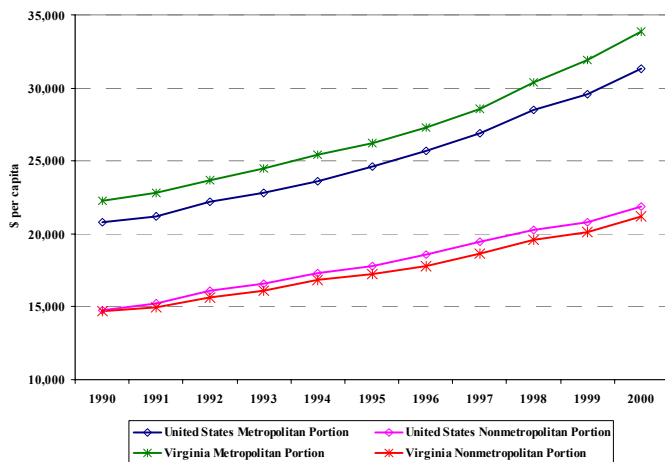


Who Speaks for Rural Virginia and Rural America?

George R. McDowell

No one speaks for rural Virginia or rural America.

Incomes of rural people continue to lag behind people in non-rural parts of both America and Virginia. The rural/non-rural income gap is large (\$9,485 per capita nationally), growing, and greater in Virginia (\$12,667) than in the United States generally (Figure 1).



Source: US Dept. of Commerce

Figure 1. Per Capita Income in Rural and Non-Rural America and Virginia

In the face of this disparity it is pertinent to ask, “Who speaks for rural America and who speaks for rural Virginia?”

A 2002 W.K. Kellogg Foundation report *Perceptions of Rural America: Congressional Perspectives* explicitly asks the question, “Who speaks for rural America?” The research for the report then says, “no one.”

While rural states receive disproportionate representation in the U.S. Senate, there are very few rural members in the House of Representatives. Many members characterize the difficulty raising rural issues on the congressional agenda due to a lack of numbers....

But even with this challenge, legislators agree that *no one voice speaks for rural America*. They are hard pressed to think of a nationally prominent rural advocate. Many ... legislators turn to the Farm Bureau for information and expertise on agricultural matters, but they cannot cite any single person (or organization) as being the identifiable voice for rural America. (Italics added. WKKF pp. 13 - 14).

If no one speaks for rural America, a next question to be asked is, “If there were a voice, who knows anything of substance worth saying?”

Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City

The most visible and prominent organization carrying out research on economic issues of rural America is the Center for the Study of Rural America of the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City. This branch of the United States’ central bank serves Nebraska, Oklahoma, Wyoming, and parts of New Mexico and Missouri. Of the Center for the Study of Rural America established in 1996, the Kansas City Federal Reserve (Fed) says,

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With so many dramatic changes facing rural America in the 21st Century, the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City decided to create a resource for this important part of our nation's economy. The Center will focus on the economic and policy issues that are unique to rural America—and give these issues the national attention they deserve.

(<http://www.kc.frb.org/RuralCenter/about.htm>)

That the Center and its staff of five are the most prominent institution in rural research is quite telling. All 12 Federal Reserve Banks (the Fed) have research departments to support the monetary policy responsibilities of the nation's central bank. For the most part, those research departments of the Fed supplement economic research carried out by hundreds of public and private university and research organization scholars and analysts. The Fed researchers are seldom the primary source of research—even for monetary policy. The Center for the Study of Rural America does research on economic forces affecting rural America but does not do much to address US fiscal policy—the ways that federal agencies enact policy or spend federal monies—and the effect of such policy on rural people and places.

Rural Policy Research Institute

The second most important rural research initiative is the Rural Policy Research Institute (RUPRI), a funding initiative of the congressional delegations from Iowa, Nebraska, and Missouri started in 1992 on behalf of research in the land-grant universities of those states. The RUPRI center is at the University of Missouri. Despite the political obligations to the three midwestern states, RUPRI has sought to coordinate and assist a national network of rural policy researchers. In its mission statement, RUPRI states that it “provides objective analysis and facilitates public dialogue concerning the impacts of public policy on rural people and places.” In its vision statement, RUPRI states that it seeks to “be recognized as the premier source of unbiased, policy relevant analysis and information on the challenges, needs and opportunities facing rural America.” (www.rupri.org)

Notwithstanding the primarily research obligations and objective of RUPRI, Charles W. Fluharty, RUPRI Director, spends much of his time establishing networks among the many diverse groups having identifiable rural interests. These constituency development efforts, more consistent with developing a rural voice, are to make the research agendas of the few rural scholars more attuned to real problems faced by rural people and to make sure that the research has an impact on rural policy.

