Cooperation, Innovation, and Information:
The Bush Administration Renews the Federal Commitment

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The Bush administration took the stage on January 20, 1989, armed with the combined wisdom of the Reagan administration and General Accounting Office reports, each reflecting the experience, interests, and expectations of different groups with claims on determining the future of Federal rural development policy in the 1990s. Roland Vautour continued as Under Secretary for Small Community and Rural Development, but Clayton Yeutter, an agricultural economist, replaced Richard Lyng as Secretary. In February 1989, Yeutter signaled the new administration's intentions for continuity with the previous administration by appointing the Rural Revitalization Task Force planned for during the last months of the Reagan administration. The Bush Administration's more activist interest in leading national rural development efforts became apparent, however, when the Task Force issued its report to the Secretary in June.

A Hard Look at USDA's Rural Development Programs

The Task Force approached its evaluation of USDA rural development programs with rigor and energy, bringing to bear the most recent social science research and considering thoughtfully the potential pitfalls of a range of policy approaches. Titled *A Hard Look at USDA's Rural Development Programs*, the report offered a strong set of recommendations premised on a renewed commitment within USDA to provide active national leadership on rural development policy. In introducing its findings and recommendations, the Task Force asserted "There is now a good opportunity, through bold action, to turn around the approach to rural development in America. For the first time in recent history, a rural development initiative is being attempted at the start of an administration, and there is a greater chance that recommended changes can be institutionalized. This administration has created a climate in which discussion and initiative are invited, and congressional and public attention are now focused on rural development."[1]

The findings and recommendations addressed four themes: (1) clarifying USDA's commitment to rural development; (2) strengthening the coordination of its programs; (3) enhancing USDA's capacity for strategic action; and (4) improving program implementation. Each theme incorporated a series of recommendations, including the formation of a Rural Policy Council, development of a long-range planning process, and encouraging a stronger land-grant university role in rural economic development. Although none of the recommendations included calls for increased funding or new programs, the focus on identifying development needs and coordinating program delivery based on informed leadership from USDA promised a more effective use of resources.[2]

In January 1990, the White House's Economic Policy Council Working Group on Rural Development released its findings and recommendations, which became the basis for President Bush's rural development initiative. The Working Group, led by Secretary Yeutter, paralleled and was informed by the USDA Task Force, arriving at similar conclusions. The Presidential Initiative, announced soon after the release of the Working Group's report, consisted of six proposals "designed to improve the coordination of rural development programs and serve as a catalyst for future initiatives." These proposals would: (1) establish a Presidential Council on Rural America made up of farmers, State and local officials, rural businesses, and high-tech industries to advise on Federal rural development policy; (2) establish State Rural Development

Councils (SRDCs) to coordinate current Federal rural development programs; (3) produce a series of rural demonstration programs from current budget resources; (4) create a rural development information and technical assistance hotline; (5) target Federal rural development funding to programs that would provide “maximum net economic benefits”; and (6) make the Economic Policy Council’s Working Group on Rural Development a standing committee, ready to implement initiatives developed by the President’s Council on Rural America.[3]

State Rural Development Councils

Among these six initiatives, SRDCs became the most visible innovation. The SRDCs were intended to identify and facilitate implementation of an effective combination of many individual programs tailored to the needs of an individual place. Unlike State and local rural development coordinating committees that had existed as part of previous rural development efforts, the SRDCs established during the Bush years were the centerpiece of the administration’s rural development strategy. Lacking significant additional funds to devote to rural development efforts, the SRDCs were designed to draw the most value from already existing programs by tailoring Federal assistance to the specific needs of individual States and local communities. Federal funding was dedicated to hiring a full-time coordinator for each State council and to providing comprehensive training for each State team. The training, offered through a National Rural Economic Development Institute established at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, covered information about rural development problems and programs, trends influencing rural conditions, the value of long-term strategic planning, how to build public-private partnerships, and team-building for the SRDC members**.** SRDCs also received Federal support through interactions with a Washington-based interagency working group of representatives from 60 agencies, which came to be known as the National Rural Development Council. Overall, Federal funding covered about 75 percent of the operating costs for each SRDC.[4]

The State Council program was instituted slowly, beginning with development of a headquarters staff trained to facilitate comprehensive, strategic planning among diverse agencies, levels of government, and private interests. In the second phase, pilot councils were established in eight States—Kansas, Maine, Mississippi, Oregon, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas, and Washington--to test the organization, training, and support system. Finally, although States could decide whether or not to participate, the goal was for councils to be established in all 50 States. By February 1992, SRDCs had been organized in 34 States, as well as Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. [5]

