



The Regional Rural Development Centers are a trusted source of economic and community development data, decision tools, education, and guidance in our nation's rural communities. The Centers link research with outreach in the areas of rural economic development, forming a one-stop-shop connection to the nationwide network of land-grant college and university researchers, educators, and practitioners.

• The RRDCs' work intersects with the Biden-Harris administration's priority areas in the following ways •

### RESPONDING TO COVID-19



The RRDCs leveraged their strong connection to the land-grant network of experts to foster adoption of resilience-promoting strategies and to conduct real-time research on impacts and responses to the pandemic in several sectors. Findings from these rapid-response research and outreach efforts can help the new administration develop evidence-based response and recovery plans. [Find out more about the RRDC COVID-19 research and outreach projects.](#)

### ADDRESSING CLIMATE CHANGE



The RRDCs are uniquely positioned to connect and support multi-state groups such as the National Extension Climate Initiative. Through this work, the RRDCs harness the capacity of the Land Grant's Cooperative Extension Service to address issues of climate change and sustainability and to reach rural audiences that have a long history of partnering with Extension. [Discover how the RRDCs can connect and support a rural climate movement.](#)

### ADVANCING RACIAL EQUITY



With leadership from the RRDCs, the Coming Together for Racial Understanding initiative, formed as a rapid response team by the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy in 2016, has since trained 80 Extension professionals from 29 states to help communities engage in civil dialogues around racial issues. The dialogue-to-change model is guiding positive change. [Learn more about the RRDCs' work to address racial equity.](#)

### PROMOTING ECONOMIC VITALITY



The RRDCs lead or support research on the many facets of rural vitality, innovation and economic resilience. The collective expertise of the RRDCs and their partners can provide policy-relevant information to Congress and the new administration to help guide their economic recovery planning. [Learn more about the RRDCs' efforts to advance the economic health of Rural America.](#)

• Looking ahead •

The RRDCs, established through the Rural Development Act of 1972, have been building capacity in rural places alongside the nation's Land-Grant University system for 50 years. [Learn more about their plans for the year to come](#) aimed at helping rural communities face economic turmoil, social unrest, climate variability and other challenges.

## RESPONDING TO COVID-19

*Along with its massive human toll, COVID-19 delivered an unprecedented economic crisis and exposed weaknesses in our food and healthcare systems. As the pandemic unfolded in the US, the RRDCs quickly initiated several concurrent research projects aimed at developing policy-relevant insights to inform response and recovery efforts. Cooperative Extension Service on-the-ground efforts also showcase relevant insights.*

### COVID-19 Issues and Data Briefs

Designed to provide information quickly or stimulate discussion, this series of briefs by the RRDC in the Northeast has studied the pandemic in the context of direct farm sales, the fruit and vegetable industry, consumer spending and sourcing, network science, and regional science. They are available online at: <https://bit.ly/2A4Qmbj>

### Local Food System Response to COVID-19

The RRDC in the Northeast is partnering with the University of Kentucky and Colorado State University in a one-year Cooperative Agreement with the United States Department of Agriculture, Agriculture Marketing Service, to research the impacts, adaptations and innovations of COVID-19 on U.S. Local and Regional Food Systems. This project focuses on rapid assessments of initial and ongoing COVID-19 responses in the food system across diverse market channels, products and populations. Project outputs will be released throughout the next year, including impact assessments, innovation briefs and webinars intended for research and practitioner audiences. <https://lfscovid.localfoodeconomics.com/>

### Mental Health Issues During COVID-19

The RRDC in the North Central region sponsored three webinars focused on building community resilience in the wake of COVID-19 by building the capacity for behavioral health in rural America, including addressing opioid addiction and the mental health of farm families during the pandemic.



[www.rrdc.info](http://www.rrdc.info)

### Rural Retail Resilience

[CREATE BRIDGES](#), currently being piloted in nine rural communities, explores how rural places can better support retail sector economies which often comprise a large portion of rural jobs. During the pandemic, the initiative guided the pilot sites into identifying and implementing rapid response strategies aimed at shoring up these businesses that were most at risk of failing.

### A Practical Guide to the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (the "CARES Act")

This guide, produced by Dorsey & Whitney LLP, was reproduced with permission by the RRDC in the West and University of California's Cooperative Extension and distributed throughout the nationwide cooperative extension system—an organization well-positioned to get information into communities that need it.

