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

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Graphic Illustrations by The Grove Consultants International
Graphic Design by WRL Advertising
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The purpose of the First National Rural Assembly was to take significant steps towards the goal of strengthening rural America by giving leaders a platform to be heard, raising the visibility of rural issues, developing specific rural policy initiatives, and organizing a national network of rural interests.

Rural leaders need three things to help meet the social and economic stresses in rural communities: 1) better understanding of the issues affecting their communities; 2) stronger regional and nationwide networks; and 3) improved capacity to develop proactive, effective strategies to address rural issues through policy change.

Against this backdrop, it is critical to understand that while rural voters have been instrumental in determining the last two presidential elections, their fundamental concerns have received scant attention from most federal and state office holders, and rural areas have received little return in the way of federal and state resources allocated to support rural infrastructure, capacity and growth needs.

The First National Rural Assembly was convened to help address the challenges and opportunities facing rural America and bring effective action to this critical area of national interest.
For many Americans, rural people and places lie somewhere in the back of their minds in a fuzzy area filled with stereotypes and myths. Mainstream media, politicians and the public at large pay scant attention to rural communities and concerns. They often only take notice when events like a disaster or a hotly contested election occur.

One Voice
How can rural Americans get national policy makers to address their realities and hopes? They can come together and create a common vision for their future; they can craft a national policy agenda advancing this vision; and they can promote and achieve this agenda by speaking with one voice.

These are the basic premises underlying the First National Rural Assembly convened in late June by the Ford and W.K. Kellogg Foundations, co-sponsored and endorsed by more than 100 rural organizations and their supporters. Nearly 300 delegates participated, coming from 43 states and representing 250 organizations.

Meeting Format
Over the course of three days, delegates learned from each other, developed ideas and set priorities. AmericaSpeaks facilitated their work by employing a highly interactive process: small groups followed a discussion guide with the support of a volunteer (participant) facilitator and worked in different issue areas; a designated participant used a laptop computer to communicate the small group’s ideas in real time, and a team of people digested this input and quickly identified common themes. These themes were reported back to participants, helping inform their continuing discussions. Participants also voted on the importance of various themes using personal keypads.

Five Issues
Participants tackled five wide ranging issue areas: Demographic Transitions; A Changing Rural Economy; Investment and Resource Distribution; Community Institutions and Civic Leadership; and Environmental Challenges. These issues were surfaced by The Carsey Institute at the University of New Hampshire. It conducted interviews and roundtables with more than 80 rural practitioners and stakeholders. Carsey also incorporated results gleaned from 6,500 telephone surveys with rural residents in six regions representing diverse populations and places and a broad spectrum of economic circumstances. Carsey presented delegates with related data snapshots summarizing current conditions, changes and trends.

Delegates were divided into small groups to discuss each topic area. They were asked to identify related assets and challenges, tap into a vision for the issue and suggest national strategies and federal policies to address each topic. Their discussions surfaced themes
covering 78 assets and challenges, 5 visions, 36 national strategies and 78 federal policies. The assets and challenges participants identified reflect the diversity of Rural America, the value of what it has to offer and the magnitude and complexity of the issues confronting it. The strategies and policies surfaced by delegates focused on increasing investments in rural people, particularly the young, developing the economic, social and physical infrastructure and enhancing and protecting the environment.

Rural Perspectives
In addition to the Carsey Institute presentation, several plenary sessions built up delegates’ shared knowledge bank. These included: opening remarks from Susan Beresford, President of the Ford Foundation, and Rick Foster, Vice President of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation; a report by representatives of Greenberg Quinlan Rosner and Greener and Hook analyzing results from the latest rural voter poll, showing how and why rural America is an emerging political battleground; and informal remarks by Sterling Speirn, W.K. Kellogg Foundation President.

The most moving moments of the Assembly came on the opening night when the first six Rural Heroes were celebrated. Mary Herrera, Secretary of State for New Mexico, saluted Senator Max Baucus, Bill Bynum, Dr. Forrest Calico, Elouise Cobell, Sharon B. King and Al Smith. On the second evening, the delegates were entertained and informed by a panel of press pundits; Susan Milligan, Bill Bishop and Ray Suarez, moderated by Bob Edwards.

Raising Rural Visibility
Delegates discussed specific ways to make rural opportunities and issues visible and get them on the nation’s agenda. Nearly ninety-percent voted in favor of creating a new coalition to bring the broad array of existing organizations under one roof, to work together on these tasks. Delegates discussed possible aims and functions for the coalition and agreed on next steps. In a fitting close to this first National Rural Assembly, delegates were asked to write down what they could commit to these efforts. The response was universal – everyone made concrete individual and organizational commitments.

On the final day, many of the participants attended a fact-finding Rural Summit, hosted by U.S. Representative Rosa DeLauro (D-CT), chair of the Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee, with some of the First National Rural Assembly delegates testifying. Kansas Governor Kathleen Sebelius was the first witness in what proved to be a lively, nearly three-hour session which drew an impressive nine Members of Congress from both sides of the aisle.

While some participants went to the Congressional Summit, others continued to meet and develop details about next steps. They agreed on possible functions for a coalition, most notably raising the visibility of rural people, places and issues, developing and advocating for a national policy agenda, creating a unified message, and becoming a leading voice and an effective force for rural America. They set up an interim committee, and volunteers stepped forward to serve and take on tasks of organizing the new coalition, recruiting existing networks, crafting a reframed message and formulating an initial policy agenda.
The Research Shaping the First National Rural Assembly

Carsey Institute Research for National Rural Assembly

Rural America is changing dramatically under pressures from globalization, demographic shifts, new migration patterns and environmental stresses. Some rural areas are growing as baby boomers move there to retire, and as “footloose professionals” choose to settle in smaller communities. Other rural places, some long dependent on resources such as agriculture or timber with a history of booms and busts, are facing new challenges associated with a changing, globalized economy. Finally, there are some chronically poor rural communities where decades of underinvestment have left a legacy of deep poverty and problematic community institutions. Rural America consists of several types of places, heading into the future along very different paths.

To learn more about how rural Americans view and experience the changes now underway in their communities, Carsey Institute at the University of New Hampshire conducted two studies in preparation for the First National Rural Assembly.

Rural America in the 21st Century: Perspectives From the Field

To inform the agenda for the National Rural Assembly, the Carsey Institute conducted a series of interviews and policy roundtables in March and April 2007 with more than 80 practitioners and other stakeholders. These interviews solicited perspectives on critical rural issues and public policy solutions. The roundtables—held in the Northeast, Southwest, and Central Appalachia—tested the findings from the interviews, stimulated additional thinking on issues and strategies, and strengthened three key regional rural networks.

