

Surfing the Net for Rural Information

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The "information superhighway" or "Internet" provides a means by which all decision makers have equal access to information on a timely basis. Access to the Internet can help level the information playing field and can provide important benefits for rural communities.

Information on things such as grant and technical assistance programs, plus data on economic and social conditions and business activities in a state or region could be of use to decision makers everywhere. Rural communities often miss opportunities because they lack access to this type of information. Public libraries or government documents have traditionally been a source of such information, but the search can be time-consuming and tedious. In addition, information is often out-dated when it becomes available to such sources.

Because of its sheer size, it is often hard to keep track of what resources are available on the World Wide Web (WWW, W³ or Web). This *Horizons* points out some interesting Web sites along with a comment about the kind of information available at those sites. Communities and organizations can access and download information contained in these sites for use in their own research, analysis, and publications. The sites included are by no means an exhaustive list. Because of rapid changes in sites and addresses, it is not possible to guarantee that these are all valid addresses. At the time of publication, all sites could be accessed as given. Mention of specific sites, companies, or trade names does not imply endorsement by REAP or Virginia Tech.

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Accessing the World Wide Web

A home page or web page is similar to a base of operations. It can be self contained or, by clicking on the high-lighted section, it can take the user to other sources without having to exit the source he/she is currently in. To return to the previous level, the user would click on "back." There are three basic ways to gain access to the Web: 1) through a direct connection; 2) by connecting to a local campus or frequent provider via a modem; or 3) through a commercial provider via a modem, such as Prodigy, Delphi, Netcom, or America Online.

Universities, community colleges, and some public libraries have direct connections to the Web. There are also two free-net services available in Virginia: Central Virginia's Free-net: <http://freenet.vcu.edu/cvanet.html> (email questions to: cvnet@freenet.vcu.edu) and Southeastern Virginia Regional Free-net: <http://www.seva.net> (email questions to: seva@seva.net). If none of the free options is available, there are commercial carriers that have local access numbers and charge a flat fee.

Almost any computer can be used to access the Web. However, unless the computer has graphics capability, only text based Web sites will be accessible. The user next needs software to log onto the Internet. Two popular versions of this software (known as "web browsers") are Netscape and Mosaic. Universities often have Internet software available to community members. Commercial providers should provide a web browser with membership.

Where to Start Once Online

Once on the Web, everything becomes self-evident.

Web browsers generally employ extensive "point-and-click" technology, making navigation straight-forward. Each Web site has an address. If the address is known, it is typed into the space titled "Location" and *<return>/enter* pressed to go to that site. The easiest way to find information when the addresses are unknown is to use a "search engine." These engines, much like a subject index at the back of a reference book, search the Web for sites related to a subject. Web sites related to keywords are listed with a small description of what is located at each site. Once the topic has been found, it can be accessed by double clicking on the title following the Web symbol. The following four search engines are widely used (Web addresses appear in italics and contain *no spaces and no ending punctuation*):

- 1) ALTA VISTA: *http://www.altavista.digital.com* contains one of the largest indexes of Web sites. Almost any subject entered will yield at least several hundred sites. It also provides a full-text index of more than 13,000 news groups.
- 2) YAHOO: *http://www.yahoo.com* is one of the oldest search engines. It has a comprehensive cross discipline resource base. There is also an editorial filter that deletes personal home pages.
- 3) NLIGHTN: *http://www.nlightn.com* allows a user to search The Library Corporation's Universal Index which contains hundreds of public and private databases, news wires, reference materials, and Web documents. NLIGHTN also lets users order information not yet available on-line.
- 4) WHOWHERE?: *http://www.whowhere.com* is a comprehensive "White Pages" service for locating people and organizations on the Net.

Sites Providing Overviews of and Access to Information

There are several Web sites that can be used as a starting point in almost any search. These home pages list topics that will link the reader to a number of other sites.

Boise State University:

http://www.idbsu.edu/carol/business2.htm#Outline contains an outline of different sites that have

economic, social, and statistical data. This fairly comprehensive list will lead to many other sites mentioned in this publication.

State and Local Governments on the Net:

http://www.piperinfo.com/piper/state/states.html has a searchable index that will link a user to the organization of interest. All of the links are related to community and economic development and policy issues at state and local levels.

Federal Web Locator:

http://www.law.vill.edu/Fed-Agency/fedwebloc.html is a comprehensive list of federal government information on the WWW. There are Web sites for departments in the legislative, judicial, and executive branches of government.

Data Sources

The national data sources listed are often useful when doing local economic analysis. These sites allow the user to access the most up-to-date information on regional economies, employment, income, and agriculture.

Government Information Sharing Project (GIS):

http://govinfo.kerr.orst.edu allows the user to access several different data sources, including regional, economic, demographic, and income information. Economic summaries for states and local areas are made available. Data by state and county can be accessed by clicking on maps. The most impressive feature is the ability of the user to customize the reports that are created. GIS is a good place to check before going to other government data sites.

Bureau of the Census:

http://www.census.gov allows the user to look at a wide array of census bureau data. This site is impressive as a source of national data. There are WWW versions of the Statistical Abstract of the United States, County Business Patterns and the Economic Census.