### Extension Disaster Education Network (EDEN)

In 2020, the RRDCs collaborated with the EDEN, a national organization within Cooperative Extension Services charged with advancing timely information and services to residents affected by disasters, to conduct listening sessions in seven states across the nation. These sessions provided EDEN with valuable insights on the type of information and educational resources that communities state they need to better prepare for, reduce the impact of, and recover from disasters.



## RESPONDING TO COVID-19 (ctd.)

### Special issue of Choices Magazine: Rural Development Implications One Year After COVID-19

The Council on Food, Agricultural and Resource Economics (C-FARE) and the RRDCs are organizing a special issue for *Choices* to be published in 2021. The issue will offer research-based perspectives on broad range of topics including food systems, local food, food security, poverty and income, broadband, health, self-employment, agricultural production, labor, and others.

Accepted titles include:

- COVID-19 Prepared: Healthcare in Rural Communities and USDA Rural Development Community Facility Asset Analysis
- A General Picture of Broadband Progress in Rural America Prior to the COVID-19 Outbreak
- Lost and Found? Job Loss and Recovery in Rural America due to COVID-19
- Rural Employment Implications of COVID-19: Analysis and Predictions
- Exploring the Impacts of Increased Rural Trail Use During the COVID-19 Pandemic
- COVID-19 and Permanent Bank Branch Closures
- Child Care and Rural Development Implications One Year After COVID-19

### Twitter/Google Trends Analysis of Food Security Under COVID-19

With colleagues from Penn State's College of Information Sciences and Technology and Hamad Bin Khalifa University (Qatar), NERCRD secured seed-grant funding to examine how social media may predict food shortages or insecurity under COVID-19. Using Google Trends and Twitter data on searches and tweets related to food items, food supply, food shortage and insecurity, we are developing insights into local conditions related to the food system in different states (including rural areas of the nation). In turn, we will examine how these can be used to forecast shortages in real time in different parts of the country, as well as emerging problems, for example, with shortages at food banks. We will complement this with analysis of changing consumer sentiments over time in different communities, related to food availability and quality. We expect that our findings will reveal recommendations to facilitate interventions by governmental organizations, which could be rapidly deployed to address food shortages, and other related problems, should a similar scenario reoccur.



This material is based, in part, upon work that is supported by the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, U.S. Department of Agriculture, under current and past awards.

Regional Rural Development Centers: [www.rrdc.info](http://www.rrdc.info)

## ADDRESSING CLIMATE CHANGE

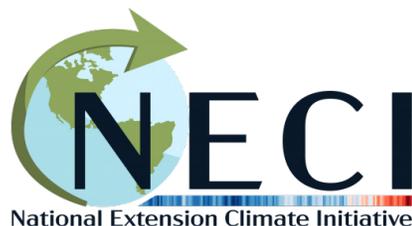
*From regenerative agriculture to renewable energy production, rural America is poised to play a significant role in carrying out the new administration's plans to address climate change. The RRDCs are uniquely positioned to connect and support a rural climate movement and have a long history of partnering with the Cooperative Extension System to support resilience in rural communities. Efforts already underway include:*



[www.rrdc.info](http://www.rrdc.info)

### **National Extension Climate Initiative**

With support from the RRDC in the West, this group of more than 100 land-grant university faculty and staff is spearheading multi-state collaboration on climate-related research and extension efforts, and is addressing the need for climate crisis educational materials in the national Extension system.



### **Food System Adaptation to Climate Change**

The RRDC in the Northeast conducts climate-change research primarily from the perspective of how agriculture and food systems can adapt to a changing climate. For example, our NIFA-funded research project, Enhancing Food Security in the Northeast (2011-2018), modeled climate change effects on the productivity of several crops, quantified the region's land requirements to produce complete diets under different diet scenarios, and estimated how crop output would change if new land is brought into production.

### **Cloud Seeding to Mitigate Hail Damage**

The RRDC in the North Central region has been working on evaluating the effectiveness of weather modification as a crop hail damage reduction agent. Their research evaluates whether cloud seeding in the summer reduces hail damage to small grain crops (wheat, barley, and oats). Results suggest that counties that participate in the cloud seeding program experience improved small grain crop yields due to reduced crop losses with an estimated benefit-cost ratio of approximately 20:1. As concerns regarding the changing climate and prevalence of extreme weather continue to grow, this research offers a useful evaluation of a potentially effective adaptation mitigating with crop loss due to hail.

