

# STEWARDSHIP + EQUITY: ROOTING A NEW RURAL LEGACY

Community  
Strategies Group

aspen institute



**Our Contention:** We are at an unprecedented moment of opportunity to act at the intersection of health, economic development, equity, and environment. Effective stewardship of the environment, natural resources, and ecosystem services requires a collection of policies, practices, and investments that embody and center the interests of rural and Native communities – not simply the interests of governments, environmental advocates, or corporations. Addressing existing and historical rural place, race, and class inequities **while** addressing climate impacts is not only the fair thing to do, it is also necessary to meet national carbon reduction targets.

## CONTEXT

Rural America's majesty and value derive from the vast expanses of natural ecosystems, watersheds, and resources it provides for our entire country's human and nonhuman residents. The rural landscapes, small towns, and crossroad communities that attract families, tourists, retirees, entrepreneurs, and others are in place today because rural and Native residents have taken care of local lands and waters. We call such patient, steady, and creative care for our natural resources – so that resources are both productive today *and* last for future generations – “stewardship.” Rural and Native people and communities have been doing the work of stewardship for all of us for centuries – even as many of these rural resources and places have been steadily despoiled by negligent and extractive industries, underinvestment, and a lax policy environment.

Today, climate change, species extinction, energy imperatives, and rapid urbanization and suburbanization are forcing the recognition that the ecological goods and services that rural natural resources provide to us all have never been more important. Many of these goods and services are tangible, such as fresh water; food and fiber from farms, forests, hunting, and fishing; land- and water-based recreation; wildlife and aquatic habitats; and more. Others are less visible, such as clean air from oxygen produced by forests; carbon dioxide captured from the atmosphere and safely sequestered in healthy soils and



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trees; cultural and spiritual enrichment; longer-term land productivity nurtured via robust nutrient and water cycling practices; and more. For the most part, these goods and services have been enjoyed by urban, suburban, and rural neighbors alike, but with insufficient – if any – compensation for the rural and tribal communities and Native nations providing most of these goods and services.

Maintaining the quality and quantity of natural resources across the United States is dependent on resource management policies, practices, and investments. Unfortunately, during the eras of colonization, the emerging nation's relationship with its natural resources began not with management, but with unfettered exploitation of the natural world without regard to sustaining it. Later that transitioned to managing for the maximum yield and efficient production of individual resources, whether fish or trees or arable land. Recent decades have moved us in a better direction toward ecosystem management, with the emerging objective of sustaining the wider range of our needed goods and services that are derived from our natural resources.

Yet, even ecosystem management can lead to over-exploitation of natural resources when it is based on assumptions and practices that are not achievable in a rapidly changing world. The need is for policies, practices, and investments that, according to one Harvard study, "...increase the likelihood of socially beneficial outcomes and reduce the risk of bad outcomes,"<sup>1</sup> with the twin goals of both sustaining ecosystems and improving human well-being. That study's authors call for strategies that reduce the magnitude, exposure, and sensitivity to known threats and stresses; focus on proactive policies that shape change; and avoid or escape unsustainable trajectories.<sup>2</sup> In short, stewardship seeks to use our natural resources to maintain and improve everyone's well-being, while managing them to last and thrive for generations to come.

But the well-being goal in that calculation calls for paying attention to more than just the resources themselves. Stewardship must encompass more than a collection of environment, natural resources, and ecosystem services policies, practices, and investments imposed by governments, environmental advocates, or corporate interests; they must embody and center the economic, social, cultural, health, spiritual, and related interests of rural and Native communities as well. That means that effective stewardship for our future requires addressing the inequities of place, race, and class created or worsened by past and current economic and natural resource exploitation and management policies and practices.

