

MIDWEST RURAL ASSEMBLY



Overview of the 2009 Midwest Rural Assembly

*August 10–11, 2009
Sioux Falls Convention Center
Sioux Falls, South Dakota*

Cultivating a Stronger Rural America

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Many thanks to the coordinating organizations of the
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Great Plains Rural Policy Network

Heartland Center for Leadership Development

League of Rural Voters

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National Catholic Rural Life Conference

Nebraska Housing Developers Association

North Central Region Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education

North Central Regional Center for Rural Development

Northern Great Plains Inc.

Renewing the Countryside

Rural Policy Research Institute

South Dakota Rural Enterprise

The Minnesota Project

West Central Initiative

Cultivating a Stronger Rural America

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Overview

“We need to keep rural communities vibrant. People want to continue to live in rural America, but they have to feel like there’s something to come back for.”

—Elsie Meeks, South Dakota State Director for USDA Rural Development

Elsie Meeks’ message reflects the concern and conviction of the 170 people who gathered on August 10–11, 2009, in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, to launch the Midwest Rural Assembly—a gathering of community leaders, organizations and policymakers dedicated to creating a stronger rural America. They came from fifteen states and one Canadian province. They discussed the issues that mattered most to them, explored policy opportunities and challenges, and committed to action. They left with new connections, knowledge and skills that will help them move their work forward across the Midwest. They also returned home with the desire to remain engaged with this new network.

The Midwest Rural Assembly was initiated by participants of the 2008 National Rural Assembly who decided to bring the work they had begun with other rural leaders back home. Through the work of members of twenty coordinating organizations, led by the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, the Midwest Rural Assembly was planned to build the capacity and the network needed in the Midwest and Great Plains region to support sustainable rural communities. The National Rural Assembly’s Rural Compact principles (www.ruralcompact.org), listed below, provided some key areas around which participants shared strategies and policies for regional revitalization.

Rural Compact Principles:

1. Quality in Education
2. Stewardship of Natural Resources
3. Health of Our People
4. Investment in Our Communities

But while the Midwest Rural Assembly was an event, its goal is much broader. The ultimate vision is of an ongoing network that serves as an effective means through which rural people can help develop, share and promote both community-based solutions and public policies that will strengthen their communities and the Midwest as a whole.

Priority Issues, Policies, and Action

For two intensive days assembly participants met, interacted with, and heard from a diverse group of people through plenary speeches, issue sessions, skill-building sessions, small group activities, panels and exhibitions. Energy was high and the spirit was welcoming. Throughout the two days, the group discussed and selected priority issues, policies and actions.

Investment in Our Communities

- 1. Leadership development to spearhead and maintain revitalization and sustainable development.** Successful revitalization stories from Holt County, Nebraska, and Bemidji, Minnesota, highlighted the need for leaders to step forward to spearhead change in their communities, as well as the need for ongoing development of new leaders throughout the region to make efforts sustainable in the long term. Milan Wall from the Heartland Center for Leadership Development also stressed the importance of leadership development in a popular skill-building session on the topic.
- 2. Collaboration and resource sharing within and among communities.** Also highlighted in the stories of Holt County and Bemidji, as well as in U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Development priorities (see page 4) was the need for government entities to set aside differences and rivalries, collaborate with each other, and share resources (through inter-local agreements among communities in the case of Holt County and through a joint planning board of city agencies in the case of Bemidji). The joint planning board in Bemidji celebrated its first “Interdependence Day” this year.
- 3. Connecting young adults and New Americans to social and economic opportunity.** Enabling young people to return, attracting families and integrating immigrants into communities were priorities for many participants. A panel of young leaders living and working in rural communities recommended that communities find ways to welcome young people and be open to new venues for social interaction that appeal to them. Garat Ibrahim of the Midwest Immigrant Health Project addressed the interests of New Americans in rural communities, especially regarding access to appropriate education and housing. Participants were also interested in improving the access of New Americans and young adults to microenterprise funding and financial education so they could leave low-wage, often unsafe employment and remain in the community.

4. Increasing the availability of local capital in rural areas. One group of participants focused on the Rural Philanthropy Growth Act of 2009, which creates a federal income tax credit for charitable gifts to qualified community foundations in economically distressed counties. This act would capitalize community-based unrestricted endowment funds to benefit these counties.

