National Rural Assembly Organizing Committee

Center for Rural Strategies
Corporation for Enterprise Development
First Nations Development Institute
The Ford Foundation
Local Initiatives Support Corporation
National Association of Latino Elected Officials Educational Fund
National Association of State Legislators
National Rural Funders Collaborative
National Rural Health Association
Rural Policy Research Institute
Stand Up for Rural America
The Carsey Institute—University of New Hampshire
W.K. Kellogg Foundation

Supporting Organizations

Center for Rural Affairs
Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy
League of Rural Voters
Northwest Area Foundation
Rural Schools and Community Trust

AmericaSpeaks is a nonprofit organization that engages citizens in the most important public decisions that impact their lives. More than 130,000 people have had an impact on their communities through our 21st Century Town Meetings® and multi-faceted citizen engagement strategies. Since 1997, AmericaSpeaks has conducted 21st Century Town Meetings across the country and around the world on such subjects as the redevelopment of the World Trade Center after 9/11, the creation of Washington D.C.’s municipal budget, and the development of global priorities at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland.

www.americaspeaks.org

References for this Discussion Guide come from publications of The Carsey Institute, W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Department of Agriculture and others. Specific citations are available upon request.

Booklet design by The Grove Consultants International.
The NATIONAL RURAL ASSEMBLY

For a strong America, all parts of the nation must be strong. Like cities and suburbs, America’s rural communities are struggling with economic and social stresses that have complex origins and far-reaching effects. Rural communities must cope with the impact of globalization, deteriorated infrastructure and services, changing demographics, and environmental challenges.

What threatens to be an intractable social and economic crisis for rural communities if left unchecked could be a new opportunity for rural America. Our challenge is two-fold. We must foster an energized, informed movement that builds on social and cultural assets indigenous to rural places. We must also improve rural policies that resonate with rural values while supporting asset-based development.

Some 300 of the nation’s rural leaders from across the United States have gathered near Washington, D.C. to begin creating an agenda for this effort. The National Rural Assembly will strengthen rural America by giving its leaders a platform to be heard, raising the visibility of rural issues, organizing a national network of rural interests, and developing national strategies to address rural challenges.

What Will Happen at This Assembly?

Participants at the National Rural Assembly will:

1) Participate in an interactive 21st Century Town Meeting® developed by AmericaSpeaks.

2) Develop a vision for rural America and, from that vision, create strategies and policies that address critical assets and challenges.

3) Communicate proposed strategies and policies to national leaders, including members of Congress.

4) Identify next steps to sustain the momentum of the National Rural Assembly’s people and ideas.

Working together in small groups at each table, participants will discuss these items in detail. Each table will be supported by a volunteer facilitator to guide the process. The ideas that come from your table’s discussions will be submitted via laptop computer to a “theme team” that will compile results for the entire room. Then, using individual keypads, participants will vote on top priorities. Before the end of the conference, results from the meeting will be summarized into a report, which will be distributed to participants as they leave.
RURAL AMERICA
Framing the Discussion

THREE RURAL AMERICAS

Amenity Rich
Places that are growing as baby boomers retire, as more people buy second homes, and as “footloose professionals” choose to settle in small town communities with rich natural amenities or outside large cities.

KEY TOPICS

1. Demographic Transitions
- Younger people continue to leave.
- Immigrants are settling in.
- Amenity-rich communities are growing.
- Poorer communities are shrinking.

2. Changing Rural Economy
- Globalization has dramatically changed the structure of the rural economy.
- Resource-based and manufacturing industries are decreasing.
- Absentee-ownership and industrialization of agriculture have undermined local systems of production.

MAJOR DRIVERS
CHANGING RURAL AMERICA

Globalization
The decline of traditional rural industries and disappearance of jobs.

Underinvestment
The deterioration of infrastructure, services, and leadership.

Migration
Patterns of migration changing the demographics of rural communities.
Declining Resource Dependent
Areas where agriculture, timber, mining or related manufacturing industries once supported a solid blue collar middle class, but are now in economic decline.

Chronically Poor
Communities where decades of resource extraction and underinvestment have left a legacy of poverty, low education, substance abuse, and broken families and civic institutions.

3. Investment & Resource Distribution
- Housing, transportation, telecommunications, and other infrastructure are severely deteriorated.
- Insufficient services, including financial, education and health, sustain persistent poverty.

4. Community Institutions & Civic Leadership
- Strong tradition of self-reliance and local capacity.
- Leadership struggling to be dynamic and innovative in face of new problems.
- Growing dependency on outside resources.
- People have lost trust in the ability of the government to get things done.

