

North American Rural Futures Institute
Rural Depopulation Notes
Prepared for Senator Baucus 11/20/2002

Q: What is NARFI?

The North American Rural Futures Institute - NARFI (<http://narfi.org>) is an applied futures institute with an education and community outreach program designed to connect rural Montanans with other citizens, community leaders, researchers and futurists throughout Montana and around the world who are working on innovative visions to enhance the sustainability of rural regions.

Located on the **MSU-N campus in Havre, Montana**, NARFI is ideally positioned to:

- **understand** first hand the issues facing rural regions as they struggle to survive.
- **engage** a rich network of academic, research, education, business, and community collaborators to focus on the challenges to sustainability for rural communities in Montana and across North America.

NARFI has four key roles to its overall mission

LENS – NARFI is the eyes and ears for rural sustainability.

Its job is to:

- Inventory existing issues and challenges for rural communities.
- Identify institutions, researchers, educators, economic developers and community activists who are working on innovative solutions to existing issues and challenges in Montana, North America, and across the globe.
- Identify trends, changes and innovations that will impact rural community life over the next 5, 10, 25 ... years.
- Identify and track researchers, experiments, and communities working on innovative approaches to those trends and events that will impact rural life over the next 5 decades in Montana, North America, and across the globe.

CATALYST – NARFI actively seeks to evoke change and innovation among rural stakeholders and to develop a rich network of active collaborators to engage in rural futures research, experimentation and thinking.

NARFI will bring together ideas and people, money and ideas through:

- Information exchange at the NARFI community website (<http://narfi.org>).
- Participation in and/or presentations at regional, statewide and national conferences on rural sustainability.
- Development of local, regional and statewide workshops and conferences on rural issues and challenges, and the future of rural community life.
- Development of a summer studies institute where researchers share their work with colleagues, students, and regional citizens on the MSU-N campus.
- Production of articles, newsletters, radio interviews and films on the information gathered through NARFI's lens activities.

- Linking together researchers, educators, economic developers and community activists and help them to find joint funding for shared innovative projects.

REPOSITORY – NARFI will become an information and education resource for all of Montana, North America and interested others across the globe.

NARFI will develop and host:

- An interactive on-line directory of information sources available on the Internet on any aspect of the rural futures initiative as part of the NARFI community website.
- An Internet-based directory of researchers and educators engaged in innovative work on any aspect of the rural futures initiative.
- A library of books, research papers, and research briefs, curriculum modules and course briefs – which will be made available (appropriate to the medium) to others in the rural futures arena.

EDUCATOR – Rural futures information that is merely gathered and not used to evoke change is limited. NARFI will have a strong outreach role through its collaboration with Montana's educators.

NARFI will actively:

- Assist educators to develop a rural futures focus within their existing programs.
- Seek funding to develop curriculum, educate teachers and motivate students to participate in shaping the future of Montana by wrestling with rural community problems today and working toward innovative approaches for tomorrow.
- Support rural Montana education through collaboration on projects to continue to find and develop innovative means to deliver educational experiences to our geographically dispersed and opportunity challenged rural and tribal populations.
- Help educators to help their rural students to bridge the Digital Divide by providing support for computer and Internet-based technology learning sessions through mobile hands-on workshops.

Montana's Senator Max Baucus and Senator Conrad Burns were instrumental in getting a \$250,000 Federal education appropriation to develop the **North American Rural Futures Institute**. *Thank you, Senators!*

Q: What can government do to help stem the tide of depopulation?

Stemming rural depopulation depends on creating a healthy and sustainable climate for solo and family-based entrepreneurs and small business networks.

- Encourage states to develop HUD's Renewal Communities, Enterprise Communities and Empowerment Zones (RC/EC/EZ) as STATE-WIDE resources for entrepreneurial small business networks, rather than seeing them as discrete, isolated communities to be serviced with assistance programs.
- Provide incentives to network small business development collaborations BETWEEN rural and urban RC/EC/EZ communities. That is, encourage partnering relationships networking rural and urban RC/EC/EZ communities. Help these partnerships to evolve into thriving and market-competitive small business networks.
- Provide NSF and/or SBIR research and demonstration business development funding to support the development of innovations in business models and supporting software to enable collaborative networks of solo and family-based entrepreneurs in rural areas.
- Taking a cue from VISTA (Volunteers In Service To America), create SEISTA, Social Entrepreneurs In Service To America, an incentive and support program to encourage solo and collaborative networks of social entrepreneurs interested in tackling economic and community development problems through private sector social ventures.
- Change focus from depopulation as a negative issue and refocus on how to leverage population shifts for economic development through the "scatterling" effect noted by Jim Salmons in a previous document.
- Identify what makes your town, county, region, or state uniquely different from others around it then build that "brand" and use it to recruit new population. Market your brand to targeted population pools.
- Instead of offering economic incentives to corporations to locate in particular areas, provide incentives to entrepreneurs, small businesses and creative individuals to locate to a region or to stay. Such incentives could be:
 - a. Health insurance plans that allow access to low-cost health insurance group rates to any resident as long as he/she lives and works in your state.
 - b. Tax credits or tax cuts for individuals who move to your state, put down roots and contribute to the economy for some predetermined number of years.
 - c. Revitalize the "welcome wagon" - fund a part time position to greet new residents of a community and deliver a "basket" introducing the area, local merchants, the community and so on. Including samples of locally produced products would be good marketing and a win-win all around.