## HOW WE GOT TO WHERE WE ARE

This more holistic definition of stewardship is key to the future of rural America. It is rooted in lessons learned from Indigenous peoples, who have long emphasized that stewardship traditions encompass more than land management; they include cultural traditions and practices that are a way of life. In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer describes the Native concepts of kinship, relationships, and reciprocity with the natural world: "In the settler mind, land was property, real estate, capital, or natural resources. But to our people, it was everything: identity, the connection to our ancestors, the home of our nonhuman kinfolk, our pharmacy, our library, the source of all that sustained us."<sup>3</sup>

While the myths of vast pristine wildernesses untouched by humans have been told and retold, the reality is that when Europeans came to these lands, Indigenous peoples had already established extensive trade networks and roads. They had sustained populations by both adapting to natural environments and adapting nature to suit human needs, using fire, for example, to create havens for wildlife. Historian Dunbar-Ortiz notes: "Rather than domesticating animals for hides and meat, Indigenous communities created havens to attract elk, deer, bear, and other game. They burned the undergrowth in forests so that the young grasses and other ground cover that sprouted the following spring would entice greater numbers of herbivores and the predators that fed on them, which would sustain the people who ate them both."<sup>4</sup>



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European colonization of the Americas brought with it extractive practices that treated the wealth of resources – people, land, water, trees, animals, minerals – as an unending supply available for the taking, using, and depleting. Land was seized, and Indigenous populations were decimated. Human labor was exploited through the enslavement of tens of millions of Indigenous, Hispanic, and African peoples, along with the indentured servitude of European and Asian immigrants. Colonial economies extracted and exported raw natural resources (lumber, tobacco, pelts, minerals, and more) to supply the colonizers' countries of origin and beyond. Settlements in this country started as centralized places to aggregate the products and send them overseas, then grew into villages, towns, and cities, many of which are still in place today. Meeting the demands of the growing population here and elsewhere spurred the unfettered extraction of additional resources via agriculture, forestry, fishing, mining, industrialization, and roads. That ever-growing scale of raw natural resource extraction increased stressors on the lands, waters, air, and numerous species.

Over the many decades since, global market forces and public policies increased instability in rural places – including industry practices and public policies on trade, corporate consolidation, and technology development, to name a few.<sup>5</sup> Inequitable practices and policies based on place, race, and class, already deeply rooted in U.S. history and policies, became more prevalent in the name of economic development. The siting of landfills, concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs), and other environmentally and socially degrading industries clustered in invisible-to-urban low-income communities and communities of color in rural places. These siting decisions met little resistance in rural locales that lacked population density and political and economic power. While these industries and enterprises often promised overly optimistic job creation and other economic benefits, they also brought uncompensated costs, including impaired air and water quality; landscapes that have become economically, socially, and environmentally depleted; and populations experiencing disproportionate health risks and consequences. Activism on environmental justice has grown in part from trying to address these negative outcomes.

## **INEQUITY: A LEGACY OF RURAL RESOURCE EXPLOITATION AND MANAGEMENT**

Below we summarize only some of the place, race, and class inequities resulting from this history. The land, capital, and social impacts underscore the scale and structural nature of disparities produced by this legacy and point to the challenges we face to advance stewardship and equity together.



### **Land, Air, and Water: Loss of Access, Ownership, Quality, and Control**

- Native nations and rural people, families, and communities have lost land (and wealth) through theft; legal constraints; and race-, class-, and place-based discriminatory practices and policies used by public agencies and private lending institutions.
- Consolidation of farms and race and class discrimination have led to the loss of ownership and control of land, and to the loss of small- to mid-sized farms that are more likely to use sustainable agriculture and stewardship practices.
- Conservation tools are designed for affluent landowners (e.g., tax credits that only the wealthy can use); few tools value cultural and socio-economic benefits in addition to the ecological benefits.
- Conservation entities prioritize large acreages more than small ones, which functionally eliminates properties owned by low-wealth and BIPOC people from securing funding and other resources to support conservation practices and outcomes on their lands.
- Environmentally degrading enterprises are disproportionately placed in low-income communities and communities of color, resulting in negative environmental, economic, social, and health impacts, while promising but not always delivering on job creation guarantees.