Although the new councils bore the same name as an earlier, Carter administration initiative, the new program was conceived very differently from its predecessor. In the late 1980s, the National Governors Association had called for a new partnership with the Federal government, and the SRDCs were in part a response to that call. Whereas the State council system of the late 1970s had been controlled by USDA with mandated State participation, the Bush system required that all five “players” involved with rural development on the State and local level—Federal agencies, State agencies, local government, tribal government, and the private sector, both profit and nonprofit—had to agree voluntarily to participate before USDA funds for hiring a full-time State executive director could be approved.[6]

The SRDC initiative was influenced by the overall governance approach of the new Bush administration, as it focused its initial efforts on issues of deregulation and minimizing Federal program involvement in favor of private sector and State-level initiatives. The SRDCs adopted the language and direction of the “reinventing government” movement, working toward a collaborative decisionmaking structure that blurred the lines between Federal, State, and local levels of government.

Although the early months after establishment of the new SRDCs were taken up with forming their membership and learning a new, collaborative relationship with Federal rural development agencies, many began to identify and implement substantive projects. Regulatory and statutory relief that streamlined implementation of established programs in particular areas, the creation of databases to make information more accessible to rural development agencies and programs, and cooperative ventures and developmental projects and demonstrations that experimented on a small scale with new approaches to solving rural problems were among the most common types of activities.[7]

The Kansas SRDC, for example, streamlined the loan and credit application process for small business assistance in the State by adopting a standard form, processing procedure, and credit analysis method for all State and Federal programs. In South Carolina, the SRDC facilitated a combination of Federal and State financial and technical resources to create a regional water treatment project for a rural area identified as having a good development potential.[8]

Congress Passes Rural Development Policy Through Farm Bill

As the administration’s approach to rural development took shape, Congress continued to pass new rural development legislation that would strengthen the Federal commitment to a coordinated rural development policy. Legislation introduced in 1989 repeated the efforts of the last years of the Reagan administration and seemed likely to succeed. Although unable to gain passage of a new rural development policy act, congressional supporters managed to insert elements of these bills into a rural development title of the Food, Agriculture, Conservation, and Trade Act of 1990, the most extensive use yet of farm legislation to address rural development.

The title also authorized a Rural Partnerships Investment Board, State Rural Economic Development Review Panels, and a series of rural development demonstration areas, all intended to enhance State and local direction of rural development programs and efforts to encourage creative problem-solving tailored to local conditions and needs. Authorities for several existing programs were expanded, including programs for water and waste facilities in rural communities, access to telecommunications and new technologies in rural areas, business and traditional infrastructure development, and rural health and safety. New programs were established to assist forestry-dependent rural communities and the forestry industry, reflecting new economic stresses in that sector of the rural economy. Finally, the title established the Rural Information Center at the National Agricultural Library, which continued the rural information collection and distribution that had already been part of the rural development policy of several previous Presidential administrations. In addition, data gathering on rural areas by the Census Bureau was expanded and additional funds authorized for rural development research.

Provisions in the Food, Agriculture, Conservation, and Trade Act of 1990 also authorized a Rural Development Administration (RDA), to which would be transferred the rural development functions of FmHA, and increased the rural development duties in both the Rural Electrification Administration and the Extension Service**.** The new RDA was also charged with developing "national strategies for rural development."[9]

Despite its inclusion in the Rural Development Title of the 1990 Farm Act, powerful interests in Congress, including House Agriculture Appropriations chairman Jamie L. Whitten (D-MS), opposed the transfer of funds and programs from their traditional home in FmHA to the new RDA. Secretary of Agriculture Edward Madigan established the new agency by Executive Order, although without funding, stating the provisions of the 1990 legislation required his action. It was not until December 13, 1991, more than a year after the new Farm Act was signed, that Congress passed legislation to fund RDA. The new agency officially began operation on December 31, 1991. In March 1992, Secretary Madigan announced the establishment of seven regional RDA offices, to be fully operational in 6 months. The regional office structure was designed to allow for better communication between decisionmakers and the local communities competing for assistance. Regional offices were also intended to serve as liaisons to State governments and to the system of State Rural Development Councils, bringing Federal program administration closer to the local and State government direction these councils were designed to foster.[10]

