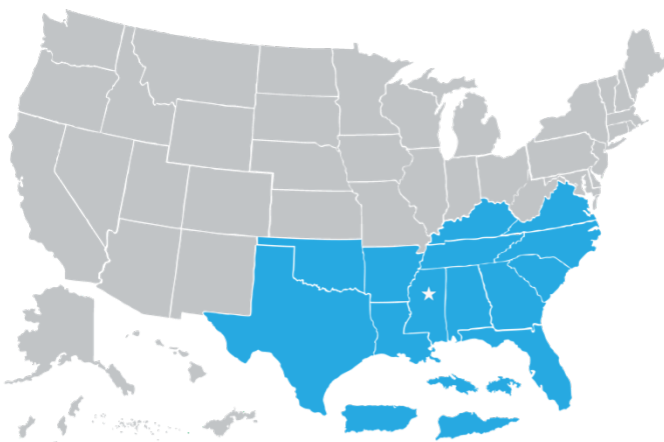*Investing in Rural Capacity:*
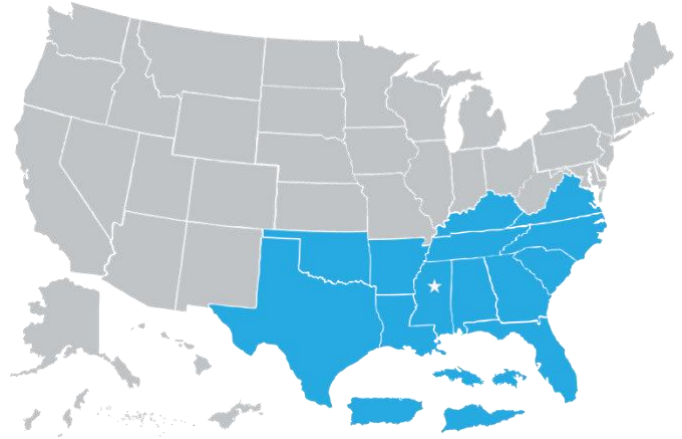
Key Findings from the Southern Region

A Comprehensive Summary of Findings from the National Rural Development Stakeholder Listening Sessions

February 2023

SOUTHERN REGION

Introduction

The overarching purpose of this initiative was to identify the critical investments needed for building capacity and improving quality of life in rural America. This was done using a stakeholder survey combined with a series of virtual listening sessions. This report is focused on findings from the region served by the Southern Rural Development Center.

Southern Regional Listening Session at a Glance

- Held virtually on April 20, 2022
- Hosted by Southern Rural Development Center
- Number of registrants 81
- Number of participants: 42

Summary Findings

Priority Rankings

Survey respondents were asked to rank in order what they view as the most critical rural development issues for further investment. There were eight options provided to all respondents, and the top four are shown in the figure, with comparisons between the regions that the respondents' organizations primarily served (explore the findings more closely via the interactive data dashboard: https://bit.ly/RuralRecoveryDashboard).

Priority Ranks

	North Central	Northeast	South	West	National Scope	Total
1	Economic development	Physical infrastructure and public services	Workforce development, training, and education	Physical infrastructure and public services	Health	Physical infrastructure and public services
2	Workforce development, training, and education	Economic development	Physical infrastructure and public services	Economic development	Physical infrastructure and public services	Economic development
3	Physical infrastructure and public services	Workforce development, training, and education	Health	Health	Economic development	Workforce development, training, and education
4	Community vibrancy	Climate change, climate variability, and extreme weather	Economic development	Workforce development, training, and education	Community vibrancy	Health

Each survey participant was asked to answer questions concerning assets, challenges, and opportunities connected to the top three topics they identified as priorities. Responses to these open-ended questions were coded, and the results are shown in the tables below. (Below each table, the statistic for perceptions of low/no capacity at the respondents' respective institutions came from the survey as well.) These are followed by the recommendations for future investments discussed during the Southern Region virtual listening session.

Workforce Development, Training & Education – Southern Region Survey Results

Assets	• Access to rural community colleges • Secondary/post-secondary vocational/technology schools • State/regional/local workforce investment initiatives
Challenges	• Insufficiently trained local workforce • Limited access to transportation and poor quality of roads/transportation • Challenges in retaining workforce • Lack of higher education/training facilities and programs • Limited access to financial resources (especially for training) • Lack of broadband access
Opportunities	• More training and education programs • Research focused on work ethics, skillsets, community asset assessment, rural models of entrepreneurship, and issues around school district consolidation

Perception of low/no capacity at respondents' institution to address the challenges and opportunities:
- 44%

Recommendations for Future Investments – Southern Region Listening Session Results
- Realign incentives to meet the needs of rural communities
- Collaborate and partner across disciplines, communities, organizations, and other stakeholders
- Pursue equitable access to non-traditional and advanced education and training

Physical Infrastructure & Public Services – Southern Region Survey Results

Assets	• Access to land and space for further infrastructure development • Sense of community, connected residents, spirit of cooperation • Existing or soon to be expanding broadband • Networking and partnership among community organizations
Challenges	• Limited broadband and wireless phone service • Identifying funds and mechanism that are in line with the population demand for maintaining/improving infrastructure • Meeting housing and transportation needs
Opportunities	• Broadband • Research and funding addressing the particular needs of rural areas and small towns • Education investments including distance education (broadband), entrepreneurship, and technical skills training

Perception of low/no capacity at respondents' institution to address the challenges and opportunities:
- 71%

Recommendations for future investments – Southern Region Listening Session Results

- Inventory the physical infrastructure and public services that currently exist
- Engage community in meetings, involving the diverse communities to be impacted
- Meet the people who will be impacted where they are
- Include youth and those with lived experience
- Provide government officials with training for climate-friendly practices
- Incentivize green infrastructure regarding workforce opportunities, and help the people who may be displaced in a community
- Consider credentials necessary for education and open connections for remote expertise that can be shared across state lines