5. Environmental Challenges
- Extraction industries have negative environmental impact.
- As people move beyond the suburbs, sprawl takes over farmland.
- Global climate change and the frequency of severe weather is a growing concern.
- New sustainable industries are being developed.
Demographic Transitions

Patterns of rural migration are increasingly two-way.

Outward migration of young adults occurs across most of rural America. This affects the dynamics of the labor force, the vibrancy of community schools and rural America’s cultural, intellectual and social life.

In some regions, “baby boomer” populations are drawn to rural communities for natural amenities, recreation opportunities and quality of life factors. These new residents, and the imminent retirement of many more, bring new experience, skills and financial resources to rural and small town America. However, they also have shown to bring development sprawl and create new pressures on the cost of living, especially in decreasing the availability of affordable housing. Increasing senior populations requires new levels of health care and transportation, placing burdens on limited services and resources of communities.

A “third wave” of rural immigration by Latinos and other “new Americans” has been linked to rural America’s low-wage employment opportunities. Affordable housing and a relatively low cost of living are other attracting forces. New immigrants often bring vitality and young people into communities that have long suffered from out-migration. Their arrival has revealed tensions associated with the economic transformation that creates lower wage rural jobs and exacerbated by social and cultural differences between newer and longer-term residents.

**FACTS & FIGURES**

- Rural population aged 40–59 years grew by 8% while people under 20 years shrank by 5%.
- From 2000 to 2005, rural population grew by 2.2%— 1/3 of that growth was due to immigration.
- From 2000–2005 minimal population growth occurred in the Midwest and Great Plains, with larger gains in the West and South.
- In rural areas, 82% of the population is Caucasian. African Americans constitute 8.4% and Latinos are 5.4% of the population.
- Latino population is fast growing while African American and Native American populations are growing at a slower rate.
- Highest African American concentration is in the southeast and highest Latino concentration is in the southwest.
Demographic Transitions
BRAINSTORM

ASSETS:

CHALLENGES:
Changing Rural Economy

New business and manufacturing practices, new technologies and new economic actors from places like China and India have brought profound changes to the world’s economies over the past several decades. These markers of globalization have already, and will continue to have, significant impact on the employment and economic structure of rural America.

Many jobs and companies in natural resource and manufacturing industries are reducing and, in many cases being eliminated, due to these pressures. Companies with deep local roots have significant multiplier effects for the local rural economy and with their steady disappearance blue-collar jobs are following suit. Reports show that this trend has devastating impacts for rural communities.

But rural practitioners also see opportunities. Entrepreneurship is a key to rural revitalization, based on the long-standing creativity and tenacity of rural residents. It is projected that an increasing percent of rural workers will be self-employed. Jobs in the knowledge and creative economy sectors are also projected to be an increasingly important part of rural America’s future.

The promise of creating new rural jobs is found in approaches that link economic development to long-term resource management as well as a community’s social and environmental goals. Additional potential is in the growth areas of medical and financial services. The core assets of rural areas—land, forests, water, renewable energy resources, and clean air—will continue to underpin the nation’s economy and hold deep potential for rural America’s economic options.

FACTS & FIGURES

- Less than 6.5% of rural labor force is engaged in farming.
- Rural employment increased by 1.4% from 2004 to 2005 while metro employment increased 1.8%.
- 2005 rural unemployment rate was 9.6% compared to 8.8% in metro areas.
- Rural unemployment is highest among minorities and teenagers. 12.1% for African-Americans, 6.1% for Latinos and 16.9% for teens.
- Unemployment rate for manufacturing jobs stabilized following a 15% decline between 2000 and 2003 in both rural and metro areas. This rate is unlikely to return to pre-2000 levels.
- The changing economy has created more low-paying service jobs and fewer high-paying jobs in rural America.
Changing Rural Economy

BRAINSTORM

ASSETS:  

CHALLENGES:  

Decades of public and private sector underinvestment in rural America has left communities disadvantaged when compared to those in more urban and suburban areas. Given rural topography and remoteness from metropolitan core areas, rural practitioners say major investments in transportation, telecommunications, and other critical services from banks to schools are necessary if rural communities are to overcome decades of inadequate policies and chronic underinvestment.

Chronic underinvestment has left the most remote and sparsely populated areas more likely to lack necessary infrastructure and services. Local tax bases are often unable to support necessary investments and improvements, which has lead to increasing disadvantage.

The long-standing connections between persistent poverty, low education and low employment levels, due to chronic underinvestment and racism, loom large in parts of rural America.

