

# RURAL COMMUNITIES IN THE WEST: INNOVATIONS TO SPARK RURAL PROSPERITY

## OUR PEOPLE, OUR PLACES, AND OUR WORK MATTERS

In America's rural west, community, economic and environmental health go hand in hand. Investment in the stewardship of our forests, watersheds and rangelands creates local jobs, while providing clean water and clean air for the Nation.

People across the West have come together to pioneer real-world solutions for the economy and the environment. These place-based approaches engage community voices and experience in the management of our natural landscapes.

Yet today, our rural communities are still struggling to keep up with their urban neighbors. The incoming Congress and Administration must invest in these solutions to revitalize communities, and create jobs through land stewardship. These investments will generate significant local and national benefits. Here's how:

*Let's keep rural Americans working: we are the stewards of our natural resources and we can be the engine of economic health and community well-being.*

## A STRATEGY FOR RURAL COMMUNITY PROSPERITY

**IMPLEMENT** existing policies with flexibility and creativity. Plenty of policies and programs support and encourage partnerships between federal land managers, private landowners, and rural communities—but they aren't used well enough. Let's use what we have to create the healthy rural communities we need.

**INVEST** in people and our landscapes to create prosperity. Community-based organizations play an essential role in designing solutions for land management and local job creation. These local organizations build broad community support, develop workforce capacity, and leverage public and private dollars leading to local business development and civic engagement.

**INNOVATE** by collaborating on larger landscapes, working across ownership boundaries, and building public-private partnerships to share responsibilities, risks, and rewards of land management.

**INFRASTRUCTURE** development can put people to work maintaining our forests, rangelands, and watersheds—tackling long deferred maintenance—from hiking trails to roads and bridges. Modernize our sawmills and biomass facilities to meet the opportunities in our forests and stimulate new energy production.

*The Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition (RVCC), promotes practical, equitable and sustainable solutions that are grounded in the experiences of rural community members, workers, and businesses. We tackle issues that affect rural communities, public and private land management, and the continuation of a natural resource-based economy in the West. We represent all Western states and include nearly 100 organizations, businesses and local governments.*

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The management of our public and private landscapes beyond urban boundaries affects our watersheds, forest products, energy systems, food and fiber supplies. The following are our recommendations for the next Congress and administration to optimize public and private land management in the West.

**IMPLEMENT** existing policies with flexibility and creativity:

### I. Forest Planning

The 2012 Forest Planning Rule was developed with unprecedented public input; it's now time to implement the Rule strategically and efficiently. Successful implementation of the Rule is dependent upon adequate staffing, capacity and commitment from both the Forest Service and local communities. Revisions to national forest plans should consider the following prioritization criteria:

- include a clear assessment of Forest Service capacity;
- maximize collaborative input while minimizing impacts to ongoing collaborative projects;
- and avoid shortcuts that will result in protracted conflict.

### II. All Lands Policies

Our challenges cut across public, state, tribal, and private lands so our solutions must work across all lands. Prioritize programs and tools that incentivize work across public and private boundaries.

- Expand the use of stewardship contracting, Good Neighbor and Wyden Authority, and other existing federal policies to achieve conservation priorities and critical economic outcomes on public and private lands.

### III. Sage Grouse Action Plans

- Implement Sage Grouse Action Plans at the state level that balance wildlife needs, landscape health, and economic development.

## IV. White House Rural Council

- Maintain the Council, which provides an important leadership role in providing advice and counsel on how to integrate rural economic development with landscape management.

**INVESTMENTS** in people and our landscapes to create prosperity:

### I. Wildfire Funding

In 2015 wildfires cost the United States more than ever before - a comprehensive funding solution will save federal dollars and allow us to use essential tools like prescribed fire and restoration practices to get ahead of the growing problem. A long-term solution must address and reform the rising cost of the 10- year average by:

- eliminating fire funding transfers;
- providing access to disaster funding;
- and addressing how the increasing cost of fire-fighting impacts other agency programs.

### II. Community-Based Organizations

Community-based organizations are the critical links between communities and the delivery of federal programs. Prioritize funding and sustain investments in the programs and activities that strengthen community capacity for conservation in land and resource management.