### Funding and Capital: Lack of Access to Public, Private, and Philanthropic Financing

- Rural communities and Native nations lack equitable access to and prioritization for financing/ capital and grant dollars from public agencies, corporations, and philanthropy. This has persisted over decades, resulting in disproportionate levels of noninvestment and disinvestment in these places and their people.
- These lower levels of investment have led to less and lower quality basic rural infrastructure, such as potable drinking water and wastewater and sanitation facilities; lack of access to other essential utilities like broadband; limited transportation choices; and lower access to health care and education facilities – all of which affect social outcomes and costs as well.
- Stewardship means both the protection *and* sustainable use of land and water resources, yet funding primarily goes to protection (preservation, conservation), not to integrated, multi-purpose-use projects.
- Low-income communities, communities of color, and Native communities are disproportionately impacted by climate and extreme weather events, but affluent, white communities receive an outsize share of federal help and recover from disasters much more thoroughly than areas populated by low-wealth, BIPOC, and immigrant people.<sup>6</sup>
- The corporate economics of high-speed internet (or broadband) provision have made its access for rural homes, businesses, and farms spotty and expensive. Yet, combining broadband service with other local assets such as cultural and recreational amenities could attract investment and new residents, including young people, and diversify local economies.<sup>7</sup>

### Social Costs: Poverty, Health, Education, Housing, Food Access

- The vast majority of persistent poverty counties (85.2 percent) and persistent child poverty counties (78.7 percent) are in nonmetro areas. (Persistent poverty counties are defined as those in which 20 percent or more of the population has been living in poverty for at least 30 years, as measured in the three most recent completed Censuses.)<sup>8</sup>
- Rural and tribal communities host disproportionate levels of emissions and discharges from animal feeding operations, the siting of polluting facilities, and the use of agricultural pesticides – affecting workers and neighbors alike.
- Over five percent of the 25 million *occupied* housing units in rural and small-town communities are considered either moderately or severely substandard. More than 30 percent of the housing units that lack hot and cold piped water in the United States are in rural and small-town communities. On some Native American lands, homes lack basic plumbing at more than 10 times the national level.<sup>9</sup>
- Rural and Native communities often have worse health outcomes and have less access to healthcare.<sup>10</sup> While almost 20% of the U.S. population lives in rural areas, less than 10% of U.S. physicians practice in these communities.<sup>11</sup>
- Health disparities in rural and tribal communities result from higher rates of low- and moderate-income households, less access to employer-sponsored health insurance coverage, higher rates of unemployment, lower educational attainment, and lower median household incomes as compared to urban residents.<sup>12</sup>
- Rural communities play a vital role in food production, but their residents are disproportionately food insecure, comprising 91% of the counties with the highest rates of overall food insecurity. Eighty-six percent of U.S. counties with the highest percentage of children at risk for food insecurity are rural, causing a range of negative outcomes, from poor school attendance to obesity. Long-term inequities have resulted in disproportionate rates of hunger in rural and tribal communities. Black people living in rural areas are 2.5 times more likely to be at risk of hunger, compared to white, non-Hispanic rural residents. Native Americans living in rural communities have some of the highest rates of food insecurity of any racial or ethnic group.<sup>13</sup>

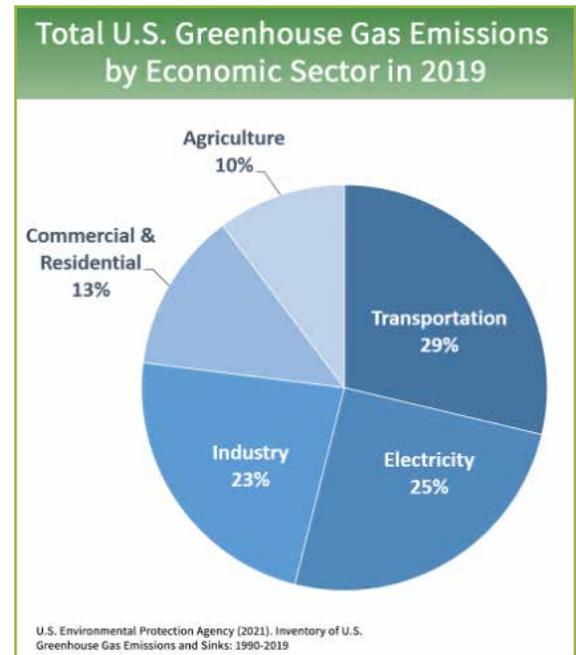


## OPPORTUNITIES TO ADVANCE STEWARDSHIP AND EQUITY

In short, this legacy leaves many rural and Native communities vulnerable to a wide array of land, water, climate, energy, food, and health challenges. While rural and Native communities and leaders often know what is needed and have the wisdom, knowledge, and expertise to address those challenges, they are not well-positioned to compete for public and private resources that are pumped into efforts to respond to these challenges. The good news is that there are examples of communities that have made progress in unraveling and solving for each of the structural disadvantages (described above) they face at the intersection of place, race, and class.

