

**Local
Government
Advisory
Committee**



MAR 18 2015

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The Honorable Gina McCarthy
Administrator
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
1200 Pennsylvania Avenue N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20460

Dear Administrator McCarthy:

On behalf of EPA's Local Government Advisory Committee (LGAC), we are writing in follow up to our comments provided January 9, 2014 on *EPA's Draft FY 2014-2018 Strategic Plan (see attached)*. The LGAC strongly believes that the EPA through its many programs and authorities is making "a visible difference in communities". However, the LGAC writes to bring to your attention the challenges and burdens of rural, small and disadvantaged communities which are not fully recognized in *EPA's Strategic Plan*. In order to make a visible difference for all our communities we write to recommend that the EPA focus on closing the gap on the environmental and public health disparities of small, rural and disadvantaged communities. The LGAC commends you, Administrator McCarthy, on 'getting out of the Beltway, and making time to visit with us in our communities. Furthermore, we believe that by EPA taking a further step to close the gap for rural and disadvantaged communities, there will be no community left behind. Addressing these challenges in a transparent strategy will assist EPA to carry out its mission of a clean and safe environment for all of our citizens. With that in mind, the LGAC offers the following in support of a rural strategy.

Background

There is a fundamental need to have a consistent and clear definition of "rural" across all EPA programs, and ultimately for all federal agencies. Some federal agencies use more specific measures like the rural-urban commuting area codes. These multiple definitions can cause confusion for local government, especially when attempting to obtain assistance. Standardization of rural classification can reduce confusion and ease the process for local government, which in rural areas, are often underfunded and short staffed.

Here are some examples of federal definitions of 'rural':

- EPA: A county is considered "rural" if it does not contain a metropolitan statistical area with a population greater than 250,000, and the U.S. Census Bureau does not designate more than 50 percent of the population as "urban."
- OMB: Rural communities are those under 50,000 without urban cores, or "micro-areas" which contain an urban core but have a population between 10,000 and 50,000.
- Census Bureau: Rural communities are those less than 2,500.
- HUD uses the following for their definition of rural:
 - 1) A place having fewer than 2,500 inhabitants; 2) a county or parish with an urban population of 20,000 inhabitants or less; and 3) any place with a population not in excess of 20,000 inhabitants and not located in a Metropolitan Statistical Area.
- NIH defines frontier communities as fewer than 7 people per square mile. It permits the categorization of rural data into "frontier" or "non-frontier" status ¹.
- USDA: Any place with a population less than 50,000

Rural communities make up a significant contribution of the nation's population, yet these communities still suffer from major infrastructure issues and inadequate funding. Local governments serving rural and disadvantaged communities struggle to balance the basic infrastructure needs of their communities with the burden of resource constraints and regulations placed on them. As a result, rural communities often lag behind major cities in building and replacing aging environmental infrastructure. Yet, this lack of infrastructure directly impacts the health and quality of life of these denizens, of whom 35% live in poverty.² The community of **Salmon, Idaho** exemplifies the issues of resource constraints. The city faced a \$6 million dollar cost to overhaul its water infrastructure, which significantly increased the water utilities bill among a population of only 3,000.

Additionally, small towns lack the capacity to compete for necessary infrastructure grants. One example is the **Town of Arcadia, Oklahoma**, a community with a population of 279. Water infrastructure is critical, yet the city lacks staff to identify and write grants for needed funding assistance. Exacerbating this funding challenge is the difficulty of rural communities to get state and federal grants, thus delaying major needed infrastructure projects.

Complicating the definitional issue of rural communities is the issue of large rural areas that exist within municipal boundaries. Within municipal boundaries, there may be a wide range of population densities and public services availability such as water infrastructure. These rural subareas have the same infrastructure resource challenges as small rural communities. In developing a rural strategy and its definitions, these situations should be considered as well. For example, the **City of Palm Bay, Florida** is clearly defined as urban under all definitions, yet the City has approximately 3500 ¼ acre platted lots with no municipal services at all and many more square

¹ http://www.nlm.nih.gov/nichsr/healthindicators/CHSI_Q_and_A.html

² "USDA ERS - Rural Poverty & Well-being: Geography of Poverty." USDA ERS - Rural Poverty & Well-being: Geography of Poverty. <http://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/rural-economy-population/rural-poverty-well-being/geography-of-poverty.aspx>.

miles of platted lots with sparse municipal services, excluding water and sewer, resulting from a development bankruptcy in the 1960s. The City has no conceivable way to aggregate the properties (they are owned by people all over the world), no legal way to restrict building and no realistic way to fund infrastructure given the sparse population in these areas. Consequently, these lots develop with wells and septic tanks, a very poor approach from an environmental perspective.

Here are some examples of key issues that should be considered within a framework, however, many other issues abound:

Why a Rural Strategy?

1) Building Capacity -federal/state/local coordination on grants to small communities

Communities under 10,000 are often neglected when it comes to access to federal and state grants. With declining budgets, many states have opted to target major population areas to address major pollution issues leaving less for small community programs. For example, the State of Oklahoma once funded an ombudsman through HUD to assist small communities with obtaining and managing grants. Though a very successful program, it was discontinued even though it provided much needed assistance to small towns in Oklahoma. States with sizable proportions of rural and frontier landscapes, often with absentee dwellers, pose significant resource challenges for state budgets. For example, the State of Montana, with 94 million acres of rural and frontier landscapes, lacks adequate funding for management of these lands. Many rural local governments also lack the basic capacity and technical staff and resources to apply for grants. Furthermore, grant requests from these communities in need exceeds the funds available. Administering grants in these remote areas also remains a challenge.

