



# Rural Change & Quality of Life

This project's research has informed policies that enhance the amenities and opportunities offered in rural communities, helping these areas adapt and thrive.

## Who cares and why?

The quality of life in rural communities both affects and is affected by the evolution of agriculture and industry, local social organization, public policy, and the movement of people into and out of these areas. For much of the past century, many rural communities have struggled with population and employment loss, high rates of poverty, poor education and training opportunities, and insufficient financial resources to provide basic services to residents. On the other hand, some rural communities, especially those with abundant natural amenities, are experiencing high rates of population, employment, and income growth. Rather than extracting or developing their natural resources, these communities are building economies based on environmental quality and a high quality of life. However, a major concern is that rural population growth may generate congestion and overexploitation that degrade the very amenities that are attracting people to the area. The citizens, businesses, and policymakers who will decide the future of rural America are in need of comprehensive research and outreach to help them understand the forces shaping their communities. If decisions are based on an up-to-date, precise understanding of how jobs, market goods, opportunities, and social life are woven together, rural communities will be better able to adapt and thrive.



## What has the project done so far?

Over the past five years, NE-1029 researchers have learned how various amenities shape rural development and how social and economic changes affect the quality of rural life. In particular, NE-1029 researchers have analyzed ongoing and potential changes in rural labor markets and the impacts of migration, commuting, and workforce development programs. Researchers have also studied the potential for entrepreneurship, industrial clustering, and nontraditional agricultural businesses in many rural areas. Many researchers have focused on strategies to increase worker productivity and wages and on strengthening important links between urban and rural communities. Applying the findings from these studies, NE-1029 researchers have presented revenue forecasts, ecotourism assessments, and economic impact projections for proposed policies, businesses, and other programs and have guided state and local government reforms. NE-1029 researchers at USDA's Economic Research Service have focused significant efforts on analyzing the



Insights from NE-1029 studies have encouraged rural areas to take advantage of ecotourism opportunities and helped them make the best use of available Internet and telecommunications technologies. Top photo by Rennett Stowe, Flickr. Middle photo by Laura Elizabeth Pohl/Bread for the World, Flickr. Bottom photo by Chester County Planning Commission, Flickr.

economic relationship between the Internet and rural economies, especially in farm management. Researchers have also examined the use of telecommunications and information technologies to provide clinical health care at a distance. These researchers have produced fact sheets on electronic health records that have been adopted and made mandatory for many rural hospitals and health care providers. NE-1029 members have successfully engaged citizens and policymakers through conferences, hands-on trainings, media interviews, and numerous publications in refereed journals and popular press outlets. For example, in the wake of the devastating tsunami in Japan, Michigan State scientists co-authored research on natural disasters that was cited by well-known U.S. news media as well as prominent outlets around the world.



Researchers in Maine have studied the impacts of hosting cruise ships in two amenity-rich coastal communities and have provided guidance to local businesses and entrepreneurs on the best ways to benefit from this growing segment of the tourism industry. Photo courtesy of James McConnon.

## Impact Statements

**I**nformed voters about the economic impacts of propositions appearing on local and state ballots

**H**elped identify problems and opportunities in local economies in a timely manner

**I**nfluenced policy changes that support better land use planning, stronger links between urban and rural areas, and more efficient rural government service provision

**A**ttracted businesses to rural counties in the Western U.S. by enacting better recruiting strategies that target new industries

**I**ncreased visibility of local food enterprises in economic development planning

**H**elped developers, homebuyers, and local officials prepare for changes in the real estate market

**I**nformed policy and advocacy discussions by providing analyses of farm labor market trends and immigration policies

**P**romoted better rural health care by increasing use of electronic health records.

**P**resented revenue forecasts that led legislators to limit spending and tax cuts

**D**eveloped databases that made detailed local government data available to citizens, local officials, state lawmakers, policy analysts, and researchers

## What research is needed?

More research is needed to learn about the factors affecting rural communities and how they can become more resilient. In particular, researchers are also seeking a better understanding of how restructured food systems that increase emphasis on local procurement may influence food sector performance, including links between adjacent rural farm sectors and urban food manufacturing. Researchers also need to assess how government policies may influence rural areas with high shares of immigrant workers (for example, housing, community, and education investments by immigrant families). Furthermore, new measures of regional competitive advantage need to be developed.

## Want to know more?

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