**Climate Mitigation.** As governments and corporations are held to rising expectations to reduce climate impacts on people and places, the focus is on those sectors that generate the most greenhouse gas emissions. *See graphic.*

Agriculture, a largely rural industry sector, represents 10 percent of those total emissions; more than half of that agricultural emission (55 percent) is associated with crop production and 39 percent with livestock.<sup>14</sup> One promising policy solution to reduce emissions overall is to provide federal incentive payments to farmers and landowners to capture and store long-term carbon by implementing specific stewardship and conservation practices on privately held lands. Another is offering incentives for on-farm development of solar energy generation – which increasingly is seen as a financially viable and environmentally friendly alternative to paying farmers for oil and gas development leases on their land.<sup>15</sup> How these and other ideas will be pursued to advance equity and justice for rural farmers, landowners, and Native communities will be vitally important.



One encouraging example in the energy sector is the partnership between EnerWealth Solutions<sup>16</sup> and Roanoke Electric Cooperative (REC)<sup>17</sup> in rural North Carolina. Together, they are helping low- and moderate-income individuals and people of color bridge clean energy, rural development, and racial and economic justice through local solar and energy storage projects. REC helps any low-income Cooperative member upgrade an older home with energy efficiency retrofits by letting them pay for the improvements over time through on-bill financing using the Pay As You Save (PAYS) program. With this option, home-owning customers can pay for their upgrades gradually as they save on their electricity bills. Without that gradual payment, these low-wealth homeowners would not be able to afford the upfront cost for the retrofit, and thus would neither reduce carbon nor improve their financial status by saving energy costs. REC also sponsors sustainable forest stewardship education to increase

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small-plot landowners’ and small-farm owners’ income derived from sustainable timber management. REC has partnered with EnerWealth to leverage these community connections and help small farmers and landowners of color develop micro (1 MW) solar installations on their family holdings; the return on such solar investments averages about seven times the return they would get from growing traditional crops on the same acreage.

Win-win projects like these could easily be overlooked while the nation rushes for large-scale climate solutions to meet ambitious 2035 and 2050 carbon reduction targets. But addressing these rural place, race, and class inequities while addressing climate impacts is not only the fair thing to do, it is also necessary to meet national carbon reduction targets. Public policies are vital to making both happen – to unlock the potential in solar and other renewable power *and* to create equitable and scalable application options so that even small landholders can benefit. In North Carolina, for example, state legislation



reduced the minimum acreage required to implement a solar installation from 35 acres down to five acres; that change alone enabled small-acreage landholders to participate and, ultimately, the success of the EnerWealth and REC collaboration.

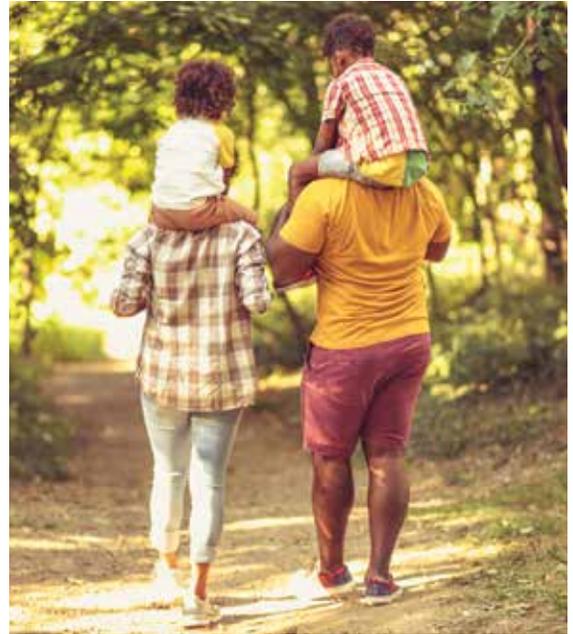
Twenty-two utilities across ten states have operated PAYS programs, including many serving rural areas known for high energy burdens and persistent poverty in Arkansas, Kentucky, North Carolina, and Tennessee. But this is nowhere near enough to meet the nation's carbon emissions reduction goals. According to Upgrade Everyone – an alliance comprising Solar United Neighborhoods, Clean Energy Works, and others – the United States must upgrade 130 million homes to decarbonize. Doing so would come with additional benefits: They estimate the positive economic impact of cutting energy costs and creating jobs to produce energy efficiency and solar installations to be at least twice the investment.<sup>18</sup>

