

Economic Development



Agricultural Marketing Service Technical Assistance (AMSTA) project

Led by the Northeast Center and launched in 2014 to provide grant-writing training to potential applicants of the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service grants related to promoting local foods and farmers' markets, this project provided training to more than 3,000 individuals in all 50 US states in its first year. All state trainings were geared towards expanding the participants' understanding of how to write a better grant application to USDA AMS. In year two, the project provided additional grant-writing training in 16 high-priority states. Since then, in collaboration with AMS, we have transitioned this project to provide dedicated technical assistance to recent and current grant recipients of the Local Food and Farmers Market Promotion Programs. The website of this new effort is: <http://sites.psu.edu/amsta>.

Policy Options for Reducing the Prevalence of Food Deserts in Rural Areas

The Northeast Center has completed a study that examines policy options for reducing the prevalence of food deserts in rural areas: Bonanno, A., R. Cleary, L. Chenarides, and S.J. Goetz (2018). Store Profitability and Public Policies to Improve Food Access in Non-Metro U.S. Counties. *Food Policy*.

Effects of Public Investment in Land Grant University Programs

A 2016 study conducted by the Northeast Center found that agricultural research and Cooperative Extension programs helped more than 137,000 farmers stay on the farm between 1984 and 2010. In addition to publication in *Applied Economics Perspectives and Policy*, these findings were shared via a press release, a policy brief, and an infographic. See <http://aese.psu.edu/nercrd/news/2016/land-grant-programs-keep-farmers-farming>.

Health Insurance, Rural Economic Development and Agriculture (HIREDnAg)

Led by Shoshanna Inwood (Vermont University) in partnership with all four RRDCs and a national set of collaborators, the goal of HIREDnAg is to understand how health insurance policy influences farmers' decisions to invest, expand and grow their enterprises, and how these decisions contribute to workforce vitality, development and security in the food and agricultural sector. As part of the research, over 1,000 farmers and ranchers responded to a survey across 10 states: Vermont, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Nebraska, Mississippi, Kentucky, Washington, Utah and California. Additionally, up to 10 families in each of the study states were interviewed. A national webinar offered an in-depth explanation of their findings and is archived at <http://hirednag.net/webinars>. A recent report: Inwood, S., A. Knudson, F.A. Becot, B. Braun, S.J. Goetz, J.M. Kolodinsky, S. Loveridge, K. Morris, J. Parker, B. Parsons, R. Welborn, and D.E. Albrecht. 2018. "Health Insurance and National Farm Policy." *Choices*. Quarter 1. <http://www.choicesmagazine.org/choices-magazine/submitted-articles/health-insurance-and-national-farm-policy>

Farm Stress Employee Training and Technical Assistance

Over the past several years, farmers have faced increasing financial stress resulting from a number of factors. The primary drivers have been low commodity prices coupled with rising debt levels. This in turn has led to reductions in net farm income of more than 50% of its peak in 2013 (USDA, 2018) and a growing risk of loan default for many farm families. As a result, farmers and their families may face increased difficulty in managing the stress and frustration of challenging financial circumstances. Farm Services Agency (FSA) personnel in turn face the challenge of working with stressed farmers. FSA field staff have noted that some farmers have expressed their stress through aggressive verbal and physical confrontation. In addition, some farmers have explicitly expressed the thoughts of suicide. FSA personnel may not have the skills and knowledge to effectively work with distressed farmers, which may increase their own stress. The North Central Center is developing and delivering training to help FSA personnel effectively identify and assist farmers experiencing distress.

Heirs' Property Issues in the South

The Southern region is particularly plagued with issues around heirs' property. USDA defines the issue like this: "Heir property refers to land that has been passed down informally from generation-to-generation. In most cases, it involves landowners who died without a will. Heirs' property is land owned 'in common' by all of the heirs, regardless of whether they live on the land, pay the taxes, or have ever set foot on the land." Land held in this manner leads to limitations of land usage and can prevent leveraging the resource in significant ways. The Southern Center was recently awarded an AFRI seed grant that will allow a broader assessment of research and Cooperative Extension Service efforts taking place across the region. The grant will also explore the regional impacts of underdeveloped land and depreciating housing stock that results from heirs' property issues. This will allow better estimates on the number of heirs' properties in the region.

Southern Local & Regional Foods Initiative (SERA 47)

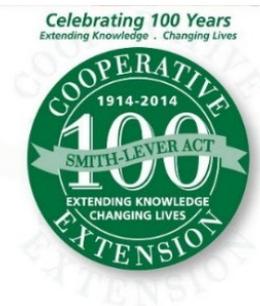
The Southern Center is providing leadership to a team of research and Cooperative Extension Service specialists to strengthen support for local and regional food systems efforts. A survey of the regional needs has been complete, and teams are actively developing work teams around the top issues, designing a resource bank as a "go-to" spot for finding research and Cooperative Extension Service resources, developing common measures and tools, and examining different models for how Cooperative Extension Service has invested in this work.

Investing in Recreation to Advance Regional Economies

Regional solutions are gaining traction, particularly in rural areas, as multi-county collaboration is often needed to identify and capitalize on competitive advantages. This type of planning, at the heart of the Stronger Economies Together (SET) initiative, led by the Southern Center in partnership with USDA Rural Development and Cooperative Extension Service, has resulted in a number of regional initiatives focusing on the importance of recreation, both for quality of life as well as an economic driver. Three examples are: (1) **Indiana 15 Regional Planning Commission** is finalizing a new half mile of trail, funded through the Indiana Department of Natural Resources Recreational Trail Program. This project increases connectivity of trails within the region and will be advanced further by for additional trail construction projects across the region; (2) **Foothills Region, North Carolina** formally adopted The North Carolina Districts Bike Plan to highlight the natural resources and scenic trails of the region. The region is creating and distributing maps of the Bike Plan to assist in cross-marketing cultural and natural resources throughout the region; and (3) **Northern Shenandoah Valley, Virginia** completed a regional interactive outdoor recreation resource tool, www.shenandoahvalleyoutdoors.com, to help establish the region as a premier Mid-Atlantic outdoor recreation destination.

Rural Opportunity Initiative

The Rural Opportunity Initiative, a partnership between SRDC, Georgetown University, Iowa State University, Mississippi State University, and Purdue University, seeks to connect investors and entrepreneurs/small businesses in rural America. Two pilot workshops (Des Moines, IA on November 2, 2017, and Starkville, MS on June 21, 2018) linked operating businesses looking to increase their growth, needing investments of between \$250,000 and \$5,000,000, and investors looking for rural opportunities.



Regional Rural Development Centers: www.rrdc.info



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