Snapshots of Social Change: A New Survey of Views from Rural America

In preparation for the First National Rural Assembly, the Carsey Institute began a study of Community and Environment in Rural America (CERA). The first stage of this project involved telephone surveys of more than 6,500 people living in rural counties of six distinct regions: the Pacific Northwest, Rocky Mountains, Midwest, Mississippi Delta, Appalachia and the Northeast. A total of 15 counties in 8 different states were selected to represent a wide variety of circumstances, from boom to decline. Questions covered topics that ranged from respondent’s personal background and experiences (such as family, jobs, education and life situation) to their migration history and expectations, and views about their region, local government and community.

The CERA surveys were presented at the First National Rural Assembly. Over the months ahead the results will be studied. The initial report for the First National Rural Assembly presents a first look at some of the similarities and differences found across the six rural regions. Some of the key issues and questions addressed in the study include:

- What do you consider to be important problems facing your community today?
- What has been the effect of these environmental issues on your family and community over the past 5 years?
- What’s important, when you think about whether you will stay here or move away in the future?
- For the future of your community, do you think it is more important to use natural resources to create jobs, or to conserve natural resources for future generations?

One initial finding of the study shows that people’s perspectives are determined more by the region they live in and the changes they are experiencing than by individual characteristics such as age, gender or race. This research was supported by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and the Ford Foundation.

For full copies of these reports, and further analyses of survey results, visit the Carsey Institute’s website at (www.carseyinstitute.unh.edu).
Between May 31 and June 5, 2007, Democratic polling firm Greenberg Quinlan Rosner, in consultation with Republican media firm Greener and Hook, conducted a survey of 804 respondents from rural America.

This survey shows broad discontent with the direction of the country and the direction of rural America. The result of this discontent leaves these voters frustrated with the current administration, delivering historically low numbers for the Bush administration. More broadly, the Administration’s problems create a moment of real political competitiveness in rural America, where voters divide evenly in (generic) trial heats for President and (named) trial heats for U.S. Congress. These results stand in sharp contrast to recent electoral outcomes—2006 election excepted—where Republicans have run up margins of 10 – 20 points.

Rural voters’ mood is bracketed by two current issues. Although support for the war in Iraq is somewhat higher than we see in other parts of the country, a plurality of voters would have their Members of Congress to vote for measures to force the President to change policy in Iraq. In addition, the survey exposes a significant economic anxiety, driven not only by diminished economic opportunity, but more prominently, by a rising cost of living.

At the same time, rural America remains a deeply conservative place, where levels of church attendance, gun ownership and self-ascribed conservative ideology exceed the national average. Conservative language that resurfaces some of these cultural concerns seems effective in reestablishing a more traditional Republican partisan advantage in rural America.

The result is that, at least for now, rural America is an emerging political battleground.

The survey carries a margin of error of +/- 3.46 at a 95 percent confidence level. For the purposes of this poll, “rural” is defined as counties in non-metropolitan statistical areas, as designated by the Census. A full copy of this report is available on the W.K. Kellogg Foundation website (ruralassembly.org)
In the early moments of the conference, the participants introduced themselves to their table mates and answered the question “What is the most important outcome for this Assembly?” The following are the strong themes that emerged from the table submissions.

Hopes for the Assembly

“One Voice/One Vision” leading to national decision makers knowing that “rural matters.”

“United rural voice” focused on rural policy agenda that includes minority and disadvantaged people: Native American, Latino, African American, and the Disabled.

“A well articulated rural political agenda that features new thinking about rural sustainability.”

“Busting the myths” about rural America.

“Hopes for the Assembly”

Create a shared and clear definition of rural.

Focus on policies on rural poverty, healthcare, entrepreneurship.

Recognize and strengthen rural and urban community connections.

Increase the political power/influence of Rural America; influence the presidential debate to include its issues.

“All groups in the room become familiar with each other,” building on strengths and create a viable and user-friendly, national network.

A continuing, effective process for creating new and integrated policies for Rural America (with money and support to make this happen).
We came together to shine light on the leaders who commit their lives to helping rural people and communities help themselves. These “heroes” fight for and foster justice. They work to make education excellent and accessible and the environment clean and safe. They develop businesses and affordable housing and deliver services. They invest in building people's skills, income, assets and opportunities. And they strive to make these strengths sustainable.

Organizers resolved to honor six heroes at each National Rural Assembly. They solicited nominations, made the very difficult choices and saluted those selected at a ceremony emceed by Mary Herrera, Secretary of State for New Mexico.

These are the very distinguished six First National Rural Assembly heroes and a few words about their contributions.

First National Rural Assembly Salutes Six Heroes

United States Senator Max Baucus (D-MT)
Chairman, Senate Finance Committee. Senator Baucus is an outstanding advocate and supporter for his constituents as well as other rural people and places across the country. Most recently he challenged private foundations to double their rural giving.

Dr. Forrest W. Calico
Appalachian, family practitioner, champion for improving rural access to healthcare as well as the quality of care provided. At the federal Office of Rural Health Policy, Dr. Calico developed quality improvement programs for 1,300 critical care hospitals. He is currently organizing people to participate in a grassroots Quality of Care movement.

Sharon B. King
Philanthropic leader. According rural problems and opportunities the same weight as others, Ms. King uses every available grant and investment tool. Her work puts the F.B. Heron Foundation among the top rural funders.

William “Bill” Bynum
Founder and leader, Enterprise Corporation of the Delta. Serving the chronically poor Mid-South, Mr. Brown has marshaled more than $300 million in financing for entrepreneurs, home buyers and community development ventures.

Elouise Cobell
Accountant, banker, and community development corporation director. Ms. Cobell is the author and lead plaintiff in a lawsuit involving a half million Indians suing to recover billions of dollars in trust land management fees the federal government has failed to pay.

Al Smith
Owner of small town newspapers and working journalist hosting a weekly television show on Kentucky politics. Mr. Smith has put nearly 50 years into covering and informing rural communities, advocating change when needed. In 2004, he founded, funded and launched the Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues at the University of Kentucky, the only organization dedicated to strengthening rural newspapers.
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.

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.

MAJOR DRIVERS
CHANGING RURAL AMERICA

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.
FOR SALE

KEY TOPICS

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

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

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.

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.

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.

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.

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
  - Changing demographics of rural communities.

RURAL AMERICA

Framing the Discussion
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 more, potentially bring new experience, skills and financial resources to rural and small town America. They also have shown to create new pressures on the cost of living, especially in decreasing the available affordable housing. Increasing senior populations require 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. The perception of affordable housing and a relatively low cost of living are other attracting forces. New immigrants 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 exacerbates social and cultural differences between newer and longer term residents.

### Assets of Demographic Transitions

- Older residents – whether existing or recruited retirees – have skills, knowledge, connections and possibly wealth!
- Younger “amenity refugees” (from urban areas) also bring skills, knowledge, connections, wealth – and likely higher tax revenues.
- Immigrants bring energy, young families (kids for the school!), cultural creativity – and may renew the community work ethic. “Cultural differences are marketable products.”
- Every time demographics change in rural, it creates opportunities. For example, seniors have specialized needs....
- Some rural communities have affordable housing that outsiders could only dream of owning – which could attract people to declining communities.
- Small-classroom schools with little crime attract and keep families – especially when they have high quality, community-focused curricula.
- Communities suffering recent economic decline (from plant closings) have available workforce with some skills and healthy work ethic.
- Some youth who leave for school come back; some who don’t will still give back.

