

Rebuild Rural America Act Summary

National Success Requires Rural America's Success

The success of our nation relies on the talent, innovation, and production of rural communities. Rural America generates much of the nation's wealth as the crossroads of industries like agriculture, forestry, energy, and manufacturing. Our rural communities are also the frontline in our fight to preserve our natural resources and are home to the industries that are critical to growing a prosperous economy. Rural communities are more often home to the men and women who enlist in the military to defend our country and reflect the values that have always made America strong. Our rural communities have the land and legacy facilities for a growing nation to utilize as new homes for their families or locations for new companies and new industries.

In recognition of this importance, the country has come together throughout its history to invest in rural America's potential. We established the land-grant university system to provide opportunities for a college education and to transform regions into new economic hubs. The associated extension services informed our farmers and rural residents of innovations and practices that helped them succeed. The Rural Electrification Administration lit up small towns and rural areas from coast to coast, and the Tennessee Valley Authority and Appalachian Regional Commission brought new industry and improved living conditions to struggling rural regions.

However, our national investment in rural areas and small towns has not always matched their contribution. Instead of prioritizing the potential of rural communities, we have left talent on the sidelines as rural America has faced economic challenges like struggling family farms, the loss of manufacturing jobs to foreign countries and automation, and the closure of local banks that make it harder for rural Americans to start businesses and for our Main Streets to thrive.

In spite of these challenges, rural Americans are not giving up. Local leaders have taken it upon themselves to innovate and try to transition their communities into the new economy. But they cannot do it alone. We must be more responsive and support these local efforts. There are now more people over ninety than under thirty in rural America. Rural Development is a crucial part of the safety net for farms and key to keeping and attracting people to rural communities and protecting and expanding the tax base for these communities. Now is the time to renew our commitment to strengthening rural communities and investing in rural America's future.

Rebuild Rural America Act

A national effort is needed to position rural regions across the country for success in today's economy. This effort will provide investment that complements local efforts and help make local economies more resilient, ensuring our rural communities are places in which anyone can live, work, raise a family, and retire. The ***Rebuild Rural America Act*** (RRAA) will establish a new

national partnership model that offers flexible, responsive, long-term investment and assistance for local rural development efforts.

A New Rural Future Starts at the Local Level

Every community has people with bold ideas, plans, and creative energy. The RRAA will give local leaders the tools and investment to turn that potential into new economic opportunity and success.

Rural areas can struggle to secure public resources because they lack community or economic development organizations or cannot afford grant writers and lobbyists to assist. That is unfair and rural leaders deserve equal opportunity to access their own federal tax dollars to help their communities. Existing federal programs also lack flexibility and are too narrow to lead to transformative solutions to a community's complex needs. For example, if a rural community wanted to improve local addiction and drug abuse services while strengthening workforce development and business expansion so individuals have skills to secure a new job and a new life following treatment, they would need to pursue many different funding sources from many Federal agencies, all with unique and often cumbersome processes. The failure to secure any one of these resources could jeopardize the entire effort. Our small towns and communities across rural America are mired in a sea of red tape.

The *Rebuild Rural America Act* seeks to change this by establishing a new **\$50 billion Rural Future Partnership Fund** that would provide multi-year, flexible block grants to support regional revitalization. Rural regions that work together to become certified would **automatically receive a commitment of five- year, renewable funding** to support progress on the region's locally developed goals and objectives.

Eligible Regions: States, in coordination with USDA, would certify rural regional designations after local leaders form a rural partnership council made up of representatives from across sectors and express an interest in participating. Eligible regions include:

- A micropolitan statistical area as defined by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget that may include neighboring census tracts or counties to include more rural communities in the region;
- A collection of rural census tracts or counties that fall outside of a micropolitan area and that join together in a region of practicable size with evidence of economic, social, and cultural cooperation;
- An Indian reservation.

Funding Amounts: Funding amounts would be allocated proportionally based on the population of each region.

An allocation will be tripled for each individual residing in a census tract in the region that has a poverty rate of 20 percent or higher.

Eligible Uses of Funding: This program would provide flexible, long-term Federal investment for comprehensive, collaborative, and locally driven community and economic development. This includes:

- ***Planning for the Future:*** Comprehensive planning and capacity building that empowers local leaders and builds problem-solving partnerships between local governments, higher education, civic associations, and the private sector;
- ***Main Street Revitalization and Critical Infrastructure:*** Critical infrastructure necessary to support small businesses and facilitate economic development, including high-speed internet and mobile internet and cellular services, affordable and workforce housing, technology centers, water and sewer facilities, and downtown corridors;
- ***Entrepreneurship:*** Efforts to improve access to markets and opportunity for small businesses and entrepreneurs, including cooperatives;
- ***Rural-Urban Connections:*** Establish new connections between rural regions and urban areas for mutual success that may include workforce readiness, access to locally grown, healthy foods, support of small and mid sized manufacturers in regional supply chains, and outdoor recreation;
- ***Public Services:*** Support for basic public services like child care centers, public schools, libraries, community centers, and health care providers, including community health centers, primary and emergency medical care, mental health, and substance abuse treatment providers;
- ***Skills Training and Job Placement:*** Support of education, job training, workforce development, or other needs relating to the development and maintenance of a skilled workforce that allows workers to adapt to economic change;
- ***Disaster Response and Resiliency:*** Activities to achieve greater economic and environmental resiliency, including emergency preparedness, disaster recovery, and hazard mitigation;
- ***Attracting Other Investment:*** Matching funds for other Federal funding, and support for collaborations that attract investment from the private and philanthropic sectors.

Projects that are part of a certified rural region's plan would also receive preferential consideration for funds from other USDA Rural Development (RD) programs. Matching requirements for these current RD programs would be waived for any projects in high-poverty census tracts within a certified rural region.

A New Rural Partnership that Empowers and Invests in Local Leaders

This legislation transforms the Federal government away from being complicated, siloed, and top-down into a more responsive, effective partner for rural communities.

- ***Creates a State-By-State Rural Innovation and Partnership Administration:*** A newly created USDA Rural Innovation and Partnership Administration would oversee this program and would offer staffing in all state USDA RD offices to provide hands-on help to local leaders craft and implement their rural revitalization plans, and a direct line to call with questions and requests.

- ***Empowers Local Leaders:*** A new suite of national capacity and training programs will help connect the expertise and resources of national technical assistance providers with rural regions. A Rural Future Leadership Institute will be established to support annual cohorts of rural leaders in skill- building seminars, best practice reviews, and other training.
- ***Streamlines Disaster Response and Recovery:*** This new program offers a new delivery system for direct Federal disaster response and recovery efforts to rural communities rather than working through states which can delay and complicate local areas receiving vital assistance.
- ***Coordinates Federal Resources to Make Government Helpful, Not a Hassle:*** The new agency will work with the cross-government Council on Rural Community Innovation and Economic Development to ensure local leaders have knowledge of and access to all Federal resources to meet their complex needs. Local leaders are also encouraged to use existing Federal plans to develop their rural regional plan so as to reduce duplication for local stakeholders.
- ***Informs Strategies with Data:*** The new agency will work with Federal and non-Federal partners to provide cutting-edge, timely data that assist regions in developing effective economic and community development strategies, measuring progress and impact of plans, and assessing future needs and vulnerabilities.
- ***Launches the Rural Future Corps:*** USDA RD will coordinate with AmeriCorps to launch a Rural Future Corps to help rural communities expand critical services like childcare, health, nutrition assistance, education, and job training. This program would also help improve the capacity of local governments and economic and community development organizations. Specific efforts would be included to retain the Corps members in the rural areas after their service, helping to reverse population loss and creating a pipeline of a new generation of local leaders for rural America.