### **National Sustainability Summit & National Extension Energy Summit**

The RRDCs provide planning support to this biennial convening of educators, practitioners, and researchers to exchange sustainability and energy research, innovative programming strategies and educational tools, and to cultivate new communities of practice that expand and strengthen collective impacts around climate/air, land, food, water, and energy. One outgrowth of this project is the development of the National Extension Climate Initiative.

<https://www.nationalextensionsummits.com/>



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## ADVANCING RACIAL EQUITY

The RRDCs have several initiatives under way to center and promote diversity, equity, and inclusion—from facilitating collaborations with tribal colleges to supporting training for communities to engage in civil dialogues around race relations.



[www.rrdc.info](http://www.rrdc.info)

### Coming Together for Racial Understanding

This initiative promotes community dialogues that lead to action related to improving race relations. Currently 29 state teams have participated in an intensive train-the-trainer process. While the work was initially envisioned as taking place through in-person dialogues, the COVID environment has led to adopting innovations for continuing to advance this work through virtual spaces. <http://srdc.msstate.edu/civildialogue/index.html>



### Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers

In partnership with the USDA Office of Partnership and Public Engagement, four sets of training materials were developed to build capacity with professionals serving underserved farmers and ranchers. These materials included recorded training videos, PowerPoints with speaker notes, and other support materials covering: (1) Understanding the Needs of Underserved Farmers and Ranchers, (2) Heirs' Property, (3) Farm Financial Literacy, and (4) Key Issues to Tap Farm Bill Opportunities and Advance Conservation. Professionals such as Cooperative Extension Service and non-profit agencies that seek to aid disadvantaged farmers/ranchers can access these tools to build their capacity to serve. <http://srdc.msstate.edu/community-prosperity/capacity-workshops>

### 1890 and 1862 Cooperative Extension Service Partnership Strategies

Cooperative Extension Service leaders in the South are joining with the RRDCs in exploring opportunities to better align efforts across the 1862 and 1890 system. Through a dialogue-to-change model, these leaders are thoughtfully considering action steps in a collaborative manner.

### Heirs' Property Resolutions and Prevention

The Southern region is particularly plagued with issues around heirs' property—defined by USDA as land that has been passed down informally through generations, in most cases without a will. Land held in this manner leads to limitations of land usage and can prevent leveraging the resource in significant ways. African American communities in the southern Black Belt have been particularly affected, although similar situations exist in the Mississippi Delta, in white communities in Appalachia, with Native Americans living on tribal lands, and in the Hispanic Colonias in South Texas. The RRDC in the South is partnering with the Cooperative Extension System, researchers, and non-profits in the South to explore opportunities for a regional capacity building response including policy implications, outreach/education needs, research priorities, and partnership opportunities. [http://srdc.msstate.edu/heir\\_property/index.html](http://srdc.msstate.edu/heir_property/index.html)

### 1862 and 1994 Land Grant University Collaboration

The RRDC in the North Central region is facilitating new collaborations between 1862 and 1994 Land Grant Institutions. One result of this effort was a new collaboration with faculty at the College of the Menominee Nation and Michigan State University. The collaboration includes research, extension and outreach related to broadband use and business development in rural and tribal areas, and resulted in a funded \$500,000 NIFA grant application.



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# PROMOTING ECONOMIC VITALITY

Vibrant, resilient rural economies support a productive, competitive agricultural sector and help position the U.S. as a global economic leader. The RRDCs conduct research to identify successful development strategies and deliver innovative programs and are a trusted source of economic and community development data, decision tools, education, and guidance.

