

## THE RURAL INFORMATION CENTER

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In April 1987 Congress proposed in House Resolution 2026 that USDA establish a National Rural Assistance Information Clearinghouse at the National Agricultural Library. The purpose of the clearinghouse would be to maintain a funding inventory of federal, state, local government and private assistance programs and services available to rural areas and to provide this information on request to local officials and leaders. The clearinghouse would serve as a mechanism for officials and leaders of small rural communities to have rapid and direct access to current information on funding programs to help them stimulate depressed economies. The service would link local officials with the appropriate federal program of funding source and eliminate the often difficult and time consuming effort required to track down this information. The clearinghouse would focus on programs, including, but not limited to, job training, education, health care, economic development assistance, and emotional and financial counseling.

In May 1987, the month following this congressional proposal, USDA Deputy Secretary Peter Myers testified before the Conservation Credit and Rural Development Subcommittee of the House Agriculture Committee on the subject of rural development. He reemphasized USDA's commitment to rebuild rural America and outlined USDA's new rural development policy in a six-point rural regeneration initiative. The six-point plan emphasized information and areas of endeavor in which the accessibility and delivery of current information is essential—education, technical assistance, and research—and, equally important, close coordination, the one factor necessary to insure the success of the entire plan.

Deputy Secretary Myers informed Congress that, as the third-point in USDA's rural initiative plan, USDA was establishing an information clearinghouse at the National Agricultural Library. The concept of RIC broadened as more USDA officials and agencies became involved in the

planning process. Within two months the idea, which had originally started out as an inventory clearinghouse of funding program information, was envisioned as a full-fledged information center.

RIC's mission and goals have been evolving for a year since Deputy Secretary Myers first proposed RIC's implementation to Congress last May and officially inaugurated RIC with two inquiry telephone calls from local officials in Missouri and Georgia on September 3, 1987.

RIC's role has steadily evolved as more parties, namely NAL and Extension, became involved in the planning process. The idea of combining the Extension Service's nationwide technical subject expertise and educational network with NAL's national informational network in the RIC project resulted in an invaluable and natural merger. Of equal importance was the decision to locate RIC at NAL. RIC is the twelfth specialized information center to be developed at the library in sixteen years. NAL's experience and information expertise are also invaluable to the success of the project. In addition, NAL, with its two million volumes, has the largest agricultural collection in the free world.

Both agencies are working together closely for one goal: to meet rural information requirements by placing the best information available in the hands of public officials and community leaders responsible for implementing rural development programs. The accomplishment of this goal by the RIC staff will play an important role in assisting local officials to make the best informed decisions on rural issues impacting their communities.

RIC's role will continue to evolve due to its special audience and joint agency sponsorship. RIC is unique among NAL's twelve information centers for four reasons:

First, Congress suggested the establishment of RIC to meet a pressing national economic and social crisis.

Second, the RIC concept quickly generated wide support and interest throughout USDA, Cooperative Extension, and other federal and state agencies.

Third, RIC is the first USDA information center to originate as a joint agency project. The success of RIC depends on continued close cooperation between the Extension and NAL networks. This project will serve as a prototype of what can be accomplished through such a focused effort. RIC has served to educate both NAL and Extension participants about each other.

Fourth, RIC is unique from the other NAL information centers in that its targeted end-users are local officials and citizens—not scientists and federal officials. The thrust of its information is economic development rather than production agriculture.

The local government official is able to access RIC through Extension's network of county and state offices. RIC staff responds by sending the requested information to the Extension agent for further analysis, interpretation, and consultation with the requesting local official. RIC staff find it motivating to be serving a grass roots audience and knowing that the results of their efforts will help rural communities provide essential government services and develop valuable economic programs.

RIC provides an information and referral service to its users. The Center serves as a mechanism to accumulate and disseminate information regarding economic and social policies, community economic revitalization, alternative income opportunities, community and public services, local leadership development and training, human capital development, maintenance of the quality of life, and other vital issues impacting rural America.

Although this is indeed a tall order, RIC staff can draw upon NAL's large collection of books, journals, instructional materials, computer software, and audiovisual materials. An even greater resource for RIC users is the center's access to over 300 specialized on-line subject databases. RIC uses the services of several online vendors to respond to the varied questions received. RIC has utilized over 60 unique databases in providing information and contact referrals to these inquiries. The databases cover subjects ranging from congressional bills to environmental issues to health care and rural educational issues, to mention a few. RIC can respond with pertinent information on nearly any inquiry from one or more of these databases.

RIC uses several online vendor services providing access to over 300 specialized subject databases. The DIALOG service provides RIC with access to specialized subject databases. The DIALOG service provides RIC with access to nearly 300 different subject databases containing over 20 million records. An appropriate DIALOG file can be identified for nearly every request RIC receives. DIALOG files contain bibliographic citations to all types of international literature and audiovisuals. In addition, it also contains files with

case studies, abstracts, and full-texts of documents. The RIC staff provides the more comprehensive text record information whenever possible.