**FACTS & FIGURES**

- Some rural areas have been persistently poor for decades: Appalachia and the Ozarks, the rural South, much of the Southwest, and all Indian reservations.
- In 2001 rural households used nearly 40% more gasoline and drove nearly a third more miles than their metro counterparts.
- In 2003, 21% of rural residents accessed high speed internet compared to 40% of metro residents.
- Poor education quality for the rural poor is a top factor shaping the future of rural America.
- There is a perennial shortage of healthcare facilities and providers in rural America.
- Predatory lenders are focusing on people with limited means through payday loans and other practices.
Investment & Resource Distribution
BRAINSTORM

ASSETS:

CHALLENGES:
Community Institutions & Civic Leadership

Rural communities need new ways of thinking and doing, and they look to their leadership for guidance. Leaders are called to address the rapid rate of change, declining effectiveness of traditional economic strategies, increasing environmental challenges, and demographic transitions.

Visionary leaders are able to see the potential in their communities. They take risks, create and respond to opportunities and use their own community assets. However, rural leaders are criticized as lacking these characteristics, depending instead on rapidly dwindling external assistance.

Rural communities have lost trust in local and larger government, and public participation is diminished. Residents say that county officials tend to be out-of-touch, overtly political and dominated by big business interest. They point to politics of ‘who-you-know,’ rather than issue-based decisions. For these reasons, and the others that plague all of American society today, rural democracy is weak.

And yet, rural residents are working together in new ways. New collaborations are springing up among businesses, educational centers, faith-based entities, and local government. The capacity of these community institutions is strengthened with internal skills, knowledge and infrastructure.

FACTS & FIGURES

- Rural residents are dependent on federal, state, and county agencies, yet it is difficult to hold these public entities accountable for their actions.

- When youth leave for higher education and don’t come back, a whole generation of leaders is lost to local communities.

- In 1960 63% of voting-age Americans went to the polls. In 1996 only 49% voted.

- Residents of rural areas are more likely than their urban counterparts to participate in civic and community activities.

- Methamphetamine use was self-reported by 8 out of every thousand rural Americans compared to 5 per thousand in metro areas.
Community Institutions & Civic Leadership

BRAINSTORM

ASSETS:

CHALLENGES:
Environmental Challenges

The environmental issues facing rural communities are long-standing and are worsening in some cases. Negative impacts to land, air and water and serious resource depletion are a result of misguided public policy, inadequate public attention, insufficient investment and the short-sighted goals of the resource extractive industries.

Resource-based jobs were the pride and economic engine of rural areas. Industrial agriculture and forestry though, have taken a toll on the integrity of America’s ecosystems and the future productivity of the land. Issues of sprawl and land fragmentation are increasingly problematic in today’s context of rapid population growth that brings new ownership and land-use patterns.

However, rural communities are developing new thinking about resource-based economies. Sustainable practices, such as organic agriculture and alternative fuels development, are becoming more commonplace.

Overshadowing all other issues, climate change is bringing unprecedented stress to ecosystems and the communities that depend on them. Changes in sea-level, storm impacts, and overall impacts on ecosystem health will have consequences for agriculture, forestry, recreation and tourism.

In many communities, long-term and newer residents are working together to address these concerns and protect the land where they work, play and live.

FACTS & FIGURES

- Extractive industries can cause negative environmental impacts. Residents see plants close down, taking with them jobs and leaving behind environmental contamination. Lack of funding prevents necessary watershed restoration work.
- Some urban areas are projected to expand in size between 60%-80% while that population grows a modest 11% over the next 20 years.
- The number of Category 4 and 5 hurricanes has almost doubled in the last 30 years.
- With the right support farmers and ranchers could produce vast quantities of renewable energy: wind, solar, in some cases small-scale hydro, geothermal and biomass.
Environmental Challenges

BRAINSTORM

ASSETS:

CHALLENGES:
Vision for Rural America

TOPIC: 

VISION IDEAS:

ASSETS LEVERAGED: 

CHALLENGES ADDRESSED:
National Strategies

FIRST TOPIC: ____________________________________________

TOP CHALLENGES FOR THIS TOPIC AREA:

NATIONAL STRATEGIES & FEDERAL POLICIES

National Strategy is a plan of action to address the nation’s specific rural needs and challenges

Federal Policy is the specific programs and resources created through legislation or other means to achieve the priority national strategies for rural America.

When governments and institutions design programs or interpret laws or rules already on the books, they are carrying out policy that frames what is possible. For example, these policies determine where one can build, who gets a loan for college, how many hospital beds are available, where businesses locate, or how much interest is paid on a mortgage.

NOTES: ____________________________________________

SECOND TOPIC: ____________________________________________

NOTES: ____________________________________________
Federal Policies
to Advance Top National Strategies

TOPIC: ________________________________

#1 NATIONAL STRATEGY:

FEDERAL POLICIES:

#2 NATIONAL STRATEGY:

FEDERAL POLICIES:
Moving Forward

MESSAGES FOR WASHINGTON:

NEXT STEPS: