

The Rural Information Center Serving Communities in the United States

Mary Louise REYNNELLS¹

1. Rural Information Center, National Agricultural Library, Agricultural Research Service, United States Department of Agriculture, United States of America.

louise.reynells@ars.usda.gov

Abstract

The Rural Information Center (RIC) is one of seven information centers within the National Agricultural Library (NAL). NAL is one of four national libraries within the United States housing one of the world's largest and most accessible agricultural information collections and is part of the Agricultural Research Service, the principal scientific research agency of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). RIC was established in 1987 and is mandated through United States legislation to provide informational services to rural areas. RIC assists rural communities by providing information and referral services that include planning, funding, training, research, and best practices through: customized information products to specific inquiries; a rural Web portal; Web 2.0 services such as RSS feeds; preservation of rural information through digitizing projects and referrals to subject specialists. The center's target audience includes: local, tribal, state, and federal government officials; organizations; libraries; researchers; businesses; farmers; and citizens working to maintain the vitality of America's rural areas. In addition, RIC provides assistance with presidential initiatives, public outreach campaigns, and departmental projects and has served as a rural information program model internationally. Currently, RIC has embarked on a five-year beginning farmer and rancher project, assisting in the assurance of national and global food security by increasing sustainable small farms within United States. RIC is also engaged in a partnership with the National Library of Medicine to provide leadership on national and global health concerns by addressing the information needs of public health workers. With over 20 years of experience, RIC has learned that collaboration is the key to a successful information program. In order to reach a diverse audience, cover numerous subject areas, and survive in lean budget years, RIC works together with other public and private entities to achieve its mission of providing information services to rural communities.

Introduction

The Rural Information Center (RIC) is one of seven information centers located within the National Agricultural Library (NAL). NAL is one of four national libraries within the United States housing one of the world's largest and most accessible agricultural information collections and is part of the Agricultural Research Service, the principal scientific research agency of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). "In fiscal year 2005 (Oct 2004 through Sept 2005) NAL delivered more than 80 million direct customer service transactions.

RIC is a national service established in 1987 by the USDA offering comprehensive information about rural issues, trends, research and resources. Coming out of the farm crisis of the mid 1980's Congress (House Resolution 2026, 1987), USDA, and rural citizens all agreed on the importance of rural leaders being able to access information at will and the need to establish an information service to provide this function. USDA developed that idea through the establishment of RIC as part of its six-point initiative in rural revitalization. (Lyng & Vautour, 1988) Although RIC emerged from many different areas to address a rural economic crisis, supportive legislation over the years has played a role in continuing RIC's existence, starting with the 1990 Farm Bill, and continuing through the current 2008 Farm Bill, which provide RIC with a Congressional mandate to assist rural communities and citizens.

Defining Rural America

In order to identify the need for information services within the United States, defining the term "*rural*" or "*nonmetropolitan*" is essential. This is not as easy as one would think, because there happens to be many definitions for rural areas within the United States. These definitions are typically based on the

intended use of the information. Public programs and private foundations may have several definitions of rural areas for eligibility purposes of financing rural programs. Research and legislative policymaking have definitions for “*rural*” that provide a standardization for comparison of data.

Within the USDA, the Economic Research Service (ERS) provides the definition of rural for most of the USDA policy and research needs. The ERS nonmetropolitan classification covers approximately 2,000 counties outside the primary daily commuting range of urbanized areas with 50,000 or more people. Using the ERS definition, there are nearly 50 million Americans living in nonmetropolitan areas, which is 17 percent of the U.S. population, extending across 80 percent of the land area. Within 2007 and 2008, the data indicates that the nonmetropolitan population continued to grow by means of a current trend in the rise in births, offsetting a decline in net migration to metropolitan from nonmetropolitan areas.

RIC Services

Customer Profile and Subject Focus

Although RIC has always served anyone interested in information on or for rural areas, RIC’s primary customers include: tribal, federal, state, and local officials; research and educational institutions; health professionals; businesses; nonprofit/community organizations; farmers and ranchers; Congress; and rural citizens. This audience has changed over the years from non electronic, in pre-Internet days, to a highly Web and emailed based user. This change has driven the Center to address the way it reaches out to customers and delivers information.

RIC includes reference services for all things rural. The topics covered by RIC are broad in nature and include issues of: everyday life; historical and current research; agricultural finance; sustainable communities; affordable housing; telecommunications; education; entrepreneurial opportunities; health care; and employment assistance.