- Expand the Community Capacity and Land Stewardship Grant Program from a regional to national program.
- Ensure that programs include a technical assistance component to secure equitable access for lower capacity communities.

### III. Youth

One of the greatest challenges faced by rural communities today is the loss of human capital, particularly youth to urban areas.

- Expand and integrate programs such as the Youth Conservation Corps and USDA Rural Youth Development, and strengthen connections with federal land management agencies.

- Provide funding to organizations, institutions and State agencies who develop programs in natural resource stewardship education and training, especially where higher education can be connected through mentorships to youth.

#### IV. Integrated Budgets

The Integrated Resource Restoration (IRR) budget line integrates existing restoration budgets, successfully facilitating the strategic implementation of restoration projects in three Forest Service regions over the past four years.<sup>1</sup>

- Expand the program to all national forests.

**INNOVATION** to achieve large landscape scale successes:

##### I. Interagency Coordination at Scale

Initiatives that incentivize coordination across state and federal agencies, and private landowners, accelerate on the ground results and make the most of every dollar.

- Fully fund existing federal programs and initiatives that promote place-based partnerships across public and private landscapes.
- Continue and deepen commitment to this approach by developing new programs and funding that draw upon lessons learned.

##### II. Secure Rural Schools

The Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act provides much-needed support to rural counties whose economies are historically dependent on timber harvest revenue from public lands.

- Reauthorize the program and pursue an innovative permanent funding solution for public lands counties.

**INFRASTRUCTURE** to put people to work

##### I. Value-added Wood Processing Facilities

Modernize our sawmills to process restoration harvested wood products and support appropriately scaled bio-based manufacturing facilities.

- Fully fund the Forest Service Wood Innovation Grant program and other research and development initiatives that create the next generation of bio-based products and manufacturing and energy related jobs in rural communities.

#### II. Maintenance Backlog

National Forests have a backlog of forest and watershed restoration projects: at least 65 million acres need restoration work, and the maintenance backlog for trails exceeds \$314 million.<sup>2</sup>

- Increase investments in forest and watershed restoration, prescribed fire, and road and trail maintenance.
- Ensure that implementation offers rural workers stable employment close to their families and the landscapes they call home.
- Right size contracts for small business access.

#### III. Rural Development Programs

USDA Rural Development provides financial and technical assistance, yet programs are poorly aligned with the needs of natural resource-based communities.

- Incentivize coordination between Rural Development and the Forest Service to stimulate business development in public lands and natural resource based communities.
- Maintain and fully fund the Rural Business Development Grant program, the Rural Energy for America Program, and the Renewable Energy Development Assistance Grants.

#### Conclusion

The unique opportunities and challenges facing rural America require a fresh approach to public policy. At the same time, the West's open spaces, forests, rangelands, watersheds and agricultural soils – and the benefits they provide to all Americans – have never been more important. Let's put rural Americans back to work: we are the stewards of our natural resources and can be the engine of economic health and community well-being.

For more information, contact:

**Karen Hardigg**

**RVCC Director**

**karen@wallowaresources.org**

**(541) 426-8053 x24**

**Ashley Rood**

**RVCC Program Associate**

**ashley@wallowaresources.org**

**(541) 426-8053 x27**

[www.ruralvoicescoalition.org](http://www.ruralvoicescoalition.org)

#### **LEADERSHIP TEAM**

Blackfoot Challenge, MT

Ecosystem Workforce Program, OR

Forest Stewards Guild, NM

Mt. Adams Resources Stewards, WA

Salmon Valley Stewardship, ID

Siuslaw Institute Inc., OR

Sustainable Northwest, OR

Sustainable Southeast Partnership, AK

Wallowa Resources, OR

Watershed Research and Training Center, CA

---

1. C. Shultz, K. McIntyre, A. Ellison, and C. Moseley, *A Third Party Evaluation of the IRR Pilot: Phase 3: Stakeholder Outreach & Engagement* (Eugene, OR: University of Oregon Ecosystem Workforce Program, 2015).

2. Forest Service Trails: Long- and Short-Term Improvements Could Reduce Maintenance Backlog and Enhance System Sustainability. GAO-13-618: Published: Jun 27, 2013. Publicly Released: Jun 27, 2013.