### Challenges of Demographic Transitions

- Newcomers reluctant to participate in civic life – especially those who have cultural barriers.
- Oldtimers have difficulty in accepting new realities and new ideas – that is, think outside of their oldtime boxes.
- Difficult getting everybody together around a shared vision when the community is changing so fast.
- When population leaves or changes it is hard to build on a collective history.
- Rising housing prices in changing communities is forcing out long-time and/or low-income residents.
- Maintaining or expanding health care system and services.
- Maintaining adequate support for schools.
- Retention of young people within the community and finding ways to bring other young ones back.
- No region-wide governance/decision-makers or locally controlled investment capital means low investment in rural region.

### Vision for Demographic Transitions in Rural America

Rural communities are more demographically diverse, leveraging the creative energy of all ages, cultures, ethnicities, and interests. Youth serve as leaders and entrepreneurs. Elderly serve as a source of wisdom and a market base for local businesses. Integrated, open, and vibrant civic life. Communities actively engage all residents to find solutions to local problems and make positive contributions.
Federal Policies to Support Top National Strategies for Demographic Transitions

Strategy #1:
Focus on education that serves youth and trains them as local leaders in their rural environment and school systems.

- Support mentoring among generations by requiring federally supported efforts to adopt intergenerational dialogue and skill sharing (e.g., youth engaged in Meals on Wheels).
- Build civic engagement component into federal educational programming (e.g., NCLB curriculum).
- Fully fund all education mandates or eliminate them (e.g. NCLB).
- Introduce career education at a young age so that rural kids see many options for their future.

Strategy #2:
Develop a system of infrastructure investment using co-ops financing electric, health care and other new technologies to include all citizens.

- Create an agency (not a department) to coordinate rural affairs among the various departments (Dept. of Transportation, USDA, EPA, HHS, Dept. of Education).
- Require mechanisms for securing input from rural stakeholders to set priorities and make decisions about infrastructural investments (e.g., town meetings).
- Hold policy makers and program implementers accountable by assessing whether/how priorities are pursued and what outcomes are ultimately achieved.
- Create a rural set-aside for AmeriCorps with an emphasis on entrepreneurship and cultural heritage.
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 impact 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.

### Assets of a Changing Rural Economy

- Strong base of small businesses and entrepreneurial capacity, and tradition of self employment.
- Peak-oil economy opening opportunities for sustainable and secure local food and energy systems.
- Unmet social and economic needs can be leveraged into economic opportunities, new jobs, businesses, institutions.
- Land, natural resources, culture, heritage, values.
- Increased educational attainment of local population – workforce potential.
- Internet has opened access to new (regional, national, global) markets for rural communities.
- Social capital: tradition of communication and cooperation.
- Scale: smaller communities where it is possible to effect change.
- Arrival of new wealth from older in-migrants.

### Challenges of a Changing Rural Economy

- Remoteness creates an economic and social disadvantage.
- Changing markets due to globalization have undermined the industrial base. Aging industrial infrastructure is also a part of this dynamic.
- Rural communities lack up-to-date educational programs and curricula to make them competitive in a global economy (including entrepreneurship, technical and workforce education, and individual financial skills).
- Inadequate public and private investment in institutions and services such as education, healthcare, and community services.
- Lack of equitable, non-predatory and affordable capital is limiting local ownership.
- Access to affordable health care is limited.
- Sky-rocketing land values makes housing and land unaffordable.
- Loss of youth & educated people due to lack of opportunity.
- In-migration of people from diverse backgrounds is creating social and economic challenges for rural communities.

### Vision for Rural America’s Economy

Affordable credit and capital is available through public, private, and nonprofit institutions for individual asset-based investments. Quality education, technological resources, and entrepreneurial opportunities encourage local youth to stay and invest in the rural life. Small businesses and entrepreneurs compete effectively in local and global markets and are supported by balanced economic development policies and a comprehensive technology infrastructure. Rural communities are part of vibrant, innovative and scalable regional economies that provide livable wages and leverage local and natural resources to create value-added economic opportunities. Rural communities embrace diversity, retain current residents, and attract newcomers through amenities, urban-rural connections, and a recognized quality of life.
National Strategies for a Changing Rural Economy

Top Two Strategies

- Comprehensive economic development strategies that include youth entrepreneurship, micro-enterprise and self-employment, business retention and expansion, and business development services. (23%)

- Integrated federal program delivery strategy that provides incentives for agency collaboration, spurs value-added investment and offers flexibility in investment criteria in exchange for measurable outcomes. (15%)

Other Strategies

- Educational institutions take the lead in creating human capital investment programs that promote entrepreneurship, financial literacy, access to health care, and cutting edge workforce skills. (13%)

- Regional development strategy that enhances competitiveness through sectoral investments, market connections and local control and ownership. (12%)

- Comprehensive energy strategy that promotes conservation, efficiencies and innovation that promotes sustainable development. (10%)

- New compact between city and country that builds national awareness of the interdependence between urban and rural economies. (9%)

- Comprehensive technology strategy that expands access, shares best practices and infuses innovation into local communities. (9%)

- New capital market strategies that liberalize regulations for individual investors provide flexible incentives for private investment, and encourage innovative ownership models (e.g., co-ops). (8%)

Federal Policies to Support Top National Strategies for a Changing Rural Economy

Strategy #1:
Comprehensive economic development strategies that include youth entrepreneurship, micro-enterprise and self-employment, business retention and expansion, and business development services.

- Develop policies that connect rural businesses to global markets.
- Transform agricultural education through a vocational educational model that encourages entrepreneurship.
- Maintain basic educational support and expand financial/business education programs.
- Create legal services initiative that supports the range of tax and regulatory needs of rural businesses.
- Preserve SBA, RBEG, RBOG, RMA, IRP, value-added producer, and community food programs.
- Restructure funding for SBA micro-enterprise intermediaries and continue TA funds; expand micro-enterprise funding through USDA.
- Develop programs that fund business development services targeted to sustainable natural resource businesses and craft metrics that assess rural sustainability.
- Design incentives for private capital to invest directly or through intermediaries in rural and/or remote communities.
- Restructure and/or expand federal procurement programs to target rural businesses.

Strategy #2:
Integrated federal program delivery strategy that provides incentives for agency collaboration, spurs value-added investment and offers flexibility in investment criteria in exchange for measurable outcomes.

