

ONE COUNTRY

GROWING RURAL AMERICA

The Farm Bill isn't just a collection of programs – it's America's rural agenda. This year, Congress has the opportunity to use this landmark legislation to go beyond farm and food policy and address the totality of what it means to live, work, and succeed in rural communities.

Education, entrepreneurship, and access to capital create the conditions for opportunity, but a continued disinvestment in rural America has made it difficult for communities to find an economic foothold – causing many rural residents to leave their hometowns and seek success elsewhere.

The Farm Bill should make rural America economically viable and vibrant so that families can stay and succeed.



THE PROBLEM AT HAND

For years, rural communities have watched their residents move away to larger cities. While the pandemic temporarily reversed this trend as many Americans moved to rural areas to escape metropolitan centers, rural counties bled jobs that they have yet to recover and still face the challenges caused by decreased economic opportunity.

Rural communities are at a disadvantage compared to larger metro areas because they often lack the resources to develop plans that maximize their strengths, identify new drivers of

economic vitality, and keep their economic engines firing on all cylinders. In many cases, they even lack the administrative capacity and technical expertise required to plan, write, and compete for federal grant applications and awards designated specifically for rural areas. As a result, those dollars often fail to reach their intended beneficiaries and rural regions continue to lose out on critical infrastructure development and tools to attract new business, forcing rural Americans to look elsewhere for better opportunity.

A POLICY SOLUTION

□ GROWING RURAL OPPORTUNITY AND WEALTH (GROWth) PLAN GRANTS

We propose the creation of new GROWth Plan grants under the office of Rural Development within U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). These grants would be awarded to help rural communities, counties, and regional authorities develop comprehensive master plans to guide development across multiple areas.

GROWth grants can be applied for by municipalities, non-profits, and private entities in an established ongoing public-private partnership. To qualify, the entities must be located in, and the grant must be for, a community, county, or region in categories 4 through 8 as defined in the U.S. Census Rural-Urban Continuum.

GROWth grants would support the creation of master plans that include options for developing **affordable housing, neighborhood rehabilitation, commercial district rehabilitation, regional transportation programs, rural energy programs, and other economic development entities**. The program would support **grants between \$10,000 and up to \$1,000,000** with the requirement of a minimum of 50 percent matching funds provided by the grantee.

THE BENEFITS

By providing rural communities with access to planning tools, we can level the playing field for competitive bids for economic development, reduce sprawl, and create regional plans to lift multiple communities that have faced stagnation and decline.



Before rural communities can begin growing and prospering, there must be a plan in place. The GROWth grants would provide the resources to create a road map for rural communities to follow as they redevelop.

ENDORSEMENTS

Rebuild Rural America Act

Introduced by Sens. Kirsten Gillibrand (NY), Tina Smith (MN), and Dick Durbin (IL), and Rep. Nikki Budzinski (IL-13).

Rural communities frequently lack federal financial and technical support necessary to address the challenges of bringing infrastructure, health care, high-speed internet, and more into the 21st century.

This bill would establish a Rural Future Partnership Fund that would create a \$50 billion block grant program for long-term rural economic development programs; establish a USDA Rural Innovation and Partnership Administration to make it easier for rural communities to access federal funds; re-launch the Rural Future Corps; and connect local leaders with a new suite for national capacity and training programs to connect rural regions with national technical assistance providers.



Rural Internet Improvement Act

Introduced by Sens. John Thune (SD), Ben Ray Lujan (NM), Amy Klobuchar (MN), and Deb Fischer (NE).

Access to broadband service is often dependent on where you live, leaving rural communities left out of critical economic opportunities. By streamlining and bolstering USDA Rural Development broadband programs and targeting funding to rural communities, farmers and rural businesses would be able to access new technologies.

The bill would merge and codify the Rural e-Connectivity Pilot Program (ReConnect) with USDA's traditional broadband loan and grant program, limit ReConnect funding to areas where at least 90 percent of households lack access to broadband service, remove unnecessary barriers and improve the challenge process in the ReConnect program, improve coordination between the USDA and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), and require USDA to enter into a memorandum of understanding with the FCC and National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) to facilitate outreach to rural residents and businesses of available federal programs that promote broadband access, affordability, and inclusion.