Expectations for the value of the RDA and its regional office system in improving USDA's attention to rural development issues were high in 1992. Walter E. Hill, Deputy Undersecretary for Small Community and Rural Development, was appointed Acting Administrator in December 1991, but was followed in August 1992 by the first permanent Administrator, Mary Ann Baron. Baron had been State FmHA Director for Kentucky, then worked briefly for the REA and FmHA before becoming Deputy Assistant Secretary for EDA in 1986.[11]

Despite Congressional approval of new authorities for rural development programs, the appropriations process failed to support much change in rural development spending, and in particular refused to appropriate funds for the new RDA for fiscal year 1992. Pressed by the administration to implement RDA as authorized, Congress approved a budget of $37,066,000 to cover the costs of staffing the Washington office and the seven regional offices. The Appropriations Committee reduced that funding to $35,539,000, refusing to fund any State or district offices and providing for continued operation of the authorized loan programs by FmHA, as had been arranged the previous year.[12]

Disagreement over establishment and funding of the new RDA stemmed from several sources. Although traditional agricultural interests in Congress did not oppose funding rural programs—FmHA continued to receive funding well above the level requested by the administration to administer the programs statutorily transferred to RDA—they did oppose additional funding and authorities that would separate administration of rural development and farm lending programs within USDA. Others questioned how funding could be increased for the rural development field office system at a time when the Department was under pressure to reduce its extensive agricultural program field structure. In the end, RDA lasted only a few years, hardly long enough to produce the expected benefits, before a new administration implemented its own vision for the most effective organization of USDA's rural development policy and program responsibilities.[13]

Implementing Rural Development Programs in the Federal Government

Federal rural development program leadership continued to be vested in USDA throughout the Bush years, and within USDA in the FmHA. Over one-third of FmHA's $8.1 billion budget in 1989 was dedicated to the primary rural development programs—housing, community facilities, water and waste disposal, and business and industrial loans and grants.

Housing programs included single-family home ownership loans, rural rental and cooperative housing construction and modernization loans, and rural rental assistance for tenants of qualified housing units. There were also a number of more narrowly targeted programs for farm labor housing, historic preservation of rural housing, self-help housing, and very-low income housing repairs, 95 percent of which went to rural areas and towns with a population under 20,000.[14]

The bulk of community facilities and water and waste disposal funds—77 percent—went to loans or technical assistance covering up to 75 percent of the costs for water and waste disposal projects in rural areas and towns with a population up to 10,000. Most of the remaining loans went to support essential services, primarily fire companies and medical facilities, in rural areas and towns with a population under 20,000. Business and industry assistance was provided primarily in the form of loan guarantees for projects in rural areas and towns with a population up to 50,000, although preference was given for projects serving rural areas and towns with a population less than 25,000 and areas showing the greatest need. No single loan guarantee was granted for more than $10 million.[15]

Despite some commitment to targeting rural development programs to small areas where local, and possibly State, governments were less likely to be able to provide needed funding, the focus of the Bush administration's rural development efforts appeared to be on infrastructure development, rather than assistance to low-income individuals. The Bush administration followed the Reagan administration's lead during its first 2 years in requesting the termination of funding for the rural homeownership loan program and the rural rental housing program. By the latter 2 years of Bush's term, the administration budget had begun to include funding requests for the rural homeownership program of about $600 million. Congress consistently funded both programs throughout the 4-year period, however, providing about $1.3 billion per year for the rural homeownership program and $500 million for the rural rental housing program.

The Bush administration, supported by members of Congress with an eye on reining in Federal budget deficits, also continued the Reagan era's expanded use of loan guarantees as opposed to grants and low-interest direct loans. Following the earlier example of business and industrial and community facilities and water and waste disposal loans, substitution of loan guarantees for direct loans began in the rural homeownership program in 1991. The Bush administration pressed to increase appropriations for guaranteed loans and to replace direct loans with subsidized guaranteed loans each year, which provided subsidized interest rates for low-income borrowers. Congress, however, continued to fund direct loans instead, based on its assessment that direct Federal credit programs provided more flexibility for low-income borrowers than commercial lenders could.

Similarly in the rural rental assistance program, Bush administration officials, backed by members of Congress, requested funding for a housing voucher program, in place of traditional subsidization of rental rates in approved rural rental housing units. Advocates of the voucher program promoted the increased flexibility for rural renters, who could use vouchers for housing of their choice that met basic sanitation and safety standards. Congress, however, refused to appropriate funds for the program, afraid that loss of the traditional rural rental assistance program would reduce interest in building new rental housing in rural areas.