- Don’t consolidate programs with different constituencies into a single agency.
- Use rural empowerment zones as a model for agency collaboration and program delivery.
- Meld federal elderly programs with affordable housing and food programs.
- Create youth service corps by reinventing AmeriCorps and VISTA models.
- Expand and connect public lands/USFS programs to support value-added natural resource businesses.
- Encourage federal agencies to create a collaborative community rural investment fund with flexible funding measured through concrete outcomes.
- Coordinate WIA and Perkins Act to enhance workforce development resources.
- Presidential commitment to revamp rural development with an executive order creating an inter-agency task force on rural development projects.
- Create “common application” for federal programs similar to the common application now used for college admissions administered through a federal clearinghouse.
- Create a comprehensive federal research agenda that assesses the true condition of rural communities and identifies key innovations and opportunities.
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. deep potential for rural America's economic options.

### Assets of Investment & Resource Distribution
- People more easily connected – due to size & increased IT capacity.
- A belief that resources (land, water, etc) are abundant and life is good.
- Locally controlled financial institutions and utilities as well as new ones emerging.
- Relatively inexpensive and highly available land.
- Quality jobs in health care with growing needs of retiring baby boomers, and in-migration of younger families.
- Robust entrepreneurial spirit.
- Natural resources, land, social capital, intellectual capital, culture of place.
- Tribes are a sovereign nation and can get things done.
- Strong sense of connection to place, desire to be there, and connections with each other.

### Challenges of Investment & Resource Distribution
- Infrastructure gaps require renewed faith in public investment and more representative political participation.
- Educational systems inadequately funded and program content lags behind workforce needs.
- Disinvestment in public natural resource agencies compromise stewardship and economic opportunities.
- Share of philanthropic resources not commensurate with need while some existing resources unidentified.
- Technological infrastructure requires upgrades to meet requirements of global competitiveness.
- Long-term patterns of institutionalized racism maintain power inequities that limit innovative and equitable investments.
- Regulated financial resources increasingly replaced by non-regulated, fringe financial institutions without community connections or investment requirements.
- Community development institutions are not adequately recognized or rewarded which limit their impact and sustainability.

### Vision for Investment & Resource Distribution in Rural America
Rural America has sustainable, harmonious, equitable communities with their own identities because local institutions have flexible and sufficient resources and power to support education, health, economy, housing and transportation. Everyone in rural America has adequate and affordable healthcare. Collaboration exists across interests and place (rural, urban, tribal, state, federal, local, generations, cultures, public and private sectors) ensuring equitable provisions of services and investment in rural America. “Interdependence works!” Rural communities tap local wealth, skills, knowledge and experience to leverage, expand and strengthen their asset base.
Federal Policies to Support Top National Strategies for Investment & Resource Distribution

Top Two Strategies

- **Encourage delivery systems that lead to affordable access to health care in all rural communities.** (19%)  
  - Increase federal incentives and tax credits that encourage health care professionals to serve in and stay in rural communities (HUD, HOME, ADDI).
  - Expand the USDA Community Facility Grants, the Business & Industry loan programs to encourage investment in rural care infrastructure.
  - Forgive student loan debt for health care professionals serving in rural communities.
  - Health care for all children at 300% of poverty or lower.
  - Allow Medicare/Medicaid reimbursement for rural telemedicine appointments for mental health. Pay on both ends of the appointment.
  - Provide school and senior center-based health care to include dental, mental, and general services to families.
  - Encourage Mobile Medical Units for service delivery in remote locations.
  - Expand Telemedicine grants and provide incentives.
  - Facilitate better health care, provide ubiquitous broadband by using universal service funds for BBand, or create public broadband utilities.
  - Fix inequities in the rate of reimbursement and malpractice insurance rates between rural and suburban for both public and private insurance.
  - OR, establish universal health care!

- **Provide continuous high investment in rural education, early childhood through college.** (19%)  
  - Fund fully Head Start and other early childhood education in rural areas (relieve the state match in rural areas with hardships.)
  - Redirect and deploy resources going through “WIA” to instead go through rural workforce development.
  - Forgive loan debt for educational professionals serving and living in rural communities. Help them buy homes and improve and get benefits.
  - Increase Pell grants and federal funding available for rural students to go to college.
  - Passage, adoption, and implementation of Education Begins at Home Act.
  - Provide equity funding for education in rural communities.
  - Revise No Child Left Behind with less emphasis on testing. Make provisions for rural areas on such issues as teacher qualifications. (Or just get rid of NCLB.)

Other Strategies

- **Invest in rural infrastructure for economic competitiveness.** (16%)  
  - Make it the federal role to provide financial and technical assistance. Make the local role to deploy resources and decide programs.
  - Provide incentives for regional decision making and collaboration that requires accountability and results.

- **Encourage the creation and growth of locally controlled rural resource streams.** (9%)  
  - Create an advocacy network for effective rural investment.
  - Create federal groups or agencies focused on rural.

Federal Strategies for Investment & Resource Distribution

- **Top Two Strategies**
  - Encourage delivery systems that lead to affordable access to health care in all rural communities. (19%)
  - Provide continuous high investment in rural education, early childhood through college. (19%)

- **Other Strategies**
  - Invest in rural infrastructure for economic competitiveness. (16%)
  - Make it the federal role to provide financial and technical assistance. Make the local role to deploy resources and decide programs. (13%)
  - Provide incentives for regional decision making and collaboration that requires accountability and results. (12%)
  - Encourage the creation and growth of locally controlled rural resource streams. (9%)
  - Create an advocacy network for effective rural investment. (7%)
  - Create federal groups or agencies focused on rural. (4%)
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.

Assets of Community Institutions & Civic Leadership

- The small size and strong sense of community builds and enhances local engagement and leadership (social capital).
- Core institutions – small schools, churches, libraries, and community colleges – form the center of rural life.
- Technology, when available, minimizes remoteness and facilitates new social and economic opportunities for rural schools, new business development (esp. entrepreneurs) and health care effectiveness (e.g., telemedicine).
- Local youth are a source of leadership vitality so long as they are empowered community participants and implementers. (You can’t expect young adults to come back if they weren’t engaged as local youth.)
- The indigenous culture and values, if tapped, are a resource for advancing economic opportunity (e.g., in Indian country).

Challenges of Community Institutions & Civic Leadership

- Non-profit and governmental leadership is “thin” and over-burdened and populated by aging people.
- Difficult to convince “exited” young adults that there is something to come back for.
- Core institutions are not focusing on entrepreneurship, despite the potential.
- Race continues to divide institutions and leaders.
- Local institutions are overly dependent on dwindling state and federal resources available for rural regions.
- Rural regions lack CDFIs and other small business financing mechanisms.
- Rural communities are characterized by weak financial literacy; many people are unbanked.
- Communities within a region compete with one another and there are few incentives (especially financial) to collaborate.
- People in poverty feel disempowered and lack the time and resources to participate in community decision-making.