Bureau of Labor Statistics:

http://stats.bls.gov has several useful resources, such as the Consumer Price Index, Producer Price Index, data on employment and unemployment, productivity, and employee compensation. Several of the resources are updated monthly.

Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA):

<http://www.bea.doc.gov> allows the user to access the BEA's news releases, The Survey of Current Business, articles, and detailed data files from BEA's national, regional, and international economic accounts. However, a subscription is necessary to receive any of the data mentioned at this site.

National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS):

<http://www.usda.gov/nass> provides statistical information and services for agriculture and rural communities. Crop reports, soils maps, and graphs on crop yield values are just a few of the interesting things at this site. This site is actually part of the USDA Web pages. To see what other on-line services USDA offers, <http://www.usda.gov> should be accessed.

Rural Development Information Sources

Rural Development Grant Information:

<http://www.latech.edu/tech/rural/grants> lists federal grant programs, each having different eligibility requirements. Federal departments that offer grants are listed. Information is furnished on the objective of the grant, examples of funded projects, and contact information. Another site listing information about grants is gopher://gopher.nal.usda.gov:70/11/nalpub/ffsra. There may be some cross-listing of grants between the two sites.

Regional Rural Development Centers:

Each center includes a list of publications on rural and community development.

Western Rural Development Center:

<http://www.orst.edu/Dept/WRDC/commprog/publist.html> has a long list of publications on topical subjects.

North Central Regional Center:

<http://www.ag.iastate.edu/centers/rdev/programs.html> has articles on-line. Many of the articles are applicable to any state or region, such as an article giving tips on writing grant proposals.

National Rural Development Partnership:

<http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/nrdp> provides information about National and State Rural Development Councils (NRDC/SRDC). Links lead to a listing of NRDC members, with their agency or organizational

affiliations noted. The SRDC sites provide contact information if the user is interested in learning about that council's activities.

1995 National Rural Conference:

<http://www.esusda.gov/ruralconf/conf.htm> includes conference proceedings and a list of other rural resources. A section titled "Understanding Rural America" describes general rural conditions and trends, with details about the many differences found in rural America.

Center for Agriculture and Rural Development:

<http://www.ag.iastate.edu/card>, a resource for agricultural communities, addresses some of the emerging issues in agriculture, like the current Farm Bill. The other news and publications it has on-line are targeted more toward the Iowa State University community. There are some interesting links leading to extension reports and related Internet resource sites.

Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service (CSREES):

<http://www.reeusda.gov> describes the purpose of this agency, different funding opportunities, current news events, and success stories. More importantly, names of contact people are included if the user is interested in learning more about the research reported at this site. A new home page is currently being created so the information will be very current.

Rural Development Handbook:

<http://tdg.res.uoguelph.ca/omafra/rural/h-bk-pt1.html> is a leadership training book that advertises itself as a guide to personal, organizational, and community development.

Web Sites in Virginia

State of Virginia:

<http://www.state.va.us> should be a popular place to visit for those interested in state and local information. The home page has definitive topics that clearly point the user in the correct direction. A visitor's guide, a government section, and educational information are just a few of the topics available. At the local level, many counties and cities in Virginia are also using the Web to advertise unique and interesting features of their locality as a way to attract potential businesses and tourists.

Virginia Library and Information Network:

<http://leo.vsla.edu/index.html> provides access to library resources, government resources, and Virginia resources. The library resources section provides links to library gophers (menus of broad topics that will lead the user to more specific topics) and on-line databases. Legislative, governmental and legal information can also be accessed from this site.

Rural Economic Analysis Program (REAP):

<http://www.reap.vt.edu/reap/reap.htm> is under construction. It has the most current policy paper, *Forces of Change Affecting Virginia Peanut Producers* and the four most current *Horizons* on-line with plans to add new publications as they are available. The user can request additional information or hard copies via email by double clicking on the email address provided at the end of the home page.

Summary

The information superhighway provides nearly unlimited access to information previously unavailable to rural Virginians. The World Wide Web can help rural decision makers gather and share information with communities that are facing similar difficulties.

One of the drawbacks of the Web is its sheer size. Often people are intimidated by the technology and

jargon related to the Internet. This issue of *Horizons* is intended to provide hints about sites containing information that would be of use to rural decision makers. These sites, and the Internet as a whole, are only useful if rural citizens make them so.

NOTICES

****Visit our home page at <http://www.reap.vt.edu/reap/reap.htm>. Mark Crawford has worked hard setting it up. It is definitely worth a visit.**

****In the works is a REAP Report that describes those producers who enter non-traditional farming enterprises. This report should be available in April or May.**

****Va. Agriculture Internet Summit, March 19, focuses on how to best use the Internet, with demonstration. Contact: Forum on Agriculture and Consumer Topics, PO Box 1275, Midlothian, VA 23113, (804) 281-1333.**

****HOW TO REACH US: REAP, Department of Agricultural and Applied Economics, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA 24061-0401; telephone (540) 231-7417; fax (540) 231-9443, email karenm@vt.edu or on the WWW: <http://www.reap.vt.edu/reap/reap.htm>**

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