**Recreation and Tourism.** For rural America, recreation and tourism are a double-edged sword. Well-managed natural landscapes – forests, parks, refuges, rivers, oceans – attract tourists and outdoor enthusiasts, which brings jobs, revenues, and investment to rural and Native communities. But having too many visitors can create environmental and economic stresses that undermine stewardship efforts and distort local economies. The well-documented impacts of overcrowding in certain national parks, such as Zion and Yellowstone, where erosion, off-trail activities, litter, long waits for shuttles, and interference with wildlife damage both the ecology and the visitor experience, are just one example.<sup>19</sup>

Rural small businesses and local employees and families can and do benefit from recreation and tourism. But there are challenges: for example, the often seasonal-only or part-time nature of employment opportunities; the predominance of low-wage, low-skill jobs; outside rather than local business ownership; and shortages of affordable, quality workforce housing. Increasingly though, as rural and Native communities take the lead on developing recreation and tourism initiatives, community-led strategies emphasize public-private-philanthropic collaborations to access funding and engage broader sections of the community in both addressing the challenges and benefiting from the chosen strategies. For instance, some networks of locally owned small businesses are working collaboratively across communities, counties, and regions to connect visitors to other attractions, goods, and services for a more complete, holistic experience that keeps visitors in the region longer, adding local economic benefit.

In Glenwood Springs, Colorado, the community partnered with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and U.S. Forest Service on a community workshop and planning process to develop shared goals and priority action items. With public and private grant funds, the community is working to engage and expand opportunities for all residents, including the growing Latinx community (now at 27 percent), to access outdoor recreation assets in and around the city. At the same time, Glenwood Springs is seeking to increase affordable housing, ensure the sustainable management of popular outdoor recreation amenities, and recover from the impacts of the COVID pandemic and a wildfire.

An unexpected example of public policy spurring investment in rural economies is the recent inclusion of recreation and tourism in the North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) codes.<sup>21</sup> The NAIC System is the standard used by federal agencies to classify/code businesses by industry for the purpose of collecting, analyzing, and publishing data on the U.S. economy. Once included, the new data collected on jobs and business revenues from recreation and tourism has highlighted key market trends and analyses that have been used in lending and investment decisions – and thus increased access to capital for related rural businesses. Consequently, in some cases where landholders previously maximized short-term returns by cutting trees for lumber or developing agricultural land for various industrial and commercial activities, there are now greater incentives,





with the rise in eco-tourism and cultural heritage tourism, to support stewardship of landscapes, waterways, and other natural features.

There is also greater opportunity to engage rural people in the design, leadership, and benefits of that stewardship – in ways that also increase equity across place, race, and class. In 2020, the economic output of outdoor recreation was estimated at \$374 billion (1.8 percent of GDP), generating at least 4.3 million jobs that employed three percent of U.S. workers.<sup>21</sup> This surpassed the output of mining, utilities, farming, ranching, and chemical products manufacturing. The opportunity for integrating greater equity into the design of recreation and tourism policy, regulations, and funding is only growing as the industry grows – as long as policymakers, funders, investors, and development practitioners are intentional about it.

**Local and Regional Food Systems.** Locally led food systems are an important part of our country’s agricultural and climate future. A recent study found that “... smaller farms have higher yields and harbour greater crop diversity and higher levels of non-crop biodiversity at the field and landscape scales than larger farms.”<sup>22</sup> Indeed, community-based food systems provide an important land-dependent opportunity to create local and regional economies that are stewardship-based, equitable, and just. We saw this during the pandemic when countless small- and mid-sized farms partnered with churches, schools, tribal entities, and community-based organizations to re-create local and regional food systems and value chains. Infusions of federal CARES Act funding strengthened community-driven local and regional food value chains and created new markets, especially for limited-resource and BIPOC farmers. In North Carolina, for example, Livingstone College, a Historically Black College, partnered with the NC General Baptist State Convention, A.M.E. Zion churches, The Conservation Fund’s Resourceful Communities program, and community-based organizations across the state to distribute CARES Act funding to reduce food insecurity. Small family farms provided fresh healthy produce to rural food hubs that distributed tens of thousands of food boxes to over 1.45 million North Carolina residents.