Vision For Community Institutions & Civic Leadership In Rural America

Diverse community residents are civically engaged and have the leadership skills to collaborate in planning and making decisions about a wide range of issues. Community institutions and leaders effectively leverage political influence and public and private resources to ensure economic vitality. Young people have ample opportunities to participate in civic activities and contribute to the leadership and well-being of the community. Community Development Corporations, local governments, and non-profits work together to improve and sustain community amenities (education, health, housing, youth, downtowns).
National Strategies for Community Institutions & Civic Leadership

Top Two Strategies
- Promote greater investment in rural infrastructure (transportation, multipurpose facilities, health care, telecommunications, and sustainable natural resource enterprises) by public, private, and philanthropic institutions. (36%)
- Direct funding to education and training geared at youth, entrepreneurs, and local leadership development. (33%)

Other Strategies
- Create a process through which national organizations work together to educate policy makers and develop comprehensive strategies and policies. (18%)
- Develop a local communication process so that diverse voices at the local level are heard. (13%)

Federal Policies to Support Top National Strategies for Community Institutions & Civic Leadership

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy #1:</th>
<th>Strategy #2:</th>
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<td>Direct funding to education and training geared at youth, entrepreneurs, and local leadership development.</td>
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<td>• Make community block grants larger, more focused on underserved, low- and moderate-income communities, and available for rural infrastructure formerly unavailable.</td>
<td>• Expand and preserve national and community service programs (e.g. VISTA AmeriCorps, Learn &amp; Serve); target resources on youth entrepreneurship, and leadership.</td>
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<td>• Require Community Reinvestment Act to encourage investment in rural areas.</td>
<td>• Maintain and increase investment (federal funding) in 4-H and youth programs in high priority areas (leadership, entrepreneurship); insist on diversity, including Native American communities.</td>
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<td>• Create incentives to encourage small scale community owned businesses rather than having rural business owned by large corporations headquartered elsewhere.</td>
<td>• Increase funding for CDBG's to states and review/change the oversight and distribution process as it relates to rural communities to support youth, entrepreneurial, and local leadership activities.</td>
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<td>• Reverse USDA Rural Development Policy back to grants/loans instead of loan guarantees.</td>
<td>• Create a GI bill to retool rural America to compete in the global economy.</td>
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<td>• Set aside federal research grants for rural areas to increase their competitiveness with urban areas.</td>
<td>• Shift Farm Bill funding out of existing commodity funding and expand funding to added value (sustainable agricultural and forest) products.</td>
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<td>• Create a new workforce investment program geared at young people (mentorship, entrepreneurship, information technology skills).</td>
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<td>• Fund demonstration projects geared at minority-owned businesses and Indian reservations to incubate projects that could benefit rural as a whole.</td>
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<td>• Change No Child Left Behind to allow more local flexibility customized curriculum for local communities.</td>
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<td>• The Small Business Administration should be reconfigured to include the capacity specifically targeted at supporting rural micro-businesses and include financing, technical assistance, and training.</td>
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<td>• Create federal policy that would ensure every child in every state to have decent public education without having to turn to charter schooling to obtain decent K-12 education (e.g. Mississippi legislature trumping equal education).</td>
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Rural Environment

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.

Assets of Rural Environment
- Rural people care about the environment and have an attachment to the land. “Rural people have a strong sense of place.”
- Opportunities to promote alternative and cutting-edge ways of doing business – biofuels, alternative energy, eco-tourism and green building.
- “Quality of life”.
- Restoration industry creating green jobs.
- Availability of land in rural areas for eco-friendly affordable development.
- Home-based environmentally friendly businesses.
- Bio-diversity and the knowledge to manage it. We have an abundance of farm land, clean air and water, forests.
- Growing recognition of the healthy nature of local foods, farmer’s markets, and self-determined eco-conscious commerce.

Challenges of Rural Environment
- We are not creating value-added products out of our natural resources in our rural communities.
- Finding resources to clean up past contamination, deal with “cancer clusters” and disproportionate number of toxic sites in rural areas.
- Effects of climate change—harder for rural areas to recover after natural disasters due to lack of capital.
- Creating a comprehensive water strategy that benefits rural America—avoiding privatization of water.
- Sprawl and land fragmentation—current law encourages sprawl.
- Lack of resources for infrastructure development in important job creation areas (such as telecommunications and broadband).
- A lack of mechanisms and opportunities for communities to manage rural public lands.
- Natural resources are undervalued. Lack of markets for “green products”.
- Balancing economic growth with cultural values and historical heritage.
- Difficult to attract entrepreneurs and leaders to communities with chronic poverty.

Vision for Rural America’s Environment

America’s rural areas are comprised of healthy and resilient landscapes and communities with renewable energy and sustainable food production that are locally owned and linked to good stewardship of natural resource systems. Value-added businesses and jobs are based on locally owned natural resources. Settlement patterns now have people living in villages (not sprawl) with adequate infrastructure that minimizes the footprint on climate change and natural resources. Education of youth, urban, and rural people promotes a strong sense of place and stewardship of natural resources. Rural America is no longer a dumping ground for urban trash.
Federal Policies to Support Top National Strategies for Rural Environment

**Top Two Strategies**

- **Strategy #1:** Shift resources away from traditional farm and commodity programs and provide mandatory funding for sustainable agriculture and energy and rural development. (28%)
- **Strategy #2:** Re-tool economic development policies to couple enterprise development with environmental stewardship. (16%)

**Other Strategies**

- Support regional land use planning that will reflect “green-affordable” community and housing development. (12%)
- Provide financial and technical assistance to rural communities and enterprises to assist in the restoration and maintenance of public and private lands. (9%)
- Create an annual “state of the rural union” report with the status of land, water, forests and other resources by region across the US. (8%)
- Create a national “Rural Energy Institute” for the development of sustainable, renewable, affordable energy policy. (7%)
- Create an awareness/education campaign to increase understanding of sustainable food, water and energy systems. (6%)
- Have a national rural coalition that works! (6%)
- Develop rural transportation systems that are explicitly linked to environmental goals. (4%)
- Initiate national programs to support place-based, conservation education for urban and rural people. (4%)

### Strategy #1:

Shift resources away from traditional farm and commodity programs and provide mandatory funding for sustainable agriculture and energy and rural development.

- Shift Farm Bill priorities to increase funding for sustainable agriculture, energy, and rural development programs and cap subsidies to individual farmers.
- Fund and strengthen USDA Forest Service and BLM Rural Development programs.
- Offer tax incentives for companies who use alternative energy in Rural America.
- Create a Sustainable Communities Block Grant program
- Provide an amendment to the Farm Bill to allocate land grant college funds away from commodity programs and towards more diverse rural development needs.
- Enact a new federal policy that will shift resources away from farm programs, and put money into new agricultural programs which support sustainable rural development.
- Implement a micro co-op act.
- Require, fund and support schools and government institutions to source a percentage of their food from local, sustainable farmers.

### Strategy #2:

Re-tool economic development policies to couple enterprise development with environmental stewardship.