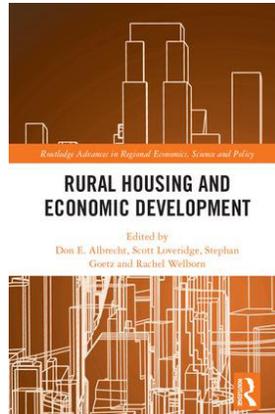


[www.rrdc.info](http://www.rrdc.info)

## Economic Development Research

The RRDCs partner on research projects aimed at helping policy makers better understand and address rural America's economic development problems. Examples of results from these efforts include:

- Book: [Rural Housing and Economic Development](#) (Taylor & Francis, 2017)
- Book: Building Rural Community Resilience Through Innovation and Entrepreneurship (forthcoming, edited by Dr. Charlie French, UNH, who received support from NERCRD for this project)
- [Strengthening Economic Resilience in Appalachia](#) — A technical report and guidebook for practitioners, published by the Appalachian Regional Commission
- [Innovation Issues](#): A series of research briefs based on studies conducted using the USDA's Rural Establishment Innovation Survey



**CREATE BRIDGES** is a pilot program centered on strengthening retail, accommodations, tourism, and entertainment industries which have been notably impacted by COVID-19 and often make up a large portion of the

jobs and businesses that drive rural economies.  
<http://srdc.msstate.edu/createbridges/index.html>

## Rural Workforce Development

- Rural Online Initiative—The RRDC in the West led a Rural Workforce Development Initiative Team in collaboration with Utah State University Extension and two of Utah's county commissioners to secure funding for a three-year pilot program leveraging Extension's well-established infrastructure to serve Utahns in rural communities as they develop skills needed in the growing freelance/independent contractor economy. The pilot program will begin in communities with the highest unemployment rates through public meetings and assessments of local needs/assets; skill-based workshops, one-on-one mentoring, webinars, and other training tools. The program also plans to bring together individuals with complementary skills to increase their earning potential, and offer incentives for businesses contracting with Utah freelancers.  
[https://extension.usu.edu/news\\_sections/impacts/roi](https://extension.usu.edu/news_sections/impacts/roi)
- Ascendium recently funded a collaboration between the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) and the RRDCs to support rural postsecondary education and workforce training. This project will build the capacity for rural communities to address workforce challenges by building and testing a Rural Workforce Engagement Model (RWEM) to be implemented by Cooperative Extension in two (TBD) pilot regions. Ultimately, this work will lead to the facilitation of community-led design of rural career pathways that will meet local workforce needs and the needs of rural people that have limited resources and/ non-traditional learners.

# PROMOTING ECONOMIC VITALITY (ctd.)

## Stronger Economies Together (SET)



A seven-year partnership between the RRDCs and USDA Rural Development resulted in over 100 rural regional collaborations. Guiding rural counties through a process of co-creating strategies rather than competing resulted in their ability to leverage \$200 for every \$1 of USDA RD resources invested.

## Rural Broadband Access

### National Digital Education Extension Team

is diligent in fostering rural broadband access and use through four working groups (policy, access, and adoption/utilization).

Recent efforts include the 4-H Tech Changemaker initiative which raises up youth leaders to aid in advancing digital skills in rural communities and collaborating on the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) sponsored conference “Broadband’s Role in Rural Economic Development: Exploring the Intersection between Community and Agricultural Broadband Needs,” which received grant support from the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture.



## Tourism and Outdoor Recreation

Vital to many rural places is the importance of tourism and outdoor recreation which can serve as an important economic diversification strategy for rural communities, contributing to their long-term economic well-being. The RRDCs have partnered with the National Extension Tourism (NET) network, which serves as a vehicle for members of Cooperative Extension Service, Sea Grant, and partner organizations to collaborate and share tourism-related research, education, and outreach programming across the U.S.



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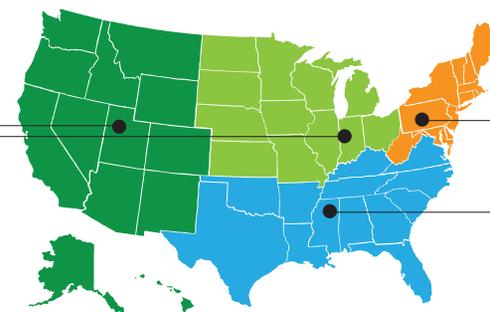
## UPCOMING INITIATIVES

The Regional Rural Development Centers, established through the Rural Development Act of 1972, have been building capacity in rural places alongside the nation's Land-Grant University system for 50 years. As rural areas across the nation continue to face economic turmoil, social unrest, climate variability and a great deal of uncertainty about the future, the RRDCs are responding in the following ways.