Funding Requests

By far the most requested RIC service is to locate funding resources for rural areas. This information need in rural America has made RIC a premier resource provider in this area. The rate of requests the Rural Information Center has received for locating funding sources for local officials, rural communities, and citizens has steadily increased. Since 1987 the percentage of funding requests coming from rural areas has risen from 16% in FY89 to 35% in FY94 to more than 50% in FY99 and to nearly 70% in 2007. In response to this need, RIC, working with the General Services Administration (GSA), provides specific federal program information to assist rural areas through the creation and maintenance of a searchable database of funding information with access through the RIC Web site. RIC also creates online publications that specifically address funding opportunities by topic. RIC’s “*Small Farm Funding Resources*” online publication continues to be a top requested item on the RIC Web site, as well as a high-ranking reference document among peer agricultural resources. Rural communities and citizens call RIC to identify funding sources, to determine if they qualify for the funds, and to learn how they can apply for that assistance.

RIC Staff

The Rural Information Center staff has always been made up of trained librarians and information specialists with diverse subject specialty. These staff respond to inquiries in a supportive manner that ensures user satisfaction and confidentiality.

RIC staff have additional duties, such as recommending NAL collection development titles dealing with issues in rural America. Staff also develop and maintain information products, and market those products and RIC services through conference exhibits, meetings, and presentations. RIC has developed the *Rural Information Center Publication Series*, which has numerous titles and editions of those titles both in print and online.

Products and Services

The Rural Information Center -

- Provides customized information products to specific inquiries, including assistance in economic revitalization issues; local government planning projects; rural health topics; funding sources; technical assistance programs; research studies; and other related issues.
- Processes a broad array of literature and funding source information on such topics as:
 - Successful strategies, models, and case studies of community development projects;
 - Small business attraction, retention, and expansion;
 - Housing programs and services;
 - Tourism promotion and development ;
 - Sustainable communities and energy programs;
 - Community water quality;
 - Health programs and services; and
 - Rural research.
- Provides Internet access to rural information, products, and services through the RIC web site and Web 2.0 media.
- Refers users to organizations or experts in the field who can provide additional information.
- Furnishes bibliographies, *Rural Information Center Publication Series* titles, and other RIC developed information products.

Staff time is also devoted to developing new Web content and maintaining existing items on the RIC Web site. The RIC Web site provides more than 4,000 resource links covering key rural subjects, and houses 50 online rural publications. RIC also maintains a Rural Calendar area that provides information on current meetings and events covering rural topics.

WEB 2.0

Web 2.0 has been employed by RIC to increase access to information. RIC aggregates several RSS Feeds on the RIC Web site to provide end users with current news and information on rural topics. Some news listings are provided through original Feed items that RIC staff identify and add to the RIC Web News section on an as-needed basis. RIC provides content, references and external links to rural subject areas within Wikipedia. RIC has launched a Wiki project, where it placed RIC information in strategic locations, enhancing the Wikipedia information by including the Rural Information Center's resources. Since this launch, there has been a significant increase of over 200% in the number of referrals to RIC from Wikipedia. RIC currently provides monthly tweets to the NAL Twitter page, which provides Twitter access through one page for all NAL areas. NAL also has a Blog called InfoFarm that provides information on many topics, including those handled in RIC. RIC also provides access to the NAL Blog from the RIC Web site.

How do rural areas use Web 2.0?

Marketing one's town can be expensive, and many small towns find themselves with restrictive budgets that make it hard to justify this expense. So, more small communities are looking to the Web to fulfill their need for marketing and as an information tool to address news within the community. Marshall, MN is an example of a town doing just that. By turning to the Web, the town of Marshall has indicated that they have saved money. (Schuster, R., 2009) There is also see a larger percentage of the younger audiences staying more involved through the use of social media, so by being involved in some of these areas such as Facebook or Twitter pages there is a better chance of pulling a younger audience into a rural community's issues and needs. Some new businesses are using Blogs and other Web 2.0 technologies to advertise their business and gain local support and feedback on what the community might want from these businesses. (Crawford, M., 2009)

The Center's Impact

Although RIC handles all types of requests, RIC serves as rural America's direct source to information on funding programs to help stimulate depressed economies. Funding requests have driven the Center's focus in identifying financial support for rural areas. RIC provides customized information and funding

replies to inquiries, and prepares online publications that include funding resources on a wide variety of rural subjects, including community development, downtown revitalization, housing, farm finance, tourism, small business development, health care, and more.

- Agricultural Funding requests such as funding for starting or maintaining small farms, is currently the number one request for information.
- Rural Housing funding requests, both purchasing a home and home repairs is second.

Notable Successes:

International, national, and local government agencies have sought RIC as a model rural information center and Web site. Officials from the Agriculture Canada Secretariat, the Manitoba Rural Secretariat, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Health Care Financing Administration, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Office of Rural Housing and Economic Development, and Japan's Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries Policy Research Institute have requested visits to RIC with the intention of using RIC as a model for their programs.