To address these concerns, some rural communities have come together on regional collaborations in order to pool necessary resources. For example, in South Dakota, local governments have aggregated resources for grant writing assistance and comprehensive land use planning for small community projects. In New York State, ten regional economic development councils, which cover several contiguous counties, help to create opportunities to aggregate resources for funding assistance to improve sustainability in rural areas. Coordination at the local level should be encouraged, but it is important to note that more assistance may be required in disadvantaged communities with more challenging needs to address with fewer resources.

2) Accessibility

Frontier areas, characterized by very low population density and a high degree of remoteness, are at the end of the rural-urban continuum and can be generally viewed as a subset of rural. These communities, as well as unincorporated areas along the United States-Mexico border, require increased efforts and increased per capita costs to provide job creation, population retention, provisions for environmental and public health care, and access to resources. A major issue faced by these frontier and border communities is that they are sparsely populated and remotely located; therefore, accessibility remains essential to access services such as health care and healthy and safe food. In times of environmental crisis such as flooding or tornados, access to information and the ability to transport resources is vital to ensure an adequate response. Additionally, improving

accessibility via bridging of transportation deficits can help address the day-to-day environmental and public health needs of these communities.

3) Communication/Outreach

Small communities need greater access to resource professionals for technical assistance in planning. Better communication can be achieved through intergovernmental cooperation at all levels of government. Essential communication extends from local governments to include all members of the community, including residents, faith based and other organizations, small businesses, and other stakeholders. Communication of practical information on sustainability and climate resiliency in small rural communities is critical.

4) Infrastructure and Resiliency

Rural communities often lack adequate public water systems and instead rely on small water systems and wells for drinking, which are susceptible to contamination. In 2003, EPA found that of the 48,271 community drinking water systems in the U.S. serving populations of less than 10,000, 8.2% were in violation of drinking water quality standards.³ In addition to inadequate funding, demographic fluctuations also make it more difficult for small communities to plan and build critical water infrastructure. Without sustainable water infrastructure, small communities cannot attract businesses and continue the thriving agricultural-based economies. Therefore, water infrastructure remains a challenge but federal resources are critical for sustainability and economic survival of small communities.

5) Food Security

Adequate food supply and access to healthy, safe and nutritious foods are issues for all Americans, not just those living in rural communities. A recent study from the White House found that climate disruptions to agriculture have been increasing and this can threaten food security by affecting food prices, crop yield, transportation, and manufacturing. The U.S. is one of the world's top agricultural producers and farm products are a major export. In 2011 alone, farm exports were valued at \$137.4 billion. Much of this agricultural production originates in rural America, where communities rely on farming. Therefore, food security issues threaten the economic livelihood of these communities.⁴ The LGAC believes that EPA's Rural Strategy should link and provide connections between urban centers and rural America so that all communities can benefit. Furthermore, the LGAC believes that local farmers markets are a growing industry which will have significant economic benefits for rural and disadvantaged communities **as well as provide fresh, locally sourced food.**

6) Law of Unintended Consequences

Although federal and state regulations are intended to improve health and environmental conditions, they can pose major challenges to small communities who are unable to meet these standards. Some small communities are unable to comply with environmental standards, and the efforts of these small communities to improve their infrastructure systems are sometimes halted

³ "Still Living Without the Basics in the 21st Century: Analyzing the Availability of Water and Sanitation Services in the United States." http://www.win-water.org/reports/RCAP_full_final.pdf.

⁴ http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/microsites/ceq/2011_adaptation_progress_report.pdf

indefinitely without assistance to meet federal standards. Because of this, small communities with limited resources are better served by and favor voluntary programs. Another issue is that increased regulation intended to address pollution sources generated by large cities may produce pollution problems downwind to small communities and place undue burden of compliance on small communities. These communities do not have the resources to address these additional environmental issues. Altogether, the issue is one of scale, whereby the capacity to implement is addressed through a priori assessment of generalizability. Lack of coordination between federal agencies and conflicting federal regulatory requirements often pose distress and potential jeopardy for compliance on small communities.

In Summary

The LGAC appreciates EPA's efforts to consider local government input. As local government officials, we speak for our constituents, some of whom reside in rural areas. Therefore, we urge the EPA to prioritize development of a rural strategic plan to identify and address the environmental and public health needs of rural and disadvantaged communities. The LGAC commends the EPA for taking a very positive step to address some of these concerns in developing the Water Infrastructure and Resiliency Finance Center which will provide needed technical assistance and partnerships to address these issues.

The LGAC's Small Community Advisory Subcommittee, focuses on the needs of communities under 10,000, and stands ready to assist the LGAC to advise EPA how to better address these concern of rural communities. Additionally, the LGAC can help the agency to identify the best approaches to addressing the needs and challenges of rural communities. EPA can make "*a visible difference*" for all communities, no matter the size, or location, and through a rural strategy consider the health and a quality of life sustainable for the Americans for whom rural living is a day to day reality, and those in the future.

Sincerely,



Mayor Robert Dixon
Chair



Commissioner Robert Cope
Chair, Small Community Advisory
Subcommittee (SCAS)