- Add scoring criteria to federal economic development programs to give mandatory priority points for advancing environmental stewardship.
- Provide incentives for educational institutions in rural areas to provide workforce development training in green collar jobs.
- Create a green innovation tax credit for small businesses and local governments.
- Initiate a Sustainable Communities Block Grant Program that links economic development, community development and ecological stewardship.
- Reform federal agency procurement policies to integrate local economic development and ecological objectives.
- Develop a renewable energy policy that supports energy production through community-based and owned facilities and remove subsidies to oil, coal, and other polluting industries.
- Appropriate adequate dollars for forest and watershed restoration to support markets for ecosystem services and recreation that can be captured by local entities.
- Create a national education initiative that focuses on the ecological impacts of human disturbance, an understanding of our choices on the environment and local perspectives and issues.
- Support the re-authorization of the Secure Rural Schools and Community Revitalization Act.
- Create rural enterprise zones that are focused on sustainable development priorities and enterprises.
Messages to Washington

Based on assets, challenges, top strategies and policies across all five topic areas, participants were asked, “What are the key messages we should deliver to Congress tomorrow?” Participants developed the following messages to deliver to decision-makers attending the Congressional Rural Summit on the last day of the assembly:

• Economically and ecologically healthy rural communities are vital to the public interest.

• We cannot have a weak rural economy & remain globally competitive.

• Rural America is more than farms, but is also comprised of businesses, educational institutions and community-based organizations – all of which draw upon the diversity & rich resources of rural areas, with much to teach rural and non-rural America alike.

• “We’re not all farmers, we’re not all white!”

• Urban & rural areas share many things in common, but their differences are also very important.

• Rural America is essential to food and energy, both essential to a healthy environment.

• “All America benefits from a vibrant rural America.”

• Rural areas already offer quite a lot in terms of CDC & non-profit capacity, but additional capacity needs to be developed.

• Congress needs to take an ACTIVE role in the life of rural America.

• Indian country must be explicitly included in any concept of rural America; Native Americans are underserved.

• Investing in small, rural business must replace our reliance on big business solely.

• “We are not asking for hand-outs...We are asking for our fair share & meaningful opportunities.”

• Move the dollars being spent on the war to investments in rural America!

Getting Rural America on the National Agenda

Given breadth of issues facing rural America and a common misperception that rural America consists mainly of farms, the Assembly struggled with how to go beyond tomorrow’s Congressional Rural Summit to make rural issues a lasting priority on the national policy agenda and visible in the 2008 presidential election. Participants identified some interesting possibilities to “raise up rural” on the national stage:

• Develop a unifying frame for rural issues with a supporting communications campaign.

• Reframe rural issues around assets, not just needs.

• Identify the key members of Congress and engage them in rural development initiatives.

• Develop unified, expanded and sustained national foundation support & advocacy for rural America.

• Develop a National media campaign (including TV) that demonstrates rural America’s diversity & opportunity.

• Invest in local leadership to create and mobilize a national rural network.

• Develop a rural issues checklist for presidential candidates who care about rural America.

Most Presidential Candidates Fail to Show

Wanting to hear the visions for rural America of presidential candidates, Assembly organizers sent speaking invitations to all 18 major party candidates, Republican and Democrat, for president in 2008. Just three, Senator Clinton, former Senator Edwards and Representative Kucinich, made an effort to participate. Edwards and Kucinich provided videotaped statements.

Senator Clinton appeared live via a two-way satellite feed from her Capitol Hill office where she was on standby for floor votes. The Senator spoke in detail about rural challenges, her actions to aid rural constituents and legislation she’s spearheading to promote rural business and job creation.

The question and answer period produced promising news. Asked if she would consider changing USDA’s name to the Department of Rural Affairs Senator Clinton voiced a definite “yes,” calling it a “wonderful idea” prompting an applause.
Participants to the First National Rural Assembly took their concerns to Capitol Hill on June 27, filling the Agriculture Committee room for a fact-finding Rural Summit hosted by U.S. Rep. Rosa L. DeLauro (D-Conn.), chair of the House Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee. At the Summit, witnesses painted a picture of the emerging importance of rural concerns in American politics. Kansas Governor Kathleen Sebelius asserted that effective rural development must start with leadership development, strategic planning, and communication – needs that few government programs currently address.

Delia Perez of the Llano Grande Center for Research and Development shared her personal story of growing up in the tiny community of Monte Alto in south Texas. The daughter of Mexican migrant farm workers, she talked about the values of rural America and gave credit for her success to family, teachers and community members who raised educational expectations for young people despite severe economic disadvantages in the area.

Other Rural Summit witnesses focused on shifting rural demographics and the social, cultural and economic conditions affecting rural America.

Republican consultant Bill Greener presented findings from the Greenberg survey exploring the issues rural Americans care about. Topics included voter preferences in the 2008 presidential election, views on the most pressing needs facing rural communities and opinions about the 2007 Farm Bill and other rural policies. The results emphasized the growing importance of the rural vote as a critical “swing” factor both in presidential and congressional elections.

Mil Duncan discussed recent research from the Carsey Institute. Her team’s research shows that different policies are needed in different types of rural places. For example, in amenity-rich rural communities, environmental and sprawl policies are needed to maintain the quality of life, while living wage and affordable housing policies are also required to assure inclusion for all rural citizens. Declining rural places need to build upon area human and social capital with New Homestead Act types of policies. In contrast, poor places with low educational attainment, high dependency and limited future prospects need investment in human capital: early childhood education, innovative and effective current-day options for public education (including charter schools), technical colleges; and restoration of the natural environment.

A panel of rural experts – including Shannon Augare, State Representative, Blackfeet, MT; Peter Carey, Executive Director of Self Help Enterprises, Visalia, CA; Greg Dent, rural health professional from Community Health Works, Forsyth, GA; and Mark Lloyd, Senior Fellow at the Center for American Progress, Washington, DC – explored the need for a coherent national rural policy across a range of sectors.

Rep. DeLauro summed up by pointing out that solving the challenges of rural America will not be simple. She noted that solutions must move beyond the superficial and deal with lack of quality infrastructure and limited access to education, health care and transportation – all combined with and contributing to high levels of poverty. “We have an obligation...to use our federal policy as the valuable tool it is to put middle and working-class rural families center stage,” she said.
Next Steps

In the final plenary session participants expressed a strong level of support for the creation of a network of organizations to advance the national strategies and policy priorities developed at the First National Rural Assembly. Nearly 90% of the participants supported or strongly supported the idea of a coalition of organizations. Given the results of this poll the groups went on to discuss what the purpose of the coalition might be and the critical activities to be pursued.

Possible Purpose of the Coalition

- Unify and energize Rural America’s message.
- Be a recognized, leading, strong voice and advocate for Rural America.
- Create awareness and increase the visibility of issues that affect Rural America.
- Develop and advocate a national rural agenda.
- Link rural and urban issues.
- Be the “go-to” network of networks for Rural America.
- Facilitate instant communication and action around rural priorities.
- Build expertise around issues that are important to rural America – keeping an eye on the coming horizon and windows of opportunity.
- FIGHT FOR RURAL AMERICA!

