

Strengthening Research and Extension Efforts Improves Community Development in Rural Louisiana

Situation:

Rural Louisiana continues to face significant challenges to improve local economies. For example, one out of every four people in rural Louisiana lives below poverty and roughly three quarters of rural parishes have been defined as persistent poverty counties and education completion rates in rural areas lag those in urban. Despite these serious challenges, we know surprisingly little about the socioeconomic conditions and trends in rural areas of Louisiana. In addition, we have limited stakeholder input from rural residents regarding rural development research and extension strategies to improve community rural development.

The Louisiana Center for Rural Initiatives (LCRI) was created to understand more about the socioeconomic conditions and trends in rural areas of Louisiana as well as gather rural stakeholder input. LCRI is an interdisciplinary team of social scientists and policy professionals engaged in research and extension programs that contribute to sustainable community and rural development in Louisiana. LCRI, as created by Act 796 of the Louisiana Legislature, is a consortium initiative between the Louisiana State University Agricultural Center (LSU AgCenter) and the Southern University Research and Extension Center (SU Agricultural Center). LCRI is housed in the Department of Agricultural Economics and Agribusiness at LSU and operates a satellite center, the Delta Rural Development Center in Oak Grove, La.

Action:

On September 6, 2006, the LSU AgCenter's Delta Rural Development Center took one of its first steps to gather rural stakeholder input to better develop and deliver rural development research and extension programming. LCRI and the Delta Rural Development Center received a small grant to conduct a workshop with rural residents to assess their perspective of current research and extension needs to improve community rural development. Almost 50 people from public and private organizations as well as rural residents participated in the workshop. The structure for conducting the workshop was provided by the Southern Rural Development Center at Mississippi State University. James Barnes, Director

of the Delta Rural Development Center, along with LSU AgCenter community economic development agents Cynthia Pilcher, Kay Tettleton and Dora Ann Hatch facilitated the workshop at Calhoun and Winnsboro in Northern Louisiana using distance education technology.

Participants were asked to identify the top three areas of future work to strengthen community development in rural Louisiana. The top three priorities included:

- Education and workforce development - rural communities struggle to: (a) assess workforce skills needed and the role of economic incentives (salaries, taxes) to improve recruitment of businesses; (b) develop of a rural entrepreneurship educational strategy; (c) access community and technical college classes; and (d) provide enhanced educational opportunities for youth and redesign of high school learning.
- Economic development (agriculture and non-agriculture) - lack of entrepreneurial environment, limited access to high-speed internet, poorly trained workforce, drug usage and a reduced farming sector continue to limit development of rural communities in Louisiana.
- Natural resource and environmental management - rural Louisiana would benefit by (a) improving solid waste management strategies; (b) strengthen water distribution infrastructure and enhance water quality; (c) expanding access to public areas for recreational use; and (d) adopting more conservative land uses to preserve natural resources and reduce pollution.

Impact:

Gathering of rural stakeholder input provides three fundamental impacts aimed at improving community rural development in Louisiana.

- First, rural stakeholder input provides a set of suggested priorities for rural development research and extension programming which means our work within LCRI and the Delta Rural Development Center becomes increasingly more relevant, timely and focused on the most important community development needs in rural Louisiana. Currently, LCRI, the Delta Rural Development Center and community rural development agents are developing new and adjusting existing exten-

sion programming to focus more on rural entrepreneurship, value-added agricultural enterprise development, leadership and rural tourism.

■ Second, LCRI and the Delta Rural Development Center can now adjust human and other resources to build a more effective research-extension programming infrastructure to meet these rural development priorities.

■ Third, LCRI and the Delta Rural Development Center will be able to leverage resources more effectively when collaborating with other institutions within Louisiana, such as the Southern Agricultural Center, as well as other institutions of higher education in the South. The same type of workshop was also conducted throughout the states in the South during 2006. The top priorities for rural development research and extension programming across the South can now be identified in a systemic way based on rural stakeholder input. This means LCRI and the Delta Rural Development Center can identify other states with similar priorities and develop projects which address community rural development needs using fewer resources.

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