**The RRDC in the Northeast (NERCRD)** will continue its data-driven research efforts designed to help regions recover better in the post-COVID-19 era, with reduced regional disparities. This includes providing timely analysis of economic, social and health-related trends in rural communities, the factors driving these trends, and strategies for mitigating their impacts. The NERCRD also will continue research on local economic development drivers, including especially the role of rural innovation, by working with the Federal Research Data Center and colleagues at USDA/Rural Development and NSF. We will conduct research on and support local and regional food systems and supply chains, identifying sources of vulnerability to disruption, including climate change. Together with regional partners we will help rural communities assess their capacity for recovery and growth post-COVID, and we will identify constraints facing underserved populations such as female- or minority-owned businesses and develop recommendations for addressing these barriers. The NERCRD will continue to serve as a regional hub for our land-grant partners, linking research and Extension faculty across state lines. In the upcoming year we will organize and facilitate "affinity groups" around specific emerging priority topics.

**The RRDC in the North Central region (NCRCRD)** transitioned to Purdue University in September 2020 after 10 years at Michigan State University. The mission of the NCRCRD is to enhance rural communities through cutting-edge research and Extension programs by building innovative partnerships throughout the North Central Region. The NCRCRD's works focuses on three interconnected systems: communities, businesses, and households and three major themes: resilient communities and economies; leadership and civic engagement; community health and wellness. The NCRCRD is dedicating resources and personnel to address issues such as rural health inequities, substance use disorder, community development, workforce development, and rural small business resilience. As a newly transitioned center, the NCRCRD is building integrated regional working groups that cultivate applied research and Extension support of NCRCRD's major themes. In addition, the NCRCRD is leading a region-wide applied research effort focused on data collection, analysis and visualization to aid decision makers from across the region.

(continued)



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Any opinions, findings, conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the USDA.

## UPCOMING INITIATIVES (ctd.)



**The RRDC in the South (SRDC)** will continue to focus on three priorities that impact the well-being of Southern rural communities, as identified by its guiding bodies made up of Land-Grant professionals and relevant non-profit partners. These priorities are: (1) Develop Pathways to Resilient Communities, (2) Build Strategic Partnerships, and (3) Mobilize Resources around Emerging Issues and Opportunities. In the coming year, the Center will continue to advance the priority to *Develop Pathways to Resilient Communities* through (a) supporting the SERA 47 Local and Regional Foods Initiative, (b) increasing broadband access and adoption in collaboration with the National Digital Education Extension Team, (c) growing research and Extension collaboration around heirs' property issues, (d) expanding civil dialogue efforts around race and ethnicity, and (e) examining opportunities for the Community Resource Development program area to effectively respond to regional needs amplified by COVID-19. Under the second priority, *Building Strategic Partnerships*, the SRDC will (a) continue shepherding CREATE BRIDGES which is designed to explore opportunities to strengthen rural retail sectors which often make up a large portion of rural employment and which are particularly at risk in the current pandemic, (b) expand rural resources to promote prosperity in partnership with the USDA Office of Partnership and Public Engagement, (c) support leadership development efforts in the Southern Region Program Leadership Network, and (d) coordinate development of the annual Southern Region Community Resource Development Indicators report. For the third priority, *Mobilize Resources around Emerging Issues*, the Center will continue to assist with a national scan of priorities for the Extension Disaster Education Network (EDEN) and engage with stakeholder groups on a monthly basis to scan for new issues/concerns that need attention in addition to what has already been noted.

**The RRDC in the West (WRDC)** continues to address the concerns of the residents of rural America. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the WRDC has coordinated efforts of researchers and Extension specialists throughout the west in helping the residents and communities of the west address the economic consequences resulting from the pandemic. The WRDC has published briefs on understanding and coping with the economic change. Additionally, surveys were conducted of county and city leaders to understand their perspective on how their communities were being impacted.

The WRDC is supporting the National Extension Climate Initiative. This group of more than 100 land-grant university faculty and staff is spearheading multi-state collaboration on climate-related research and extension efforts, and is addressing the need for climate crisis educational materials in the national Extension system. Additionally, the WRDC initiated the National Sustainability Summit, which is conducted every other year.

The WRDC has been heavily engaged in rural economic development. Our Area Sector Analysis Process (ASAP) is a strategic planning program that has been implemented in over 50 counties in the west from New Mexico to Alaska and from Montana to Hawaii. This process helps communities target industries that are both desirable to residents and compatible with industry needs, and fit in a 21st Century economy. The WRDC has also partnered with Utah's Rural Online Initiative.