Critical Activities for a Coalition

- Organize across diverse constituencies including youth to advance the goals (drawing on existing networks and efforts).
- Re-frame the message around rural America to facilitate a public communications strategy and use presidential elections as a platform for rural advocacy.
- Develop an initial policy agenda for a national coalition.
- Develop champions for rural America, people, places and issues.

Pundits Focus on Rural Vote

The rural vote could be pivotal in the 2008 presidential election, according to opinion polls discussed by a panel of nationally respected journalists at the First National Rural Assembly. But it’s not clear how rural voters will affect the results of the election. “Candidates seem to think of rural issues as beginning and ending with ethanol and farm subsidies,” while overlooking health care, economic development, fuel costs, and other bread and butter issues, said Boston Globe national political reporter Susan Milligan.

Bill Bishop, co-editor of a recently launched online rural news publication, “The Daily Yonder” (www.dailyyonder.com), stated that Republicans have successfully tapped into identity politics with rural voters while Democrats have struggled to do the same. “Democrats treat rural as if it meant putting on camouflage and shooting ducks,” Bishop said, referring to John Kerry’s much publicized hunting trip during the 2004 campaign, whereas Republicans have figured out how to tap into social structures and institutions and pick up votes that way.” Bishop is the author of a forthcoming book on increasing political segregation called “The Big Sort” (Houghton Mifflin).

Ray Suarez, senior correspondent for PBS’s NewsHour, said politicians now pander to rural voters with messages about reducing the size of government instead of addressing the role of government in creating healthier communities. “People are feeling very close to the edge because of the fraying safety net, which is a product of reduced government,” Suarez said. “But they want to hear from politicians about getting government off their back.”

The panel was moderated by Bob Edwards, host of the Bob Edwards Show on XM Radio. The free-ranging discussion covered the political impact of the war in rural America, immigration, and the mainstream media’s failure to cover rural stories. Milligan said both politicians and journalists had a difficult time engaging rural people and issues. “Journalists don’t go into those communities for the same reason that the candidates don’t,” she said. “It’s pretty hard to report when you don’t go to a population center. It takes a lot of time to go to a sparsely populated area and talk to people about what is really going on.”
On Wednesday morning, June 27th, attendees had a choice between going to the Rural Summit on Capitol Hill or meeting at the hotel about “Next Steps.” Fifty-seven attendees representing 55 different organizations from 29 states participated on next steps for the work achieved during the Assembly.

The group was quick to recognize that it is more effective working together as a group, which enhances the learning and achievements of all the organizations involved. The broad range activities suggested could serve to organize a new, sustainable national network or coalition over the long term for reframing and advancing a new rural agenda. The new national network would tap into existing networks, would not duplicate what is already happening and would enable sharing across sectors, interests, and issues of existing networks. It would serve as the clearinghouse and mega-alliance of rural networks that goes beyond sharing to acting. Its purpose would be to give support and structure to a network and not to form a new organization.

The critical activities for the coming year would be for the mega-network to organize itself, reframe the message, develop an initial policy agenda and map champions and organizations for rural America across public, private, and non-profit sectors. This map should be bi-partisan.

Other Important Activities

- Create in-state or regional networks to support the national network.
- Develop organizational map that shows and builds on existing networks represented by the First National Rural Assembly.
- Develop an intentional process to address race, class, and power issues in rural communities and the field of rural movement as a whole.
- Create a media campaign focused on the key elements of our messages, including training and supporting practitioners in print, radio, and web-based media outlets.
- Develop key questions to insert into the presidential televised debates and other political races that address rural issues.
- Each of us brings someone under 24 to the next meeting.

Organizing Activities Take Shape

On Wednesday morning, June 27th, attendees had a choice between going to the Rural Summit on Capitol Hill or meeting at the hotel about “Next Steps.” Fifty-seven attendees representing 55 different organizations from 29 states participated on next steps for the work achieved during the Assembly.

A number of individuals (16) have committed to participating in an initial organizing committee for this network seeded at this First National Rural Assembly and have recommended the following tasks as the work of the committee:

- recruit people/organizations to ensure appropriate representation of the diversity of rural U.S. communities;
- widen the tent with new and existing entities in order to be inclusive;
- develop purpose, value, structure, role and communications tools; explore housing for the coalition, a network of networks;
- explore the reframing of rural; and
- be involved in the design of the Second National Rural Assembly.

- Create in-state or regional networks to support the national network.
- Develop organizational map that shows and builds on existing networks represented by the First National Rural Assembly.
- Develop an intentional process to address race, class, and power issues in rural communities and the field of rural movement as a whole.
- Create a media campaign focused on the key elements of our messages, including training and supporting practitioners in print, radio, and web-based media outlets.
- Develop key questions to insert into the presidential televised debates and other political races that address rural issues.
- Each of us brings someone under 24 to the next meeting.
Personal Commitments

At the end of the Assembly, participants wrote down the commitments that they were willing and able to do based on their experience at the First National Rural Assembly. Below are a few examples of the commitments grouped into several different categories.

Building a Coalition
- I commit my time and talent to help form a functioning rural coalition.
- I will work to bring groups, individuals into the coalition.
- I commit personal time on the structure and governance of this coalition.
- I will be an active member of the coalition and assembly.

Staying Connected
- I commit to staying in contact with the six people at my table and my congressional delegation regarding the issues.
- I will continue to participate in these kinds of assemblies and commit personally to pursue its goals.
- I will participate in electronic and phone communications providing 30 years experience in healthcare in rural America.

Staying Informed
- I will join www.RuralUS.org to keep more up-to-date on legislation around rural issues.
- I commit to connecting the network members to the best sources of information available at the University of Nebraska on topics related to sustainability including water, alternative sources of energy, climate and drought and food.

Building Diversity
- I dedicate a portion of work to cultivating rural youth and next generation leadership and success planning and to defining regional policy issues unique to rural and communities of color.

Spreading the Word
- I am going to share the five key topics with five of my friends. I am going to email new friends from this meeting.
- I will be a voice for rural in non-rural audiences.
- I will disseminate ideas and strategies with other organizations in my geographical area.
- I will inject rural perspectives into discussions and debates on all sorts of issues.

Advancing the Rural Agenda
- I can personally commit to advancing these goals as part of my life work and experience.
- I will continue to be an active and productive participant in forming and creating public policy at state and national level.
- I will lobby presidential candidates about rural issues.
- I will be the key person within NE, to guide the activities of organizational personnel in furthering the NRA goal and be sure it happens!
- I will work in coalitions to further these goals. Specifically to work with Senators Baucus and Tester.

Get Involved.