National Rural Development Partnership and National Rural Development Council

In its rural constituency building efforts, RUPRI has worked closely with the National Rural Development Partnership (NRDP). As of 2002, 40 states had rural development councils, and Virginia is not one of them. The state councils are the result of the NRDP's efforts and the National Rural Development Council (NRDC).

The NRDP and the NRDC were started under the first Bush administration in 1990 as an effort to better coordinate the efforts of federal government agencies directed at rural America. The NRDC, the national level body whose work is staffed by the NRDP, reflects that objective:

Based in Washington DC, the National Rural Development Council (NRDC) brings together representatives of over 40 federal agencies and national organizations to provide a uniquely rural perspective to federal policy and program development (<http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/nrdp/nrdc.html>).

If rural areas had the voices to speak for them, would those voices have research-based information to provide to decision makers?

The establishment of State Rural Development Councils and the independent activities of the councils at the state level seem to be the primary activities leading to the development of a national rural voice. To that end, the state rural development councils have come together independently of the NRDP and the NRDC to establish Partners for Rural America, a private, non-profit organization that can conduct political and lobbying activities that the two federal governmental entities cannot.

Federal funding can be and should be used to assure that services from federal agencies are not duplicated and to make federal programs more effective through better coordination. The emergence of a national rural development voice may be a by-product of that effort. However, as the Kellogg Foundation report makes clear, an effective rural voice speaking to the United States Congress has yet to emerge.

While many implications result from the lack of a national voice for rural America, a particularly harmful one is the lack of support to scholars and analysts who can research and document the plight of rural places and people. And many diverse topics need to be addressed! Among the diverse topics that need addressing are the special difficulty of providing services to America's rural veterans, the threat

of making and marketing illegal drugs in rural communities, the apparent threat of Medicaid reimbursement rates on the survival of rural health care systems, and many others.

Before policies can be changed, the problems must be documented and the basis for changing policy developed. Before problems can be documented and policy analysis accomplished, a constituency must exist who says a problem exists that should be addressed and changed. The most important national rural policy questions fall under the rubric of fiscal policy. The ways that federal agencies enact policy or spend federal monies are clearly beyond the domain of the Federal Reserve Bank, however important the input of the Fed is to the study of rural America.

Who Speaks for Rural Virginia?

The disparity between rural and urban/suburban people and places is uniformly greater in Virginia than in the United States as Figure 1 shows. Both federal policies and the policies of the Commonwealth of Virginia are of concern to rural Virginians. So who speaks for rural Virginia? The answer is the same for Virginia as it is for America: Rural Virginia has no voice!

The Rural Virginia Prosperity Commission has the establishment of a Center for Rural Virginia as one of the centerpieces of its 2001 recommendations. However, in the face of the state's fiscal woes, the Commission may be reluctant to seek legislation to establish even a private, non-profit center that uses any state funding.

On September 24, 2002, on the initiative of the Virginia Association of Resource and Conservation Councils, a rural summit was held in collaboration with the Rural Virginia Prosperity Commission. Members of Resource and Conservation Councils around Virginia had heard about the NRDP program and state rural development councils in other states. They felt a discussion was needed about formation of a rural development council for Virginia. The 130 attendees at the rural summit were enthusiastic about the formation of a state rural development council. In general, they believed that the efforts toward the formation of a Center for Rural Virginia and a state rural development council could be combined. At the time of this publication, a steering committee is being formed to consider the views expressed at the September 2002 meeting about the formation of a rural development council associated with the NRDP.

Who Benefits from an Economically Improved Rural Virginia?

New institutions are needed to speak to the problems of rural Virginia and rural America. The support of both rural and urban people, agencies, institutions, and organizations is needed to create an institution to represent rural Virginia. Without the support of urban people, the income gap that requires monetary transfers to help support rural areas will continue to widen.

If you have an interest in helping create and support an institution that will help rural Virginia develop economically, please contact Rural Virginia Prosperity Commission through the REAP office at (540) 231-9443 or by email at reap01@vt.edu or Mr. Jeff Neal, Chair, Virginia Association of RC&D Councils at (276)889-4180.

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****New from REAP:** *Are Extension Education Programs Effective? Impacts of a Program to Assist Limited Resource and Socially Disadvantaged Farmers* by Ebere Akobundu, Albert Essel, George Norton, Abebayehue Tengene. The authors conclude that farmer income can be enhanced by an increasing number of visits by a program agent. They recommend increasing the number of visits per program agent before the program is expanded into areas not currently served.

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