Impact of RIC Information Services

- RIC assisted a New Mexico frontier hospital obtain \$475,000 in federal and state grants.
- RIC helped a disabled Vermont entrepreneur obtain \$40,000 in the first phase of a USDA Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) grant to develop a specialized wheel chair.
- RIC helped a New Mexico mining company create jobs by identifying new markets for zeolite that generated sales of \$500,000 the first year.
- RIC helped an Idaho consortium obtain \$180,000 to develop a homeless veteran's job program
- RIC helped an Alaskan Native American community obtain \$50,000 in USDA SBIR funds to develop Alaskan cultural products.
- RIC helped a Texas community development organization plan and develop a frontier festival to promote their historic community and local historic tourist attractions.
- RIC helped a Maryland rural public school, in one of the poorest counties, receive \$40,000 in private foundation funding for an obesity education program.

Monitoring and Evaluating Services

RIC, working with the NAL Information Systems Division, created a database tracking system to provide data on requests received within the Center. This system uses subject categories, geographic location (state/region/country) and end user affiliation fields to provide useful information to assist RIC in strategic planning and end user satisfaction. Typically these reports are used in conjunction with standardized library reporting to provide the Center and NAL with an overview of services provided. No personal identification information is retained, such as contact information and name.

The RIC Web site uses a NAL-wide Foresee Results Customer Satisfaction Survey tool. This is employed through a pop-up window that is triggered on certain pages or by the number of pages viewed on the Web site. This allows for RIC and NAL to identify ways in which we can change our Web site to meet end users' needs more effectively, using the University of Michigan's American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) to determine a satisfaction score. RIC has a Satisfaction Score of 73 in the 2008 survey, and RIC this year has redesigned the Web site by changing the highest level taxonomy, making it easier to identify the subject areas from the home page. With this change we hope to see an increase in the navigation scores and overall satisfaction. The repeat user score was 84 and the site preference score was 89; both of these are very high. The NAL Web statistical tool, Urchin, is used to track page views, content, referral rates, and other pertinent Web data that allows RIC staff to adjust content and design to better serve our customers.

National Achievements

- ***Rural Development Presidential Initiative:*** In 1990 President George H. W. Bush implemented the recommendations in the White House report, ***Rural Economic Development for the 90's: A Presidential Initiative***, which designated RIC as the national rural development technical information center, and recommended that RIC establish a toll-free 800 number service.

- ***Presidential National Rural Conference Features RIC:*** In 1995, USDA's Office of the Under Secretary for Research, Education, and Economics (REE) featured RIC as USDA's national rural information provider and its publication, *Federal Funding Sources for Rural Areas*, on the REE website created especially for Secretary Dan Glickman's Six Regional Rural Forums. The nationwide forums concluded on April 25, 1995 with President Bill Clinton's National Rural Conference in Ames, Iowa.
- ***American Heritage River (AHR) Presidential Initiative:*** President Bill Clinton announced the AHR Initiative in his 1997 State of the Union Address. The Initiative, a multi-agency effort, supported community-led efforts to revitalize heritage rivers and surrounding watershed areas, to spur economic revitalization, to protect natural resources and the environment, and to preserve historic and cultural heritage. In FY 97-98, RIC staff prepared four key resource publications for the project and customized more than 200 notebooks of information requests from the 126 nominated rivers, providing information essential to the success of each of the 126 development council proposals.

Ongoing Projects

- ***Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program (BFRDP) Clearinghouse –***
- ***Start2Farm.gov*** Start2Farm.gov is a National Clearinghouse and integral component of the National Institute of Food and Agriculture's Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program (BFRDP), and will provide farmers with critical information on how to start and stay in farming and ranching. In late 2009, NAL's Rural and Alternative Farming Systems Information Centers, in partnership with the American Farm Bureau Federation, were awarded a five-year, \$1.5 million dollar competitive grant to create and implement this program. This program will provide a database-driven Web portal that provides national program information to assist those interested in starting to farm or ranch. Start2Farm will provide access to information on other BFRDP grantee projects that are designed to assist farmer and ranchers through training, mentoring, workshops and additional outreach programs. RIC will help to facilitate the delivery of information on these projects as well as conduct a national scoping project to identify existing programs that may be of assistance.
- ***Public Health Partners – an Initiative through U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the National Library of Medicine.*** RIC sits on the steering committee with the NAL Food and Nutrition Information Center to provide information and input to a national Web portal for public health workers. This is a collaboration of public and private organizations coming together to assist public health areas with their information needs.
- ***DHHS, Centers for Disease Prevention and Control (CDC) Public Outreach Campaign Learn the Signs. Act Early.*** RIC was approached by the CDC campaign to address their focus on rural communities and parents with additional information on childhood development milestones to assist in identifying early in a child's life the possibility of development issues. RIC has just started working with this campaign, and is developing a coordinated agenda of promotion to rural communities through the RIC Web site, attendance at rural conferences and meetings, and enhancing RIC's Rural Child Care information to incorporate this campaign message and materials.
- ***RIC Assists Congress:*** Over the last five years, Congress has submitted an average of 150 requests annually for RIC's assistance with information and funding requests submitted to their offices from rural constituents. This is a 50% increase from previous years.