If your organization is interested in becoming a part of this nascent network of organizations addressing diverse issues of rural America, please email info@ruralassembly.org

RuralUS.org – A Resource for All

RuralUs.org, is an interactive website created by the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP) to track federal legislation, with the exception of the Farm Bill, related to agriculture, food, rural development and public health. The site provides individuals with a forum to debate, prioritize and share information about policy development and legislation.

RuralUs.org features a variety of tools to encourage collaboration among members and capture the results. The ultimate focus of this collaboration is (1) to make members aware of other members’ offline work and (2) to organize – and therefore intensify – members’ energy to sway political opinion on various legislation.
Accounting or Health /Garfield County Hospital District Pomeroy, WA; ACF/Arizona Rural Development Council - Phoenix, AZ; Action Communication and Education Reform Duck Hill, MS; Alliance of Forest Workers and Harvesters - Willow Creek, CA; American Forests - Washington, DC; Amigos Bravos Inc. Albuquerque, NM; Appalachian Sustainable Development - Abingdon, VA; Appalachian Women's Alliance Floyd, VA; AR Public Policy Panel - Little Rock, AR; Asset - Based Community Development - Decorah, IA; Association for Enterprise Opportunity (AEO) Arlington, VA; Association of Programs for Rural Independent Living (APRIL) - Kent, OH; Bank of America - Kansas City, MO; Beau Chemin Farm - Waldoboro, ME; Big Sky Institute for the Advancement of Nonprofits - Helena, MT; Boys, Girls, Adults Community Development Center - Marvell, AR; Brushy Fork Institute - Berea, KY; California Indian Basketweavers Association - Hoopa, CA; CAP Services, Inc. Stevens Point, WI; Carolina Alliance for Fair Employment - Greenville, SC; Catholic Community Services - Tucson, AZ; Center for Economic Options - Charleston, WV; Center for Rural Affairs - Center For Rural Strategies - Whitesburg, KY; Children's Defense Fund - Southern Regional Office, Jackson, MS; City of Lockhart, Texas; Coastal Enterprises, Inc. - Wiscasset, ME; Colonias Development Council - Las Cruces, NM; Comite de Bien Estar - San Luis, AZ; Community Access, Inc. South Charleston, WV; Community Connections - Fowler, CO; Community Health Works - Forsyth, GA; Congregation of Holy Cross - Chicago, IL; Corporation for Enterprise Development (CFED) - Washington, DC; CT Rural Development Council - Tolland, CT; Daily Yonder - Knoxville, TN; Deep South Delta Consortium - Marks, MS; Delta Citizens Alliance - Greenville, MS; DNA People's Legal Services - Flagstaff, AZ; Enterprise Corporation of the Delta - Jackson, MS; Farmworker Association of Florida, Inc. - Apopka, FL; Fayette County Community Action Agency, Inc. - Uniontown, PA; Federation of Southern Cooperatives/LAF - East Point, GA; Four Directions Development Corporation - Orono, ME; Garrett County Community Action - Oakland, MD; Good News Mountainaire Garage - Charleston, WV; Habitat or Humanity International - Washington, DC; and HandMade in America - Asheville, NC; Hazard Perry County Community Ministries, Inc. - Hazard, KY; Heartland Rural Health Network, Inc. - Avon Park, FL; Highlander Center - New Market, TN; Housing Assistance Council - Washington, DC; Humboldt Area Foundation - Bayside, CA; Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy - Minneapolis, MN; Internal Revenue Service - Atlanta, GA; International Sonoran Desert Alliance - Ajo, AZ; La Union del Pueblo Entero - San Juan, TX; League of Rural Voters - Minneapolis, MN; Llano Grande Center or Research and Development - Edcouch, TX; MACED - Berea, KY; Maine Center or Economic Policy - Augusta, ME; Maine Rural Partners - Orono, ME; Mississippi Action for Community Education, Inc. (MACE) - Greenville, MS; MMCD - Detroit Lakes, MN; Montana House of Representatives - Great Falls, MT; MS-NAACP / PRTI - Jackson, MS; National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture - Randolph, VT; National Consumer Law Center - Washington, DC; National Network of Forest Practitioners - Athens, OH; National Rural Funders Collaborative - Dallas, TX; National Trust for Historic Preservation - Washington, DC; Native Americans in Philanthropy - Minneapolis, MN; NCVA/NCES - Raleigh, NC; Nebraska Appleseed Center or Law n the Public Interest - Lincoln, NE; Nebraska Community Foundation - Lincoln, NE; Nebraska Housing Developers Assn. - Lincoln, NE; New Mexico Community Foundation - Santa Fe, NM; Office of the Secretary of State of New Mexico - Santa Fe, NM; New Mexico Voices for Children - Albuquerque, NM; FEDC - Gretna, FL; Northern Forest Center - Concord, NH; Northern Great Plains - Fargo, ND; Northern Initiatives - Marquette, MI; Northwest Area Foundation - St. Paul, MN; NW Montana Human Resources - Kalispell, MT; Ohio Appalachian Educators Institute - Athens, OH; Ohio University's Voinovich School - Athens, OH; OLLAS/University of Nebraska at Omaha - Omaha, NE; People Incorporated - Abingdon, VA; Potlatch Fund - Seattle, WA; Poverty Initiative - New York, NY; RCAP - Washington, DC; Renewing the Countryside - Minneapolis, MN; Rural Action - Trimble, OH; Rural Development Initiatives, Inc. - Eugene, OR; Rural Health Office, UA COPH - Tucson, AZ; Rural Local Initiatives Support Corporation - Washington, DC; Rural Neighborhoods, Inc. - Florida City, FL; Rural Opportunities, Inc. - Rochester, NY; Rural Schools and Community Trust - Arlington, VA; Rural Strategies - Cincinnati, OH; Save the Children - Westport, CT; Self-Help Enterprises - Visalia, CA; Service Employees International Union (SEIU) - Washington, DC; Siete del Norte CDC - Embudo, NM; South County Housing - Gilroy, CA; Southern Rural Development Initiative - Asheville, NC; SRBWI - Augusta, GA; SRBWI - Montgomery, AL; SRDI - Raleigh, NC; Stennis Institute/Mississippi State University, Mississippi State, MS; Sustainable Northwest - Portland, OR; Texas A&M School of Rural Public Health - College Station, TX; The Daily Yonder - Austin, TX; The Food Trust - Philadelphia, PA; The Forest Guild - Santa Fe, NM; The Watershed Center - Hayford, CA; UND Center for Rural Health - Grand Forks, ND; University of Alaska Anchorage - Anchorage, AK; University of California - Berkeley, CA; University of Wisconsin Law School - Madison, WI; Virginia Rural Health Association - Blacksburg, VA; Wallowa Resources - Enterprise, OR; Wisconsin Rural Partners - Wisconsin Rapids, WI; Wisconsin Rural Partners, Inc. - Oakdale, WI; Working for Equality and Economic Liberation - Helena, MT; WVU Institute or Health Policy Research - Charleston, WV; YouthBuild USA - Somerville, MA