The early Bush administration budgets did not press to end the community facilities, water and waste disposal, and business and industrial development loan programs. These programs more closely fit the kinds of infrastructure development efforts Bush rural development leaders considered appropriate for Federal assistance. Still, Congress regularly appropriated more funds than requested for these areas.

Rural Development Across the Federal Government

As had been the case for decades, other departments beyond USDA continued to provide programs serving rural areas. These programs were strengthened, moreover, in response to criticism of some major Federal assistance programs for failing to be sensitive to potential rural clients and to the effects of their programs on rural areas, and they had begun to gain some advocates. By the late 1980s, for example, the Economic Development Administration (EDA) in the Department of Commerce had become essentially a rural development program, with 80 percent of discretionary public works funds and 68 percent of economic adjustment program funds dedicated to rural areas in 1987. The Small Business Investment Act required Federal agencies with procurement or grantmaking authority to create plans for assuring that rural businesses received a fair share of awards and contracts. These changes reflected the economic reality of the time, when urban areas, particularly on the West and East Coasts, were booming, while the rural heartland lagged.[16]

In a time of tight Federal budgets, major new funding for rural development was unlikely, so requiring fair consideration of rural areas in already established national programs became more crucial to continued assistance to rural communities and people. Many States and rural communities welcomed these new requirements and other efforts to target Federal assistance funds to rural areas, as they faced the end of Federal general revenue sharing and a spate of State and local restrictions on tax increases.[17]

Congress supported the growing rural development role of agencies beyond USDA, at least in theory. New initiatives were authorized in 1990 in the Departments of Transportation, Commerce, Health and Human Services, the Small Business Administration, and the Office of Technology Assessment. While rural areas had long been recipients of Federal programs that applied to both metro and nonmetro areas, these initiatives targeted rural areas in particular. However, subsequent funding levels for these initiatives rarely reached authorized levels.[18]

The Department of Health and Human Services received perhaps the greatest increase in authorized funds for expansion of rural programs in 1990. Most of its new programs were administered through the Department's Office of Rural Health Policy, established in 1987. Funded by Congress at $24.4 million in fiscal year 1991, the office's staff of 10 health professionals tracked rural health conditions and worked with other government and private agencies to develop solutions to rural health care problems. In addition to implementing new programs authorized in the 1990 legislation, the Office pursued other avenues of support for rural health care, working with the National Advisory Committee on Rural Health to disseminate their findings, making public presentations on rural health care issues throughout the country, and working closely with the Health Care Financing Administration to assure equitable and effective provision of health care support to rural areas. The Office also funded the Southeastern Minority Rural Health Research Center at the Morehouse School of Medicine in an effort to support research on the health problems of rural minority populations and on policies that might help improve their conditions.[19]

National Commission Issues Its Rural Development Report

Shortly after passage of the 1990 Farm Bill, the National Commission on Agriculture and Rural Development Policy issued its report on rural development. This commission, mandated by the Food Security Act of 1985 and appointed by President Reagan, included primarily farmers and agricultural organization leaders and had reported its findings on agricultural policy in 1989.

In *Future Directions in Rural Development Policy,* the commission identified three goals for rural development policy: (1) rural areas must be economically self-reliant; (2) rural areas and people must be able to adapt; and (3) the rural physical and cultural environment should be protected.[20]

The first two goals reflect the principles of local control and adaptability in the face of economic conditions that had been in flux since the beginning of the 1970s. The third reflects an inherent challenge to rural development policy that had been growing over time: the need to adapt to global competition and the principle that local control can often conflict with the demands of new residents and environmental mandates imposed by Federal and State governments.

The Commission documented economic distress experienced by rural areas in the 1980s. Rural unemployment averaged 8 percent between 1979 and 1987, a full percentage point higher than urban areas. Real earnings per job for employed rural residents fell 7.5 percent, compared with a decline of only 4.3 percent for urban residents, with the average gap between rural and urban earnings per job more than $5,600 by 1987. Real per capita income growth lagged its urban counterpart by more than 2 percentage points during the same period, and the rural poverty rate rose 2.3 percentage points, ending at 3.8 percentage points above the urban rate by 1988. Net outmigration from rural counties reached more than 2 million for the decade, with about half of all rural counties losing population. Overall, rural population growth slowed from 1.7 percent in 1980-82, to 0.5 percent in 1984-1986, while urban population growth remained steady in the earlier part of the decade and increased by mid-decade.[21]

