

This is the final issue of *Rural America*, which will be replaced in February of 2003 with a magazine covering all of ERS's research areas. This issue begins with a new look at rural population loss by David A. McGranahan and Calvin L. Beale. The counties most likely to lose people in the 1990s had low population densities, few amenities, and were not near any metro centers—all characteristics that discourage development. The few counties with these characteristics that did not lose people benefited from unusual circumstances, such as industrial agriculture or casinos. Surprisingly, high-poverty counties were no more likely to lose people than were other counties.

Counties blessed with natural amenities, on the other hand, have been among the most rapidly growing. Kenneth M. Johnson and Calvin L. Beale have identified 330 nonmetro recreation counties, many of which score high in amenities. These counties have grown faster than most county types, largely from immigration. Most are in the mountain West or upper Great Lakes and can be classified according to their principal attraction, such as casinos, reservoir lakes, or ski resorts.

Two articles treat regional development efforts, an increasingly popular way of targeting rural development programs. Richard J. Reeder and Samuel D. Calhoun discuss the new Delta Regional Authority, created in 2000 to assist the Mississippi Delta counties in 8 States. This region made substantial progress in the 1990s but still lags the Nation in poverty, unemployment, and per capita income. The new Authority is expected to leverage project funding, emphasizing infrastructure and aid to distressed areas. Faqir S. Bagi, Reeder, and Calhoun studied Federal funding in the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) area, which encompasses parts of 13 States. Appalachia has made significant strides in recent decades but still suffers from high poverty and transportation problems. Central Appalachia is the poorest section and, therefore, receives large per capita income support payments. ARC is concentrating on improving highways to attract more industry.

Manufacturing employment has held up relatively well in rural areas, despite a long-running downward trend nationally. However, the skill level of food processing employees has dropped, as noted by Gerald Schluter and Chinkook Lee in their study of the skill needs of the U.S. processed food trade. The growth of overseas trade in meat and poultry has led to higher demand for low-skilled workers. Many of these new jobs have been in rural areas, but the wages and nature of the work make the jobs unattractive to local workers, necessitating immigrant and commuter workers.

Publicly supported water and sewer facilities can generate economic benefits well beyond the supply of water. Faqir Singh Bagi uses a study of Economic Development Administration projects to show how water system projects create and save jobs, increase private investment, and add to the local property tax base. The effects are greater in urban areas, but rural areas receive substantial benefits.

One Federal program that has assisted with a wide variety of rural development projects is the Resource Conservation and Development program (RC&D), which is explored by Dwight M. Gadsby. Established in the 1960s to counter economic decline, locally planned RC&D projects have grown strongly over the past decade and were given permanent status in the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002.

Interest in minority farmers has been increasing recently. Census of agriculture data can overlook minorities because of its focus on farm operators. Jess Gilbert, Spencer D. Wood, and Gwen Sharp have used USDA's 1999 Agricultural Economics and Land Ownership Survey to look at land ownership by Blacks, American Indians, Asians, and Hispanics, as well as Whites. Counting nonoperating land owners, especially Blacks, adds considerably to the number of minority people involved with agriculture. While few in number, these people make up an important component of their local communities.

Finally, Fred Gale examines how growing trade between and United States and China might affect rural areas in this country. Imports from China—often of goods that compete with rural American industries—have soared since the mid-1980s. On the other hand, prospects for agricultural exports to China are promising. Chinese competition will require adjustments in the rural economy.

In the Rural Updates section, John Cromartie reports on a significant reversal in rural migration. In 2000-2001, the number of people moving from nonmetro to metro counties exceeded the number moving from metro to nonmetro by more than 1 million for the first time since the 1980s. Rural areas had gained from migration during most of the 1990s, but an aging rural population and more rapid job growth in metro areas has caused a turnabout. The biggest changes occurred in the West and among college graduates.

Dean Jolliffe traces the decline in rural poverty, which reached its lowest recorded level of 13.4 percent in 2000. Poverty rates are highest among minorities and children, and in the West and South. In all regions, nonmetro poverty is higher than metro. Nonmetro earnings per job likewise improved in 2000, according to Linda M. Ghelfi, rising 0.7 percent. But nonmetro earnings also continue to lag metro. The rural-urban earnings gap widened in the 1990s and now stands at 33 percent. Because available poverty and earnings data only go through 2000, they do not yet record the effects of the recent recession.

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