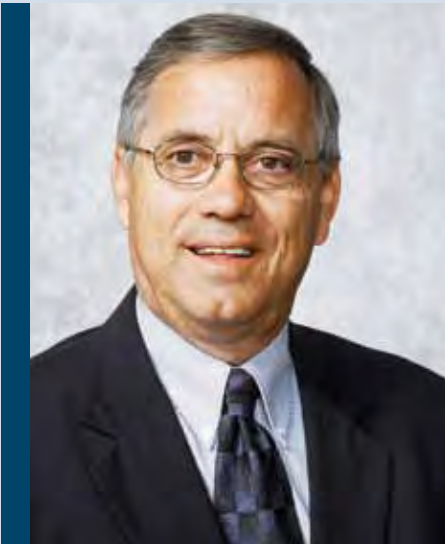


# “Communities in Isolation Are Going to Have a Hard Time Surviving”

## An Interview with Lionel Beaulieu of the Southern Rural Development Center



### LIONEL BEAULIEU

**Title:** Director

**Organization:** Southern Rural Development Center

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**Other:** Beaulieu has been the center's director since 1997. During his tenure, the Southern Rural Development Center (SRDC) has launched policy briefs that help bring focus to the challenges facing rural areas of the South and established partnerships between land-grant universities and rural community colleges to address educational and economic development needs. Before joining the SRDC, Beaulieu served on the University of Florida faculty for 20 years. He received his master's degree and PhD in sociology from Purdue University.

Lionel “Bo” Beaulieu is director of the Southern Rural Development Center at Mississippi State University and a professor in the university's department of agricultural economics. The center aims to strengthen the capacity of the region's land-grant institutions to address critical development issues affecting the well-being of people and communities in the rural South. Beaulieu spoke with *EconSouth* about the evolving role of economic development in the Southeast.

**EconSouth:** *To what extent did the rural South participate in the famous Sunbelt boom that really started in the 1960s and lasted through the '90s?*

**Lionel Beaulieu:** I'd say that the manufacturing boom really helped rural areas quite a bit. A lot of the manufacturing sectors—particularly the textile mills, and a lot of the lower-skilled jobs that came to the South—ended up in rural areas. So the rural South benefited that way in terms of jobs. During the '90s, when much of the country was enjoying pretty active growth, the rural South benefited from that as well. We saw some genuine increases in income and declines in poverty. At the same time, many of those areas that have been persistently poor—the high-poverty counties—remained quite impoverished. There may have been some improvements on

the margins, but not enough to overcome historical challenges.

**ES:** *What are some of those historical challenges?*

**Beaulieu:** Low education levels. Some of the counties were agricultural, some were reliant on manufacturing. Increases in the efficiency of agriculture and the decline of low-wage manufacturing cost jobs that have by and large never come back [are challenges]. It is also an issue of distance. They're remote. Their infrastructure is limited. They don't have broadband. The health care sector may be compromised. They don't have the full breadth of resources needed to attract businesses.

**ES:** *What is the hope for areas like that?*

**Beaulieu:** My sense is—and I think this is increasingly gaining some traction—that those communities in isolation are going to have a hard time surviving. What we're talking about is, how can communities or counties like that begin to think more regionally? You have to begin to identify what your competitive advantages are, not in terms of the geography of a community or a county, but in the geography of a region. We know that we have to have some relationship to larger cities because there's interdependence there. How can we create value-added activities in these

more remote areas to help build and strengthen economic activities that may be primarily taking place in a larger city?

Take, for example, the auto industry. There's been a tremendous influx of advanced manufacturing through the auto industry. So can we think about, what are the products and services needed to support that industry that might be produced in these more remote areas? We're working with a lot of multicounty groups, mostly rural, and looking at what are their economic clusters and what are their economic leakages, and where

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can some of those economic leakages be plugged by creating businesses that support that cluster.

**ES:** *Do they typically have a cluster?*

**Beaulieu:** If you can identify a sufficient number of counties to work collaboratively, it's very unusual not to find something that they share in terms of an economic cluster. If it's ag, then it's a matter of what are some value-added products and services that the ag sector needs? It could be inputs, it could be processing. It could be a lot of different things. That's what we're trying to do now, is strategize how to help these counties work together, and that's hard because they haven't always cooperated.

**ES:** *Rural areas that have done reasonably well tend to be closer to metropolitan areas, right?*

**Beaulieu:** Yes. Either that, or they tend to be located near some nice natural resource amenities.

**ES:** *How do rural counties benefit from proximity to a more populated area?*

**Beaulieu:** If you look at the U.S. Census, we have two things that go on. One is that you have a daily migration into the metro area from these contiguous counties outside metropolitan areas. Much of the workforce may actually be employed in that metro area. So part of the well-being of these communities rests in the fact that they have a fairly sizable population every day going to the [metro area] and bringing back money, and they need services. Also, if you're contiguous to a metropolitan area, you can provide services to a metropolitan area. It could be computers, it could be health care. You name it.

**ES:** *This probably varies from location to location, but in general, have rural areas in the South lost population to urban areas?*

**Beaulieu:** It's been a mix. The more remote areas have. We tend to approach things from a county basis. We have metro counties, then "micropolitan" counties, which have a city of 10,000 to 50,000, and the noncore, nonmetro counties, those that have no city of 10,000 or more. Unless they have some unique amenities, they're the ones that are losing population. And the people are moving either to micropolitan areas—a city of 10,000 or more—or to metro counties. ■

*This interview was conducted by Charles Davidson, a staff writer for EconSouth.*

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