

THE RURAL INFORMATION CENTER'S FIRST YEAR ON THE NATIONAL SCENE

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The Rural Information Center (RIC) is a joint project of the U. S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Extension Service and the National Agricultural Library (NAL) and is located at the library in Beltsville, MD. In May 1987 the USDA Deputy Secretary Peter Myers reemphasized in Congressional testimony USDA's commitment to rebuild rural America and outlined USDA's new rural development policy in a six-point rural regeneration initiative. Deputy Secretary Myers informed Congress that, as the third-point in USDA'S rural initiative plan, USDA was establishing a Rural Information Center at NAL. The center would provide up-to-date information to rural community officials about funding and technical assistance programs available to them.

RIC provides information and referral services to a target audience of local, state and federal officials, community development professionals (including academic and nonprofit providers), and volunteer leaders of local citizens groups involved with rural development programs.

RIC handles questions which fall into four broad categories:

- o economic development -- how rural communities can maintain a competitive, diversified rural economy
- o local government -- how rural local government services and facilities can be maintained and supported
- o leadership and public decision-making -- how local leaders deal with community change

- o national resources and quality of life -- how rural communities seek to preserve and maintain national resources for the enjoyment and use of the current and future generations and preserve the quality and characteristics of their rural lifestyle.

RIC staff customizes the requested information so that it will best meet the user needs. The staff member taking the request asks a series of questions to specifically identify the use of the information and enable RIC staff to provide the best available information. RIC staff provides answers to questions, the names of organizations and subject experts when appropriate, identifies funding programs and specialized computer searches of bibliographic citations, with abstracts and full text from databases whenever available. The information package may also include copies of pertinent articles or legislation which may be in the NAL collection.

RIC staff recently started logging information requests in a customized online database tracking and trends monitoring system. The system is being used to record all RIC requests. The customized system provides RIC and the Extension Service database access for monitoring rural trends and identifying geographic locations with specific rural concerns. The system also captures branch and division statistics, produces information products and management reports, and provides an inventory control to RIC response files. The customized database system is part of a local area network.

Between Fiscal Year (FY) 1988 and FY89 the percentage breakdown in the types of subject requests RIC received has remained almost identical. In both years, 60% of all requests dealt with economic development and revitalization; in addition many of these requests involved funding source information. Another 25% dealt with questions involving the quality of rural life and the concern about environmental conditions, air and water pollution, and the preservation of natural resources. About 10% of the requests are concerned with providing local government services while the remaining 5% deal with questions on community leadership.

Likewise, RIC users have remained fairly constant between FY88 and FY89 with nearly 60% of all requests coming from the county, state or federal extension

staff. Other major users include libraries, universities, community development organizations, individuals, and businesses. The one significant change is that in FY88 only 4% of all RIC requests were from individuals while that figure increased to 13% during FY89. The individual callers in most cases are seeking funding sources usually for the purpose of starting a small business. RIC has online access to a variety of private, state, and federal funding databases in addition to a comprehensive reference collection of funding source directories.

It usually takes a year or more for an organization or individual to survive the lengthy grant application process and because the center has barely been in operation that long, RIC is just beginning to learn about successful funding results. Two which RIC is very pleased about occurred in Vermont and Virginia.

A Morrisville Vermont County Extension Service agent contacted RIC in November 1987. A handicapped small-business client seeking a Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) grant needed the names of some electrical contractors who build variable small speed DC motors to use on his specialized wheel chair invention. He had hit a dead end in obtaining this information, without which he could not complete his grant application.

RIC identified an appropriate contact organization and placed a call to the Small Motors Manufacturing Association and obtained the name of a key contact person. The contact provided the names of seven East Coast companies and agreed to act as a referral contact and provide technical assistance.

The Vermont businessman learned recently that his SBIR development grant request for \$45,000 was approved.

A Virginia Extension Service horticulturist requested funding sources in September 1988 for the development of an ornamental horticulture industry for southwestern Virginia counties. The objective of this project was to increase nursery stock in the Mid-Atlantic states, especially the Virginia, Maryland, and Washington, D.C., region.

He had received some initial funding (less than \$10,000) from Tennessee Valley Authority programs the previous year but was also interested in other funding

programs. RIC sent him federal program information, including TVA programs and private funding information. He applied to several programs and received \$40,000 funding from a TVA program identified by RIC.

The project set up 35 demonstration projects in 25 counties in Virginia. Three of the counties already have nursery stock growing in them as of April 1989. Future plans include setting up a cooperative of nurserymen.