Having described the need for rural development programs, the Commission charged that previous efforts to help rural America had become outmoded in the new policy context of the 1990s, which included four changes particularly meaningful to rural areas: (1) New Federalism had led to an expectation that State and local governments, not the Federal government, would be responsible for leading rural development; (2) global competition required the U.S. economy to be efficient, precluding the use of subsidies to prop up the traditional rural economy; (3) the traditional natural resource-based rural industries were becoming an increasingly smaller share of the national economy, forcing rural areas to discover new opportunities in high-growth sectors like services and high-tech manufacturing; and (4) the comparative advantage of cheap labor in rural areas had been lost to developing nations, requiring rural development efforts to focus on higher skill, higher wage jobs.[22]

Responding to this new policy context, the recommendations for rural policy, while echoing reports of previous decades, emphasized the need for improved availability of data on rural conditions and analysis of rural development alternatives; a comprehensive, coordinated, strategic approach to rural development; and promotion of flexibility and innovation in rural development programs. A recommendation to “make education a major component of rural development policies” revived a focus of the Kennedy and Johnson anti-poverty approach. A new suggestion, though, seemed to offer the basis for a government-wide “consciousness-raising” on rural needs. The Commission recommended that the Federal government “review all of its policies to determine their effects on rural areas.”[23] A proactive approach, this recommendation had the potential to integrate rural needs into a much broader range of policies in lieu of limited-purpose rural programs that compensated for the effects of urban-oriented policies on rural areas.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the Commission on Agriculture and Rural Development Policy’s report was its well-developed understanding and presentation of the nonfarm character of much of rural America. Its recommendations acknowledged the irrelevance of most agricultural policy to rural development--virtually nothing is mentioned in the report about the importance of saving traditional American agriculture to save rural America as a whole. Because this Commission was made up almost exclusively of agriculturists of one kind or another—farmers, ranchers, farm-related businesspeople, and public and private agriculture officials—this acknowledgement of the primary importance of the nonfarm economy in rural development bears a special significance.

Symposium on Rural America Points to Strategy for Long-Term Rural Progress

The President's Council on Rural America, after listening to rural Americans and experts on rural America for 6 months, determined that rural communities "have the will and the desire to improve their quality of life," but not always the capacity to devise needed solutions. The Council found that these communities looked to the Federal government for technical assistance, to understand the problems they faced and to offer alternative solutions, and for flexibility and sensitivity in implementing programs, so that the unique problems of individual communities and regions could be addressed.[24] Following this approach, and in keeping with the comprehensive, strategic approach recommended by the National Advisory Council on Rural America, Federal efforts focused on identifying factors associated with successful rural communities and regions, and encouraging other rural communities to utilize as many of these factors as possible.

At the request of Senators Patrick Leahy (D-VT), Richard Lugar (R-IN), and Tom Daschle (D-SD), the General Accounting Office convened a Symposium on Rural America in June 1992. The Symposium brought together 78 rural issues experts, including local and regional leaders, financial specialists, nonprofit association members, and local, State, and Federal government representatives, to consider the challenges facing rural America.[25]

Speakers and other symposium participants identified three primary challenges for rural communities: (1) remoteness from urban centers; (2) low population density; and (3) specialization in either natural resource-based industries or in low-skill, low-wage manufacturing. Communities that had continued to thrive into the 1990s had been able to capitalize on strengths like proximity to rural amenities that attract tourists, retirees, and other exurban populations. To survive, communities without these natural amenities needed to identify enterprises that built on their traditional strengths in ways that could provide flexibility in the face of continuing economic change.

To do so, according to symposium participants, required creative approaches to overcoming their remoteness, low populations, and single-industry dependence. And for those creative approaches to be effective in the long term, communities required access to expertise in planning, business development, global markets, and development of a better educated workforce. Long-term success also would require addressing environmental sustainability and infrastructure development, as well as drawing on the potential benefits of telecommunications advances.

Symposium participants agreed that current Federal policy approaches did not address these needs. Too much emphasis had been placed on agricultural programs, ignoring the reality that most rural areas were no longer dependent on an agricultural economy. Nonfarm rural programs were also inadequate because they remained fragmented and largely uncoordinated and therefore difficult for small, underfunded governments and community groups to identify and apply to successfully. To become useful to rural areas, Federal efforts needed to focus on creative solutions generated at the local level, on tailoring assistance to the specific needs of individual communities, and on communicating broadly the availability of existing Federal programs.

The symposium report appeared November 20, 1992, within weeks of the election of Bill Clinton as the incoming President. Its summary of rural conditions, analysis of barriers to success, and recommendations for rural development programs and policies that could facilitate real change in rural America informed both congressional views and those of the incoming administration.

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