diversity of local, regional, and sector areas, as well as to ensure diversity of organizational, ethnic, and philosophical perspectives. Individuals who participated in interviews and the electronic survey were assured that their individual responses would be kept confidential to maximize the opportunity for candid responses. A total of twenty-one telephone interviews were conducted with rural leaders from a range of natural resource sectors and regions of the country, staff serving on natural resource related committees in the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives, and the USDA Under Secretary for Natural Resources and the Environment. The web survey was emailed to 185 individuals with a range of expertise in environmental and natural resource issues from a diversity of rural leaders, interest groups, local, state, tribal, and federal representatives, and regional perspectives. Fifty-seven respondents took the survey, and of those 47 percent were from the west, 28 percent were from the east, and 25 percent did not state a regional affiliation. Materials and policy recommendations produced by the first National Rural Assembly, the Carsey Institute, American Farmland Trust, and the Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition were also reviewed.

This scan represents a synthesis of the interviews, survey, and review of the materials, as well as the expertise of the team who put together this document. This snapshot is intended to provide a framework and starting point for participants at the 2008 National Rural Assembly to use in their deliberations. We expect the ideas in this review to be vetted, refined, augmented, and changed during the 2008 assembly and the processes which follow.

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Rural Health Care Appendix:

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Methodology

The process began with contact with Tom Morris and Heather Dimeris of the Federal Office of Rural Health Policy, Alan Morgan of the National Rural Health Association, and Keith Mueller of the RUPRI Center for Rural Health Policy Analysis to compile a list of current issues that were attracting attention among their grantees, members, and research colleagues respectively. A list of nine such issues were identified, which then became the focus of an extensive literature search to gather information on the way the issues are framed, the challenges, promising practices, and policy opportunities.

At the same time, these nine issues were incorporated into a Survey Monkey questionnaire and made available for people on mailing lists held by the Federal Office of Rural Health Policy and the National Rural Health Association. Over the period of a month, 97 responses were completed to the following questions:

- - How would describe the state of health care in the United States?
 - What are the overarching challenges to providing adequate health care in rural area?
 - Improvements in which of the following (chose up to three) would have the most impact on rural health in the next five years?
 - Do you believe the National Rural Assembly should focus their attention on the issues you identified in question c (above) for a rural health policy agenda in 2009?
 - If you answered No to question d, which of the policy issues below should the National Rural Assembly (choose up to three) focus their attention on for a policy agenda in 2009?
 - Which organizations or groups should have a voice in changing policy directed towards healthcare? (Please identify up to five)?
 - Would you be willing to support the Rural Compact?
-

In addition, telephone interviews were conducted with a number of experts in different facets of rural health care to obtain their views on challenges, and priorities and opportunities for Federal policy change.

- Bill Finerfrock, Executive Director, National Association of Rural Health Clinics, Fremont, MI
- Terry Hill, Executive Director, Rural Health Resource Center, Duluth, MN
- Tim Size, Executive Director, Rural Wisconsin Health Cooperative, Sauk City, WI
- Tim Skinner, Executive Director, The National Rural Recruitment and Retention Network (3RNet), La Crosse, WI
- Rebecca Slifkin, Director, North Carolina Rural Health Research and Policy Analysis Center, Chapel Hill, NC
- Mary Wakefield, Associate Dean for Rural Health, Director and Professor, Center for Rural Health, School of Medicine and Health Sciences, University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, ND

Survey Results

How would you describe the state of health care in the rural United States? (92 responses)

The vast majority of responses spoke to current challenges in providing rural health care. A significant number of comments were brief and somewhat negative – ‘sparse,’ ‘poor,’ ‘inferior,’ ‘tenuous,’ ‘unstable,’ and ‘at a crisis level,’ are some examples. Other comments outlined specific problems with the state of health care in the rural United States; a smaller, but significant number of responses also highlighted the strengths of rural health care, referring to quality care, resourcefulness, dedication of providers, and collaboration among existing services. While there were some highlights, the survey responses painted a struggling system that is being further chipped away at

by an aging population and recent market and policy changes that work better in urban and suburban areas – all in addition to the general challenges faced in providing health care nationwide.

Specific observations focused on:

Access to health care due to cost and location – access to a range of local, quality health-care services is more or less crucial depending on the geographic meaning of “rural.” The situation is very different in remote, frontier regions, such as Alaska, compared with an area 40 road miles from an urban center. “...every rural resident...regardless of their ability to pay and regardless of his or her distance from a competent and appropriate tertiary care facility, should have access to local, quality, essential emergency services on a 24 hour basis and should be able to count on access to whatever emergency transport is necessary...to move him or her to the nearest facility that can provide treatment to the patient...” “Often times, ‘rural’ is defined by East Coast standards that don’t apply to Western situations. For example, our agency provides services to rural and frontier districts that often take two to three hours of driving to provide the services. This year we were told that transportation was no longer billable. How can those clients be served when funding pools are dwindling and we need to donate six hours of drive time?”

