

## PREVIEWING DECEMBER'S SYMPOSIUM

## 'The New Rural America' Promises A Reality Check on Diverse Regions

BY DAVID DANGLER



For many Americans, “rural” is a special state of mind that has little to do with what is actually taking place in a thousand distinct markets across the nation.

Each market or unique economic region has its own defining characteristics. Collectively, it is true, there are enough of the most basic ingredients – less people, more open land – to justify the generic label, “rural America.” But today, as never before in our history, what we casually refer to as rural America is in fact a patchwork quilt of wildly diverse economic regions.

The W. K. Kellogg Foundation has recently completed a series of research papers on “Perceptions of Rural America.”<sup>1</sup> The series is particularly helpful in illustrating measurable differences between what various constituencies think about rural America versus what leading statistical indicators reveal.

As the prime example, we cling to the belief that the dominant industry in rural America is agriculture. The reality is that “farm employment is 7 percent of all rural employment. Adding 0.8 percent for farm input supplier employment and 3.9 percent for processing and marketing jobs, the total still is only 11.7 percent for all agriculture-related jobs in rural America.”<sup>2</sup>

Even though we still perceive a substantially higher role for agriculture in rural America, the Kellogg study does indicate a high awareness of the plight of the family farm. On the one hand, the suburbanization of America has transformed small farms into quasi- or pseudo-rural subdivisions.

On the other, agribusiness or megafarms have absorbed or displaced the more traditional family-style farm. For the less than 10 percent of the rural population who still live on farms, the majority now habitually supplement farm income with off-farm employment.

### Reshaping Policy Vision

As the NeighborWorks® national rural policy forum made clear in February, perceptions or misperceptions are not to blame for stale policy. Instead, institutions and special interest groups have controlled rural policy, as William Paul Browne, professor of political science at Central Michigan University, has often suggested.<sup>3</sup> The door is wide open for new stakeholder groups to redefine the rural landscape and begin to reshape a policy vision for rural America.

When a team of rural NeighborWorks® leaders and colleagues recently undertook the design of the network's first rural symposium, we all came to the same conclusion – it's really time to introduce the new rural America, to ourselves, to our urban and suburban counterparts, and to our partners.

The December 10 symposium, “The New Rural America,” at the NeighborWorks® Training Institute in San Francisco, will feature ground-breaking analysis by Mark Drabenstott, director of the Center for the Study of Rural America, a unit of the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City<sup>4</sup> which defines the new rural America not in broad national

strokes but rather in the detailed exploration and analysis of emerging regional economies (see page 11).

In this fresh view, existing and historic boundaries such as township perimeters, county lines, and even at times whole state demarcations, are set aside in favor of more fluid regional boundaries. Even more striking, these new and self-described regions do not isolate and separate rural, suburban and urban communities, but, rather, integrate them within regional plans that acknowledge and anticipate critical interdependencies.

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Throughout the day, symposium participants will move from self-selected, thematic break-out sessions to plenary sessions. The practitioner-based design team has recommended that each element within The New Rural America symposium yield specific action steps for participants to take back to their respective communities.

For example, a track on new rural affordable housing strategies, will explore innovative designs and financing in both sparsely populated “soft” rural areas, such as Nebraska and the Dakotas, and “hot” markets, such as the West Coast, parts of Colorado, and New England. A parallel track on community economic development will demonstrate how traditional rural values – hard work and self-reliance – combined with new technologies, are creating jobs.

In depopulating areas (See page 6), a handful of new jobs can make the difference between a rural community having the capacity to offer core services or lacking it. In hot rural markets, jobs have to offer livable wages, a pay scale high enough to offset the high cost of housing.

### **Humor Is Critical**

Humor is another critical dimension to life in the new rural America. The symposium luncheon will feature a keynote address by Roger Welsch, who may be best known as “the fat guy in overalls” on CBS’s *Sunday Morning*, where he offers up essays on American rural and small town life.

Welsch will offer his own imitable brand of story-telling as well as lead an afternoon track in storytelling as an

effective community-building tool. A resident of Dannebrog, Nebraska, with a population of 354, Welsch is an advocate for Native American interests and the author of more than 30 books.

The symposium design team and growing list of sponsors and endorsing agencies are determined that participants will come away with a better sense of the new rural America and clarity about what each can do to measurably increase their organization’s impact and effectiveness.

As Kevin Smith, president and CEO of **Community Ventures Corporation**, a NeighborWorks® organization in Lexington, Kentucky, and symposium design team member, has suggested, “If we can assure each participant, whether from the nonprofit or for-profit sector, that they will pick up fresh ideas to help them achieve their objectives back home, we’ll have done our job”. ■

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## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> The series can be accessed in detail at [www.wkkf.org](http://www.wkkf.org)

<sup>2</sup> *Perceptions of Rural America*, W.K. Kellogg Foundation, page 1

<sup>3</sup> See William Paul Browne’s *The Failure of National Rural Policy*, Georgetown University Press, c. 2001

<sup>4</sup> Go to the center’s Web address for more information-  
<http://www.kc.frb.org/RuralCenter/RuralMain.htm>