Another useful online database service is LOGIN, or Local Government Information Network, maintained by Control Data Corporation. LOGIN contains text records of 50 to 500 words each on problems encountered by local governments in such areas as economic development, housing, financial management, and services. LOGIN records include case studies and provide the name and phone numbers of key contact individuals or organizations, information on training courses, and resource materials, and the status of research projects. In addition, LOGIN provides a unique service in that its users can input questions to the system and see if another user responds with information on similar experiences to aid them in resolving their inquiry.

The NAB Clearinghouse Database, maintained by the National Alliance of Business in Washington, is a similar service to LOGIN. NAB records contain information on programs and resources on public/private partnerships in economic development, job training, worker dislocation, community economic development, and related areas. The NAB file contains records with bibliographic citations and summaries of policy reports and publications in addition to program and project profiles, program models, and key individual and organization contacts and services.

RIC also utilizes the federal database, FAPRS, or the Federal Assistance Programs Retrieval System. The General Services Administration in Washington maintains this system; it provides online access to more than 1,000 Federal Assistance loans, grants, and technical assistance programs. FAPRS is a full-text database which allow the searcher to define and narrow the search to the who, what, and where of each funding program, such as who is eligible (state or local government); what type of assistance (grants or loans); what program objective (such as to provide low-income individuals with self-help housing efforts in rural areas); what Federal agency is the source of funding; what is the application procedure; and who is the program contact.

The cost of creating and maintaining such a vast array of these highly technical databases is expensive. Some of the DIALOG files cost \$300.00 per hour access time. So far we have not had to use this group, but RIC uses several databases which cost more than \$100.00 per hour to use. Therefore,

online searchers receive specialized training to sharpen searching skills and speed. In addition, a searcher first works out the strategy manually before going online and incurring charges. Due to the expense of some of the DIALOG files, the vendor provides the user with an online capability to use a designated low cost file to test the search strategy in several subject-related databases to select the best ones before executing the actual search.

Online searchers are also faced with the problem that all online vendor services utilize a different command language. This requires that the staff be familiar with several different vendor searching modes. This problem affects a searcher in even as simple a procedure as exiting a database. All of us have experienced the frustration of trying to end our search and having a momentary mental lapse by not remembering the correct exit command, and then keying every logoff sequence which comes to mind--"QUIT," LOGOFF," "EXIT," "BYE," "GOOD-BY," etc.,--before accidentally inputting the correct one.

One of our current plans is to add a gateway software system and network all RIC computers. This gateway system will function as a front-end translator, vendors' databases. A project to include the design of customized input screens to replace our present paper request form is currently underway; the staff will use the screens to log-in online each telephone or mail request. RIC will be able to build a valuable database for analyzing and identifying trends and preparing statistical reports on who is submitting requests, from where, and asking what. Such data will be available for trend analysis and be invaluable to Extension and RIC for planning purposes.

Six states participated in a test pilot project conducted from January through April of this year--Georgia, Iowa, Illinois, Missouri, New Mexico, and Vermont. Once each pilot state selected its RIC State Coordinator, the coordinators spent a few days at the center to receive a general orientation in RIC activities and services.

Two general trends have emerged from the pilot. First, the State Coordinators decided to monitor the questions and activity personally by either funneling the questions through themselves or designating a network with access points directly accessing RIC. Second, RIC staff soon discovered that it took the state coordinators about two months to get the pilot network set up in their individual states. Therefore, RIC expects to see only about one or two

months of pilot data in addition to four months of pre-pilot data before proceeding with the national implementation stage in the next few weeks.

An analysis of RIC requests and users since its implementation last fall so far has revealed the expected data. Four broad subject areas comprise the USDA rural revitalization initiative: economic viability; local government services; quality of life and natural resources; and leadership and community change. So far 85-90% of all questions RIC is receiving deal with local government services and economic development programs. While approximately 65% deal strictly with economic development, most of those on local government services are also economic in nature—questions on government or private funding sources and lower cost alternatives to essential government services.

Presently 50% of RIC users are either county, state, or Federal Extension with an additional 20% comprising state and federal officials and community economic development organizations. Although RIC has not been nationally promoted to date, 42 states and the District of Columbia have already discovered and requested RIC services. RIC services were not promoted extensively since it started operating on a limited basis in September to allow time to implement the center and hire and train staff. Therefore, RIC's principle users are the District, the six pilot states, and the nearby states of Maryland, Virginia, Pennsylvania, and New York who have been more likely to hear about RIC services from local newsletters and users.

During this start-up phase the RIC staff has been able to prepare numerous publications and order off-line subject print-outs generated from the varied requests received; RIC staff have prepared over 50 such products available to users upon request.

Future RIC plans include: enhancing the NAL collection in rural information areas; adding online records of these new items to NAL's online database, AGRICOLA; and establishing a network of RIC State Rural Library Coordinators similar to the RIC Extension Coordinator network. NAL plans to ask each state library to designate a staff member as the coordinator to work with the RIC Extension Coordinator by providing resource materials identified by RIC in its response to requests.

As USDA's first jointly sponsored information center, RIC is already serving as a federal example that a close working interagency relationship can

successfully combine the valuable information and human resource networks of NAL and the Extension Service. The USDA staff working on the national implementation are very enthusiastic about RIC's potential role in providing information to aid rural leaders and local, state, and federal officials responsible for implementing rural development programs.