Yet, the current business model for agriculture is challenging, with farmers receiving only 7.8 cents of every food dollar spent by consumers, and significant barriers for those who wish to get into farming.<sup>23</sup> Young and beginning farmers are hindered by difficulties in obtaining access to leasing or ownership of land; to capital and financing, especially for those with student loan debt; and to agricultural business planning support.<sup>24</sup> Food shortages during the COVID-19 pandemic additionally highlighted key “broken” areas of the overall U.S. food supply chain – which had been relying on centralized production and delivery systems that lack resilience and redundancy.<sup>25</sup> This has all elevated the need for food systems reform. Investing in infrastructure for local value-added production in rural regions will be vitally important both to build power and retain increased economic benefits locally in rural and Native communities. The Native American Agriculture Fund, for example, has proposed creating 10 regional food hubs across Indian Country that are projected to increase Native food enterprises’ return on their investments and labor almost three-fold, potentially returning over \$9 billion to Native and tribal communities.<sup>26</sup>

***Investing in infrastructure for local value-added production in rural regions will be vitally important both to build power and retain increased economic benefits locally in rural and Native communities.***

Stewardship of ecosystems for food production that are centered on equity and justice will not happen automatically. New business models will require strategic policy changes, increased financing, funding investments in rural and Native communities and producers, and partnerships. Federal and state agriculture agencies can structure better policies and investments in agriculture operations, working-farm protection easements, value-added processing, marketing, and creating access to new markets. Philanthropy can support community-driven programs that increase access to healthy food for local residents or that create food hubs with commercial kitchens to serve as business incubators for value-added food enterprises. Corporate investments in stewardship and regenerative agricultural production are also important. For example, Kashi, General Mills, Ardent Mills, and other companies now pay premiums to farmers during their three-year transition to gain organic-production certification. Ideas for creating funds, whether through transfer payments for ecosystem services under new climate change policies or a conservation framework, need to be part of the conversation and the action.



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## INVESTING IN STEWARDSHIP PLUS PLACE, RACE AND CLASS EQUITY

Effective stewardship of the environment, natural resources, and ecosystem services requires a collection of policies, practices, and investments that embody and center the interests of rural and Native communities – not simply the interests of governments, environmental advocates, or corporations. Effective stewardship also requires addressing the inequities of place, race, and class that have been created or worsened by past natural resource exploitation and management policies, practices, and under-investments. This is much easier said than done, given the diversity of rural (and urban) people and places in America.

**Understanding that We Need to Do – and Know – More.** To address structural disadvantages and advance stewardship together with place, race, and class equity within and for rural and Native communities, we recommend the following actions, drawn from our work with a range of rural practitioners:

- Support rural and Native communities and tribal Nations in planning and implementing “Just Transitions” from extractive, degrading economies (especially coal mining and power production) to sustainable and regenerative economies, “that provide dignified, productive and ecologically sustainable livelihoods; democratic governance and ecological resilience.”<sup>29</sup>
- Invest in increasing local ownership and control of land through public and private funding and financing that prioritizes balanced economic, environmental, and social equity goals. Example projects might include community farms, community forests, and cooperative and worker-owned land-based enterprises.
- Increase the flow of public and private dollars to support locally-led food system efforts in rural and Native communities that utilize sustainable, regenerative, and agroecological practices – by, for example, leveraging health, economic development, and environmental funding into a cohesive package.
- Increase the overall amount of public and philanthropic grant investments in rural and Native communities to levels that are equivalent to urban per capita investments.
- Build on the competitive advantage of rural regions in producing renewable energy, and ensure that local rural and Native communities benefit from partnerships with private investors through meaningful co-ownership and benefit-sharing agreements.<sup>30</sup>
- Advance cross-sector funding partnerships that support rural and Native stewardship while also producing other positive and needed outcomes – for example, creating jobs, mitigating climate impacts, improving food security, and reducing health disparities.