“If urban America has the technology and we don’t, what does it say about democracy in this country?”

—Loris Taylor, Native Public Media



5. Access to broadband technology in remote rural areas. Internet penetration in Indian Country is 10 percent or less. Participants deemed access to broadband infrastructure, hardware and software essential to economic development, health care, civic engagement and many other aspects of life. Access to broadband is an issue of fairness. “If urban America has the technology and we don’t,” Loris Taylor of Native Public Media asked, “what does it say about democracy in this country?” As one solution to this critical problem, the assembly felt that policies and action should be promoted to ensure that all federal agencies build broadband access into new construction and refurbished buildings.

Stewardship of Natural Resources

1. Producing renewables—such as biomass and wind energy—in an environmentally sound way. The production of renewable energy is an important new industry in the rural Midwest. Making it environmentally sustainable is critical for the long term. The city of Madelia, Minnesota, is developing the Madelia Model—a comprehensive approach to economic development. It includes a bioprocessing

enterprise scaled to community needs to incentivize the production of diverse crops, including perennials, as biomass for energy production—providing both jobs and environmental benefits for the community.

2. Rebuilding rural communities by looking at energy and economic development in a new way. Decreasing the energy burden and improving local economies in many rural communities is a pressing issue throughout the region. Participants were intrigued by a successful model that the Greater Milan Initiative in Milan, Minnesota, population 300, is using, called a “Sustainable Energy Utility.” The goals of an SEU are to build community assets, create local and diverse energy opportunities, and provide support for all types of energy consumers (commercial, residential and farms). The SEU model was developed by the Center for Energy and Environmental Policy at the University of Delaware. You can find more information on the SEU at www.iatp.org/seu.

3. Creating local food systems that build the economy, improve health and provide greater food security. “There is economic opportunity,” said USDA Under Secretary for Rural Development Dallas Tonsager, “in growing local food for local people.” Jacob Limmer, owner of the Cottonwood Bistro in Brookings, South Dakota, and the operator of a farm producing food for his restaurant, shared his experience developing a successful restaurant and the challenges of sourcing local foods. Systems for collective local food distribution, he emphasized, are a critical component in making local food production profitable.



“There is economic opportunity in growing local food for local people.”

—Dallas Tonsager, USDA Under Secretary for Rural Development

Health of Our People

1. Recruiting medical professionals to rural communities. Medical professionals—doctors, nurse practitioners, physician’s assistants, etc.—are in short supply in rural areas. Providing more incentives for medical professionals to work in rural communities is a priority for assembly members. Promising solutions included loan forgiveness, scholarship programs and programs to recruit rural students into medical careers.

2. Telehealth. At the same time, participants considered it critical to promote and ensure the availability of telehealth facilities in rural areas so that residents can have the benefit of medical expertise that is not available in those areas.

3. Health care reform. Legislation to date has not addressed the interests of rural communities—or only addressed them at the last minute. Both Congresswoman Stephanie Herseth-Sandlin and Steph Larsen of the Center for Rural Affairs discussed the limitations of current legislation. Going forward, assembly members want legislation to address the interests of rural communities from the beginning, and include:

- a. Reform of the disparities in Medicare reimbursement rates.
- b. Affordable insurance options for farmers, ranchers, small business owners and employees in rural areas.
- c. Provisions to promote health and wellness.
- d. Increased access to mental health providers.

Quality in Education

1. Engaging schools in community economic development and distance learning, and recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers. Dr. Jim Beddow, Dr. Richard Melmer and Dan Guernicke described promising South Dakota models that focus on these solutions, including development of a Rural Teacher Corps at the University of South Dakota and a regional education cooperative that is using “open courseware” to develop online education for its region.

2. Providing entrepreneurship training, financial education, and career planning and training in rural and reservation schools to retain and bring back young people. The Cheyenne River Reservation has a promising model in place—financed through the Four Bands Community Fund (a Native community development financial institution)—that helps provide students with the skills they need to find employment at businesses in the area.