Health – Southern Region Survey Results

Assets	• Land and natural resources that could be used to benefit healthy behaviors (e.g., fresh foods, outdoor exercise) • Existing organizations and services (local and state) • Local primary care/critical access services in some areas
Challenges	• Limited services relative level of need • Mental, behavioral, and substance abuse • Too few healthy food options • Lack of cultural support for healthy lifestyles and equitable access
Opportunities	• Address the characteristics and interests of rural places and small towns • Improve applied research/evaluation and planning to develop evidence on what works • Increase funds for healthcare access and education (such as nutrition education, broadband access, Community Health Workers, school nurses)

Perception of low/no capacity at respondents' institution to address the challenges and opportunities:

- 51%

Recommendations for future investments – Southern Region Listening Session Results

- Expand stable broadband access critical to providing telehealth
- Build partnerships with libraries, churches, and others to use computers and internet for health appointments and to access medical records
- Address basic needs such as food access and safe drinking water as priorities
- Provide strategic funding for rural communities to address suicide rates, drug abuse, and mental health issues
- Actions should be taken simultaneously to be most effective

Economic Development – Southern Region Survey Results

Assets	• Rural innovation and entrepreneurship • Natural and outdoor spaces • Tourism, recreation, and travel
Challenges	• Lack of resources for small businesses and entrepreneurs • Limited amenities (affordable housing, healthcare, financial services, shopping/retail) • Lack of broadband or technologies
Opportunities	• Startup funds, incubation effort, and training for business owners and innovators • Broadband access, digital assistance and tools, and remote work capabilities • Workforce development

Perception of low/no capacity at respondents' institution to address the challenges and opportunities:

- 51%

Recommendations for future investments – Southern Region Listening Session Results

- Conduct research and development around workforce interests and needs
- Improve education for basic life skills and employer needs, helping parents understand and meet student needs, providing better training for teachers on classroom management, and offering apprenticeship programming and other opportunities
- Remove barriers and increase access to resources and infrastructures needed to get to work (housing, broadband, transportation) and for entrepreneurs
- Enhance networks and share resources to be "community driven"
- Connect tourism to natural resources
- Move beyond the community as a unit of analysis to pursue solutions that are multi-community to achieve the scale needed to manage challenges and emergencies
- Engage in succession planning for cooperatives, land ownership, and businesses
- Look ahead to technological developments and trends reshaping entrepreneurship

Continuing the Dialogue in the Southern Region

Following the survey and listening session, presentations were made to several stakeholder audiences in the southern region, virtually and in-person. In addition to disseminating results and providing opportunities to inform planning, these events were used to solicit feedback and engage in "ground truthing" among diverse participants. Recognizing that some groups were under-represented in the research, intentional efforts were made to engage with partners working in the 1890 Land-Grant University System. One important briefing took place at an in-person joint meeting of 1890 leaders in Extension and research. Following presentation of Southern Region results, participants were invited to provide feedback on a form asking for their rankings on the issue priority areas being considered in this project, additional topics in need of attention, and the importance of different capacity building initiatives. Approximately 80 people were attendance at the conference, and 33 people submitted forms.

Comparison of the research results with this feedback from the 1890 Extension and research leaders is important to consider for continued dialogue around priorities and capacity building activities both in the South as well as for any state working to engage Black/African American communities. Although not in direct contrast with the original research results, differences in prioritizing investment areas did surface. For instance, the top four priority areas were as follows, with the first in the highest priority: (1) economic development; (2) workforce, development, training, and education; (3) health; and (4) agriculture and food systems. In response to the open-ended question asking for additional priorities they felt needed attention, participants identified more specific issues falling under the more general topics, including broadband access, educational assistance for Black students, addressing financial resources for families and businesses, and addressing mental health needs. Regarding programming, coordination of Extension and outreach teams across state and institutional lines was seen as the most important.

Providing opportunities for feedback such as these are important to the continued work of the RRDCs in general, and the SRDC has plans to continue to solicit input for its own planning and to inform the priorities that are conveyed to partners. In fact, a southern region follow-up virtual briefing and feedback session is planned for early 2023.

Roles for the Regional Rural Development Centers (RRDCs)

The listening sessions were intended to inform a broad range of rural development partners, including leaders with the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Land-Grant Universities, among others. Given their focus on building capacity across organizational and state lines, the RRDCs may play several roles in advancing the strategic investments addressed in this report. These include the following themes.

Reaching across 1862, 1890, and 1994 Land-Grant University systems to collaborate on priority issues.

Conducting, translating, and disseminating research through journal articles, special issues, briefs, and presentations.

Scaling Extension outreach through curriculum development, training, gauging impacts, and showcasing promising practices.

Helping to acquire and leverage funding for research, Extension, and scholarship.

Actively encouraging the integration of research and Extension on key issue areas.

Facilitating workshops, listening sessions, and dialogues for innovative problem solving.

Convening researchers, Extension practitioners, and rural development stakeholders on high priority issues.

Building and coordinating multi-state teams.

Notes

Information in this report is excerpted from a report titled "*Investing in Rural Capacity: Comprehensive Summary of the National Rural Development Stakeholder Listening Sessions*." The report shares findings from a national initiative conducted through the Regional Rural Development Centers (RRDCs).

For a comprehensive description of methods and participants, download the full report at: https://www.usu.edu/rrdc/listening-sessions#reports

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For More Information

More information, including the comprehensive listening session report, survey report, supplementary materials, and an interactive data dashboard, is available at: https://www.usu.edu/rrdc/listening-sessions

Learn more about the Regional Rural Development Centers at: https://www.usu.edu/rrdc/index