The imperative to engage and collaborate with rural communities and stakeholders is an important component in current and future public funding, but it is also a natural focus for philanthropic investment. Philanthropy must be a catalyst for explicitly addressing place, race, and class inequity. But first, there is the matter of the current low levels of foundation investment – calculated at only 5.5 percent of total domestic grants<sup>31</sup> – in rural communities. Likewise, a study by First Nations Development Institute found that only 0.23 percent of philanthropic dollars are invested in Native-led nonprofit organizations.<sup>32</sup> Increasing philanthropic investment in rural places to levels that are equivalent to urban per capita investments would be a first step toward equitable investment. Aligning investments across sectors to advance rural stewardship while also creating jobs, mitigating climate impacts, improving food security, and reducing health disparities would be a game-changer.



**Understanding the Opportunity of Now.** There is urgency to put these recommendations into practice *now*. The pandemic, economic shocks, racial unrest, and pledges for climate action have opened the spigot on public, private, and philanthropic investments. The opportunities are there to be grasped:

- The \$1.2 trillion Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021 (IIJA) can support investments in climate mitigation, alternative energy, recreation and tourism, and local food systems, as well as a host of activities that support the stewardship of the environment, natural resources, and ecosystem services, and that create jobs and businesses across rural America.
- The Department of Energy alone is slated to spend \$62 billion to deliver a more equitable clean energy future for the American people through the onshoring of manufacturing, perhaps providing more economic opportunity for small towns; and through expanding access to energy efficiency and clean energy, including in rural communities that are eager to benefit from advances in technology or that seek to offset economic impacts by changes in energy production.
- As the National Park Service receives critical capital improvement funds, the funded upgrades can provide important needed infrastructure that helps rural tourism and recreation businesses.
- As states and metropolitan governments leverage billions of dollars of new water and sewer infrastructure funds (e.g., nearly \$50 billion through U.S. EPA’s IIJA programs), there is an opportunity to invest in farmland protection upstream, as a means of strengthening the food economy and reducing the wear and tear on water filtration in the suburban and metropolitan communities downstream.
- Likewise, infrastructure funds invested in tribal climate mitigation and adaptation efforts can leverage Indigenous wisdom and traditional ecological knowledge as the federal government elevates the need to incorporate these systems of knowledge throughout federal policy and scientific processes.<sup>33</sup>
- The new Rural Partners Network, led by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, is piloting place-specific efforts to leverage resources across sectors, and across organization and government agency silos, in a partnership between rural and Native communities and the federal government that includes on-the-ground federal staff. This localized capacity-building initiative has great potential for implementing the above recommendations in the rural and Native places where it is being rolled out.<sup>34</sup>

A significant portion of these resources could flow to programs and projects that consistently advance both stewardship and equity. But the pressure to “get the money out” could lead to reinforcing prior or existing investment patterns and program approaches that do not advance, or even are contrary, to a Stewardship + Equity action framework. **This calls for consistent and persistent rural and Native voice and vigilance in advising on dispersal of these funds – and demands for accountability to generate both better ecosystem and greater equity outcomes through their use.**