RIC National Partnerships

RIC has had numerous collaborations through 38 interagency agreements with USDA's Extension Service, Forest Service, Natural Resource Conservation Service, Rural Development, U.S. Department of Justice, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and the National Rural Studies Committee. These agreements provided additional funding with which RIC has provided a variety of national rural information services including research, publications, preservation and Web site development. RIC continues to identify additional support to assist rural America with its information needs.

Conclusion

The Rural Information Center is a national service established in 1987 by the United States Department of Agriculture, offering comprehensive information about rural issues, trends, research; and resources. With over twenty years of experience in providing information to rural America, RIC continues to develop new partnerships and collaborative efforts to address the ever-changing needs of the rural communities within the United States. RIC continually strives to provide the best information resources and improve information delivery and access for rural officials, citizens, organizations, and communities by keeping at the forefront of technological developments. Through the monitoring, feedback, and evaluation of RIC services additional customer satisfaction can be achieved. With the addition of the new Start2Farm.gov responsibilities, RIC hopes to provide farmers and ranchers with additional information, training and mentoring, funding resource and technical assistance, to start farming and stay farming. RIC staff look forward to the next opportunities that arise to serve these communities.

References

- Cahn, M. A., Auston, I., Selden, C. R., Cogdill, K., Baker, S., Cavanaugh, D., Elliott, S., Foster, A. J., Leep, C. J., Perez, D. J., and Pomietto, B. R., 2007. The Partners in Information Access for the Public Health Workforce: a collaboration to improve and protect the public's health, 1995-2006. *Journal of the Medical Library Association*, July; 95(3): 301-309.
<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1924938/>
- Crawford, M., 2009. Small but Strong: Strategies for Business Success in Rural America. *Rural Telecom*. Washington, DC: National Telecommunications Cooperative Association. Featured Article. November/December edition 2009.
http://www.ntca.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=3289&Itemid=987. Viewed 1/12/09
- Frierson, E., Leonard, M. A., April, 2008. Staff Discussion Paper, Blueprint for Success: The National Agricultural Library 2008-2012. Beltsville, MD: United States Department of Agriculture, National Agricultural Library. <http://www.nal.usda.gov/blueprint2008.pdf> Viewed: 1/25/10
- House Resolution 2026, 100th Congress, 1st Sess. §202(b) 1987. John, P. L., 1994. The Rural Information Center: Federal and state cooperation expands information access. *Rural Libraries*, 14(2): 37-48.
http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/custom/portlets/recordDetails/detailmini.jsp?_nfpb=true&_ERICExtSearch_SearchValue_0=ED379132&ERICExtSearch_SearchType_0=no&accno=ED379132
- John, P. L., 1995. The Rural Information Center Assists Local Communities. *Library Trends*, Summer; 44 (1): 152-175. <http://www.nal.usda.gov/ric/ricpubs/trends.htm>
- Kernicky, G. G. 2006. Modeling the Local Rural Library on the National Agricultural Library's Rural Information Center. *Rural Libraries* 26 (1):29-58.
- Lyng, R. E., & Vautour, R. R. 1988. *On the move: A report on rural economic development in America*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- President's Council on Rural America. 1992. *Revitalizing rural America through collaboration: A report to the President*. Washington, DC: President's Council on Rural America.
- Reynnells, M. L., 2002. Rural Development and Sociology in the United States. *Using the Agricultural, Environmental, and Food Literature*. B. S. Hutchinson and A. P. Greider, eds., New York, NY: Marcel Dekker, Inc., p. 403-433.
<http://www.cababstractsplus.org/abstracts/Abstract.aspx?AcNo=20023115804>
- Schuster, R., 2009. Smaller communities search for ways to stand out in economic development. *Prairie Business Magazine*. Grand Forks, ND: Forum Communications Company. November 09, 2009 edition.
<http://www.prairiebizmag.com/event/article/id/10144/> Viewed: 1/12/09
- United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. 2009. Rural America At A Glance, 2009. Washington, DC: United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service Economic Information Bulletin Number 59 (EIB-59) 6 pp. September 2009.
<http://www.ers.usda.gov/Publications/EIB59/>