Availability of workforce – “Quality, comprehensive health care is lacking due to shortage of qualified health providers within reasonable commutes.” “In rural America, it is difficult to expand services and improve infrastructure when the population is declining (fewer patients) and government and insurance payments are being cut.”

Collaboration to provide services – “Rural U.S. health care is a fragmented system that is difficult to navigate by those most in need.” “Fragmented, under-funded, advancing slowly on the technology front, and short of primary care providers, but despite these, existing agencies and providers strive to work together with the little they have to meet the need of their clients.”

Reimbursement – “The issues lie more in the delivery system such as the survivability of rural hospitals (poor Medicare reimbursement for Critical Access Hospitals), the erosion of the rural safety net as represented by federally certified rural health clinics (again reimbursement)...”

Inadequate financing – “Limited and on the brink of collapse.”

Lack of technology – “Telehealth is an interesting option...but that doesn’t help when the rural community has no internet access.”

What are the overarching challenges to providing adequate health care in rural areas? (95 responses)

Ability to recruit/retrain a quality healthcare workforce	89.5%
Lack of financial resources	76.8%
Geographically dispersed/low population density	51.6%
Other	28.4%
Lack of flexibility in using financial resources	24.2%
Impact of urban solutions to rural areas	13.7%

The “Other” category evoked 27 responses that ranged from the need to pursue health-care system reform to the challenges of poverty, racism, and socio-economic conditions, to issues of technology, financing, regulation, infrastructure, culture, and insurance.

Improvements in which of the following (choose up to three) would have the most impact on rural health in the next five years? (95 responses)

Recruiting and retaining a quality rural health workforce	81.1%
Improving the financing of rural health care through increased and more flexible funding	54.7%
Increasing availability of health information technology	41.1%
Utilizing innovative ways to provide rural health care	37.9%
Encouragement of healthy behaviors through community engagement	27.4%
Building a quality improvement infrastructure into rural health care	18.8%
Other	13.7%
Improving access to pharmacy services in rural areas	12.6%
Better family caregiver support for rural elderly	10.5%
Improving the physical and mental health care for returning veterans	7.4%

The “Other” category evoked 13 very different responses. At the broad policy level, there were calls for universal access to health care and a complete overhaul of the Medicaid and Medicare reimbursement structure, especially as it relates to Native America tribal health care. There were also some specific suggestions relating to development of health networks of services and providers, and innovative ways of using paramedics, technicians, and other resources to provide improved services.

Do you believe the National Rural Assembly should focus their attention on the issues you identified in question 3 (above) for a rural health policy agenda in 2009? (96 responses)

Yes	99.0%
No	1.0%

If you answered No to question 4, which of the policy issues below should the National Rural Assembly (chose up to three) focus their attention on for a rural health policy agenda in 2009? (5 responses)

Other	60.0%
Increased availability of health information technology	40.0%
Utilizing innovative ways to provide health care	40.0%
Recruiting and retaining a quality rural health care workforce	20.0%
Building a quality improvement infrastructure into rural health care	20.0%
Improving the physical and mental health care for returning veterans	20.0%

The “Other” category provided three responses including funding options for the emergency medical response mandate, and a comment that real change will come from the bottom-up, not the top-down.

Which organizations or groups should have a voice in changing policy directed towards rural health care? (Please identify up to 5) (82 responses)

The responses can be grouped into several categories (organizations with * were mentioned five or more times):

- National Associations
 - National Rural Health Association*, National Association of State Offices of Rural Health*, National Association of Community Health Centers*, American Hospital Association*, American Medical Association, National Area Health Education Center Organization, National Cooperative of Health Networks, National Association of Rural Mental Health, American Dental Association, American Academy of Family Practitioners, American Public Health Association, National Governors Association
- Advocacy Groups
 - Archimedes Movement, Physicians for a National Health Program
- State Associations
 - State hospital associations, state medical associations, state rural health associations
- Federal Agencies
 - Office of Rural Health Policy*, Centers for Medicaid and Medicare Services, DHHS Office of Minority Health, Veterans Administration, USDA Rural Development, Centers for Disease Control
- State and Local Governments
 - State offices of rural health, state FLEX programs, state health departments, county public health departments, school boards
- Non-Health Organizations
 - Natural Resources Defense Council, American Farm Bureau Federation, Children’s Defense Fund, economic development agencies
- General
 - Rural communities, residents, consumers, and patients, rural health care providers, health care workers, rural health researchers, representatives of Native American and Mexican American communities, health educators, youth leadership groups, “healthy lifestyle” non-profits, insurance companies

Would you be willing to support the Rural Compact? (86 responses)

Yes	93.0%
No	7.0%

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Investment in Communities appendix:

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