The Extension Service provided the FY88 operational funds for RIC while NAL provided the facilities and staff. Congress approved the center's funding as a line item in NAL's FY89 budget. While RIC's daily operations are handled by NAL staff, the Cooperative Extension Service which is partially supported by federal funds provides RIC with state coordinators. RIC expanded the project nationally in May 1988 from a six-state pilot test and invited all the states to participate. Nearly 20 states joined immediately and there are now RIC State Coordinators in 49 states and Guam. The one remaining state, Connecticut, plans to join. Four states, -- Colorado, South Carolina, Texas and Vermont -- have at least two professional staff specialists working with RIC while Nebraska has hired a new staff member to be the RIC State Coordinator. Nearly all of the state coordinators are state extension subject specialists usually with either a community resource development or local government background.

Since June of 1988 RIC staff have conducted twelve orientation workshops and trained 45 state coordinators along with some volunteer attendees from both the Extension Service and library profession. The coordinators spend two days at RIC. The first day is devoted exclusively to the RIC project; what it is; how it operates; what type of information and materials RIC provides; and, what is the role of the RIC State Coordinator. The RIC staff also provides CD-ROM and online database demonstrations. On the second day the coordinators receive an in-depth tour of NAL and demonstrations of various NAL database systems and technology projects.

RIC's training goal is to orient the coordinators to both RIC and NAL's information resource capabilities so they know how both resources can help them. In addition to the vast NAL resource collection of books, journals, instructional

materials, computer software and audiovisual materials, RIC also utilizes 35 online databases from DIALOG, LOGIN, and FAPRS on a regular basis in response to the various requests. Rural information does not exist in any one database and RIC staff have accessed over 120 databases in trying to answer various questions.

The DIALOG Information Services provide RIC access to over 20 million records from 300 different subject databases containing 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.

The LOGIN Information Services database provides RIC access to full text records 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.

RIC also utilizes the federal database FAPRS, or the Federal Assistance Programs Retrieval System. The U. S. 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 providing such information as to who is eligible, the type of assistance (grants or loans) and who to contact for program information.

After the coordinators complete their RIC training they implement and promote the RIC program in their state. The coordinators pass on local information requests to RIC. The RIC staff in turn provides a customized response to best answer the request and sends it to the coordinator. The coordinator then analyzes and interprets the information for the local requester and provides necessary follow-up. RIC views the state coordinators as an extension of the RIC staff. The daily working relationship of this joint state-federal partnership is a major factor in the success of the RIC project.

A second state-federal partnership performing a major role in a successful RIC program is the three way link-up among the Cooperative Extension Service, the state libraries, and RIC.

In the spring of 1988 RIC started setting up a second network with the state libraries. NAL staff met with the Rural Library Services Committee (RLSC) during the January 1988 American Library Association Midwinter Conference in San Antonio to discuss using RIC as a nucleus in establishing a national network of librarians similar to the RIC State Coordinator Network. The RLSC recommended that RIC request that each state library designate a staff member as the RIC State Library Representative to coordinate with RIC and the respective RIC State Extension Coordinator. The state library representative assists the extension staff in locating, at either the local or state level, the information and resource materials identified by RIC in response to a request from their respective state.

RIC invited the state libraries to participate in the RIC project and establish this three way link to assist extension agents in local information and document delivery. Within six months 22 states joined the RIC project and additional states have also expressed an interest in participating. The states that have already joined are:

Alabama, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Nebraska, New York, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Virginia, West Virginia, Wisconsin, Wyoming.

RIC's first endeavor with a state library representative, in this case, Iowa, and the Iowa RIC State Coordinator, was very successful. The State Library of Iowa and RIC participated in a joint exhibit for rural economic development in Amana, Iowa at the September 1988 World AG Expo which was attended by more than 350,000 people. The theme of the exhibit was "Library Country". The joint exhibit project won first place in the Marketing/Community Relations category from the Iowa Library Friends Marketing for Excellence Program.

Another networking endeavor which is very successful and has proven to be

mutually beneficial is the one RIC has with Clarion University of Pennsylvania.

Since January 1988 three graduate library science interns have worked at RIC. They have all done a great job and each student completed two major projects during their three month internship; they usually do two special reference briefs on a rural topic. This is very beneficial to both parties because RIC has experienced a three-fold workload increase without a comparable staff increase since it expanded nationally last May and the staff is just managing to keep up with its request load. Consequently they rarely have enough time to devote to the preparation of reference briefs which are badly needed. With this intern program RIC is getting help from the graduate students who in turn are getting valuable professional experience which assists them in obtaining a future library position.