There is no doubt that the priorities described above and in the Rural Compact are interconnected, and changes in one area likely affect others. Government policies impact work opportunities that can retain or bring in families. In turn, families need housing, schools and health care—all of which can draw new businesses and therefore new families. Throughout this entire cycle, an adequate telecommunications infrastructure is vital. The reality of this interconnection requires that policy solutions be created and implemented with this understanding and context.

Policymaker Input and Feedback

The interest and participation of policymakers in the assembly was striking. Most stayed for the entire two days and listened as well as provided input. They were seeking ideas and answers and in the process demonstrated what Minnesota Secretary of State Mark Ritchie emphasized: policymakers are more accessible and interested in partnerships than people may realize. “I challenge you,” Nebraska State Director for USDA Rural Development Maxine Moul told the audience, “to give us the best projects and the best ideas for funding.”

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—Maxine Moul, Nebraska State Director
for USDA Rural Development



Assembly keynote speakers included South Dakota Congresswoman Stephanie Herseth-Sandlin and USDA Under Secretary for Rural Development Dallas Tonsager. In addition to Under Secretary Tonsager, assembly participants heard from and interacted with five other leaders in USDA Rural Development: Deputy Under Secretary for Rural Development Victor Vasquez and four state directors—Colleen Landkamer of Minnesota, Elsie Meeks of South Dakota, William Menner of Iowa and Maxine Moul of Nebraska.

State and local officials also participated. Minnesota Secretary of State Mark Ritchie spoke about moving issues and policies to action. Senior Economic Development Officer Toni Merdan from Minnesota Congressman Collin Peterson's office and Economic Development Advisor Ben Ready from South Dakota Senator John Thune's office responded to the assembly's priorities. Minnesota State Senator Gary Kubly and South Dakota State Representative Bernie Hunhoff also provided responses.

State Director Moul pointed out that the top priority of Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack is for rural communities to create wealth so they become self-sustaining, repopulating, and economically thriving. "For the first time," she told the group, "rural development is at the top of the agenda of the Department of Agriculture."

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—Maxine Moul, Nebraska State Director for USDA Rural Development

Under Secretary Tonsager got everyone's attention by emphasizing the agency's fortunate yet difficult position of having twice as much money as it had last year—and needing to get those appropriations and stimulus funds out the door and into the countryside as soon as possible.

Tonsager outlined seven priorities for USDA Rural Development:

1. Improving collaboration between communities within the same region to better leverage resources.
2. Capitalizing on the economic benefits of local food systems.
3. Improving the effectiveness of community development programs already at USDA.
4. Expanding economic opportunity from bioenergy, including biofuel, biomass and cellulose.
5. Increasing broadband access to rural communities.
6. Identifying and working with strategic partners on the ground in rural communities.
7. Improving the flow of capital into rural communities to make important investments.

The priorities of policymakers overlapped closely with those of other assembly participants. Clearly, a new opportunity exists to gain support from the federal government for the interests and priorities of local

Midwestern communities. Capturing community-based solutions that address real interests and needs and sharing them with policymakers has perhaps never been more important. The Midwest Rural Assembly network can play a significant role in ensuring those conversations happen.

Conclusion

The speakers, discussions, workshops and individual conversations that made up the Midwest Rural Assembly achieved many of its pre-identified goals. Assembly members gained new information and insights that will be useful in their work, met people they could learn from and partner with, and committed to taking further action based on what they learned. "I feel that the connections I made will allow me to improve rural America and rural policy," wrote one participant. The opportunity to interact with many new people from different states emerged as a highlight of attendees' experience, along with the opportunity to engage with federal and state government officials. In the future they wanted even more opportunity to interact with each other, more participation from local government officials, and more time devoted to action. Overall, participants found the assembly stimulating and worthwhile, offering something for almost everyone.



"I feel that the connections I made will allow me to improve rural America and rural policy."

—Participant, Midwest Rural Assembly

But a successful gathering was only one of the desired goals. The assembly's steering committee is working to build on the momentum of the gathering and develop the means for participants to stay connected and move forward the priorities and potential collaborations that emerged. If you would like more information, want to share ideas, or join the network, please visit www.midwestruralassembly.org, send an email to midwestruralassembly@iatp.org, or contact Kerstin Gorham at (612) 870-3429.

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Many thanks to the sponsors of the 2009 Midwest Rural Assembly, without whom this gathering would not have taken place.

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