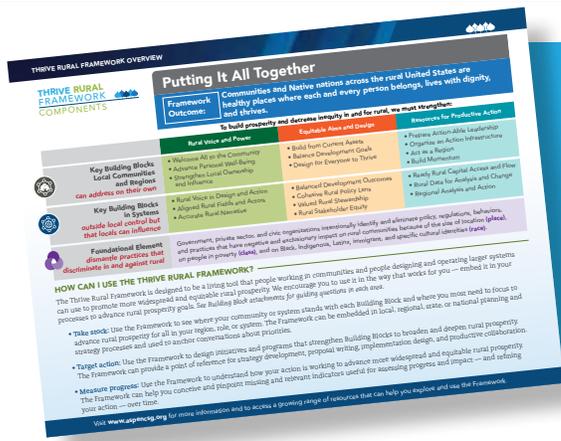


## OUR BETTER FUTURE RELIES ON RURAL ACTORS – AND RURAL EQUITY

Indigenous and rural people have strong cultural ties to the land and water and have depended on natural resources for millennia. Whether you call it sustainability, environmentalism, conservation, stewardship, or Indigenous rights, rural people are natural stewards of the land. Just as rural landscapes and stewards were key to growing the national economy, so too can they play a lead role in planning and implementing rural-led, holistic approaches to reducing climate impacts; advancing environmental and economic justice; and providing durable jobs and businesses, healthy food, clean air, clean water, and clean energy for all. The concrete steps that will ensure the long-term viability of our country's natural resources will require cross-sectoral collaboration, intentional and meaningful investments of public and private funds, and, most importantly, trust in rural people and places that provide public benefits for all.

### ENDNOTES

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## EXPLORE CSG'S NEW TOOL, THE THRIVE RURAL FRAMEWORK!

Take stock, target action, & gauge progress on equitable rural prosperity.

### ABOUT THE FIELD PERSPECTIVES SERIES

The series aims to catalyze more effective and fair rural policy and practice.

In this series, we ask thinkers and doers with rural experience and expertise to propel and deepen understanding about rural issues and realities, shine a light on rural innovation and investment opportunities, connect and align fields of practice and interest, and call for constructive changes in the design and implementation of key public and private systems – all toward achieving this outcome:

**Communities and Native nations across the rural United States are healthy places where each and every person belongs, lives with dignity and thrives.**



Support for this report was provided by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the views of the Foundation.

Based on research and best practices from the field, Aspen CSG's **Thrive Rural Framework** shows what needs to be true within both a local-level and systems-level theory of change for equitable rural prosperity to occur.

The framework's ten Local-Level Building Blocks are conditions on the ground that communities and regions can take action on directly, by themselves. The ten Systems-Level Building Blocks are beyond the scope of an individual community or region to change alone — though rural communities and people can certainly (and must) work together to influence these as well.

This brief has many themes and recommendations that connect to the Thrive Rural Framework. The authors note that “effective stewardship for our future requires addressing the inequities of place, race, and class created or worsened by past economic and natural resource exploitation and management policies and practices.” They directly connect to the framework's **Foundational Element** in the Legacy of Rural Resource Exploitation and Management section, which summarizes some of the race, place, and class inequities around these issues.

Exploring **Systems-Level theory of change**: Throughout the brief, the authors note the need to measure development success as both resource sustainability and poverty reduction/wealth creation found in the **Balanced Development Outcomes** Building Block. The need for coordinated and targeted government policies is represented in the **Cohesive Rural Policy Lens** Building Block. The majority of the brief is centered on the **Valued Rural Stewardship** Building Block, which refers to fairly compensating rural actors for the natural resource value they are managing. The authors note the fraught history and important need for balanced relationships to produce fair value in the **Rural Stakeholder Equity** Building Block. Finally, the recommendations call for more steady and accessible investments for rural stewards found in the **Rural Ready Capital Access and Flow** Building Block.

Exploring **Local-Level theory of change**: The authors recommend that local efforts to create a more dynamic economy also seek to strengthen the natural environment found in the **Balanced Development Goals** Building Block. While the authors note the economic opportunities from eco-tourism and related efforts, they also highlight that communities will not see economic growth without investment and intentional efforts to grow local businesses to meet these opportunities. This concept is found in the **Strengthen Local Ownership and Influence** Building Block. Given the long history of discrimination against Native communities and farmers of color, the authors suggest an intentional economic effort is needed to improve outcomes for these groups, which is found in the **Design for Everyone to Thrive** Building Block.

**Use the Thrive Rural Framework** in your work to take stock, target action, and gauge progress on equitable rural prosperity.

Since 1985, the Aspen Institute **Community Strategies Group** (CSG) has been committed to equitable rural prosperity. We work towards a future where communities and Native nations across the rural United States are places where each and every person belongs, lives with dignity, and thrives.

CSG serves as a connecting hub for equitable rural community and economic development. We design and facilitate action-inducing peer learning among rural practitioners, national and regional organizations, and policymakers. We build networks, foster collaboration, and advance best practices from the field. The foundation of our work is the **Thrive Rural Framework** — a tool to take stock, target action, and gauge progress on equitable rural prosperity.