Another aspect of this cooperation is that NAL has been able to co-sponsor the last two conferences with Clarion University on information and rural economic development. RIC was fortunate in that it was established as a high-level USDA initiative to meet rural information needs. RIC enjoyed a great deal of support from the former USDA Deputy Secretary, Peter Myers, and other top level USDA officials view the success of RIC as an essential link in the USDA rural revitalization effort. In fact, in October 1988 RIC held an open house to celebrate its first anniversary and Deputy Secretary Myers was the principal speaker. Other featured speakers and guests included the Under Secretary and Deputy Under Secretary for Small Community and Rural Development. Even though Deputy Secretary Myers is no longer at USDA, RIC's high level support has not diminished. Roland Vautour remains USDA's Under Secretary for Small Community and Rural Development. He and his staff have been great supporters of RIC and his office issued a January 1989 report entitled *Signs of Progress: A Report on Rural America's Revitalization Efforts* in which it included a thorough segment on RIC's FY88 accomplishments.

This spring the Secretary of Agriculture established a Department-wide Rural Revitalization Task Force to examine the rural economic situation and make recommendations about USDA's future role in providing rural economic development. Although a newcomer RIC is already recognized as a significant contributor to

USDA's rural development program and NAL named the RIC Coordinator to serve on this Task Force.

The Task Force first reviewed 78 rural nonfarm programs of eight USDA agencies to identify any areas of duplication or overlap.

The Task Force next conducted surveys of the USDA field and Washington office staffs. The surveys identified rural needs and problems, examined the wide range of current USDA rural programs, and identified factors affecting the performance of these programs. The surveys led the Task Force to conclude that, USDA's programs for the most part do not promote any single strategy for developing rural areas. In some cases also, rural needs have changed faster than programs have adapted to keep pace.

USDA rural programs must adjust to the changes in rural America. Today only two percent of the U. S. population live on farms and fewer than nine percent of the rural labor force farm. Nonfarm industries predominate in most rural areas. Despite these changes the Task Force observed, the department's attention remains heavily concentrated on the agricultural sector of the rural economy.

The Task Force prepared a June 30, 1989, report to the Secretary of Agriculture, *A Hard Look at USDA's Rural Development Programs*, in which it proposed eighteen recommendations.

The recommendations have four themes: (1) clarifying USDA's commitment to rural development, (2) strengthening coordination among USDA's rural programs, (3) enhancing USDA's capacity for strategic action, and (4) improving USDA's ability to implement its rural programs.

The Task Force's five concluding recommendations focused on improving USDA's ability to implement rural programs. One of these recommendations was that USDA strengthen the resources of RIC, encouraging its use among USDA staff, and requiring that RIC summarize and report its information requests to a rural policy council to assist in identifying emerging rural issues.

As a result of RIC's high-level visibility, its success as a joint agency information center, and its support from the USDA Rural Revitalization Task Force,

NAL is planning to invite Secretary Yeutter to visit RIC and see the operation first hand. In addition to high-level USDA support and visibility, RIC is also receiving Congressional support.

In August the Senate passed Senate Bill 1036 known as the Rural Revitalization Act of 1989 by voice vote. This Bill was proposed and nurtured by Vermont Senator Patrick Leahy. The Act is designed to address two major financial problems in rural America. First, the lack of capital for small business. Second, rural infrastructure needs for improved telecommunications for educational opportunities, health care, and business, and rural infrastructure needs for water and sewer systems.

Title IV of the Act aims to improve the effectiveness of the Extension Service efforts to provide competitive business development and management.

Title V of the Act authorized USDA to expand RIC's mandate to that of a National Rural Assistance Information Center Clearinghouse. The purpose of the clearinghouse would be to distribute information and data to any industry, organization, or government agency, on request, about federal, state or local programs regarding programs assisting rural America, including information on job training, education, health care, and economic development programs. The Bill would increase the involvement of the National Agricultural Library in collecting and disseminating information on rural development. The Bill also authorizes \$500,000 annually for this additional responsibility.

In spite of RIC's brief fifteen months existence on the national scene, it has been involved in many visible USDA activities. RIC hopes that this kind of visibility and department-level participation in rural development initiatives will continue and that RIC activities will continue to favorably impact USDA's rural program.