

Fall 2019



RURAL MATTERS

The magazine of the Rural Community Assistance Partnership

The *Regionalization* Issue

**Illinois summit focuses
on collaboration strategies**

**RCAP helps river alliance
move their vision forward**

**Innovation in rural America:
it's not an oxymoron**

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RCAP 2019 National Conference Award Winners

The RCAP network is made up of some of the most hard-working and talented people dedicated to improving the quality of life in rural communities across the United States. The following network members were honored with prestigious awards at the 2019 RCAP Annual Training Conference held in St. Petersburg, FL, last July:

Outstanding Service

- Kurtis Strickland, Great Lakes CAP

Outstanding Rookie of the Year

- Brad Jarrett, Communities Unlimited

Outstanding Mentor

- Jean Holloway, SERCAP

Pillar Award

- Diana Varcados, RCAC

Bill French Bridge Builder Award

- Jim Starbard, RCAP Solutions

John Squires Hall of Fame

- John Squires, Communities Unlimited

John Squires Hall of Fame

- Pat Walker, SERCAP

TAP of the Year

- Jesse Campbell, Midwest Assistance Program

Robert Stewart Leadership Award

- Stan Keasling, RCAC

In addition to staff awards, each year our network holds a photo contest. We encourage members of the network to submit photos of their work, their communities, and those they are working with. Keep an eye out throughout this issue for the amazing photography from the following winners:

Rural Landscapes

- Candace Balmer, RCAP Solutions

Infrastructure

- Carlos Velazquez Figueroa, RCAP Solutions

Communities

- Seth Loht, RCAP Solutions

RCAP in the Field

- Joseph Lawrie, Great Lakes CAP



Nathan Ohle
RCAP CEO

Welcome to the Fall 2019 issue of Rural Matters! In this issue RCAP is focusing on regionalization opportunities for water and wastewater systems across the United States. This topic has become increasingly important as rural and tribal communities contemplate how to ensure that their systems remain sustainable in a world where 97% of the United States' water systems serve communities of 10,000 or less.

The RCAP network has been working with rural and tribal communities for more than 45 years, and the implicit trust built with those communities is what sets our work apart from others. Trust is the most crucial aspect to any conversation around regionalization, and the reason that RCAP can work with rural communities through facilitated discussions around an array of regional approaches. RCAP is helping communities understand the potential benefits and challenges of a full spectrum of regional approaches.

RCAP is not only providing on-site technical assistance to communities on regional approaches, it is also conducting research to provide communities with better data, more context around decisions like potential governance models, and case studies of successful regional collaboration from communities across the United States.

This two-pronged approach is meant to help communities understand the array of options available to them, from sharing the cost of a water operator among several communities all the way to the physical connection of pipes. Many communities are already taking regional approaches through emergency response plans or the purchase of services from other communities, they just do not call it regionalization. This is why language is so important, especially in the local context. RCAP strives to provide leaders with as many tools and resources as possible so that they can make decisions in the best interest of their community.

RCAP is a leader on water and wastewater regionalization, led by our long-term solutions to several issues facing rural and tribal communities in every state, including Puerto Rico and the USVI. Every decision starts and ends locally, with a goal of ensuring long-term sustainability that ensures affordable and reliable access to safe drinking water or sanitary wastewater disposal for decades to come.

RCAP

2020 FLY-IN

We look forward to members of the
RCAP Network joining us in Washington,
DC on

February 23-27, 2020

at the Holiday Inn Capitol hotel.

Visit rcap.org/events for more
information.





A READER'S GUIDE TO THIS ISSUE

The Fall 2019 Rural Matters focuses on how systems are partnering because at RCAP, as our CEO Nathan Ohle said in his letter, we believe that regionalization is an important tool for communities to be aware of to address myriad water and wastewater issues in a variety of ways. Regionalization is sometimes a sensitive topic. Many communities are wary that regionalization means giving up control of local assets. However, regionalization doesn't have to mean losing control. It can mean almost anything that a community needs it to mean. We define regionalization along a scale ranging from very informal to very formal, as shown in the illustration.

Articles in this issue touch on a variety of types of regionalization and strategies that can be used to pursue partnerships. They also showcase

why RCAP believes regionalization is so important to understand and consider: rural communities all over the country are taking advantage of partnerships to improve the quality of their water and wastewater services and mitigate costs for customers. In some cases, partnerships were formed explicitly to take advantage of economies of scale, to better secure water resources for the future, or form a water system where previously none existed. In other cases, partnerships evolved organically without a concerted effort to create a formal alliance, but ended up building collaboration between communities, improving operations, and safeguarding public health for all involved.

RCAP was pleased to kick-off a national conversation with communities on this topic with a

Regionalization Summit in October, as Sarah Buck and Laura Landes cover. This event signified the first time RCAP gathered stakeholders, policy makers and communities to generate shared understanding and provide feedback on preliminary themes from RCAP conversations with communities involved in some form of regional collaboration across the country.

This issue, too, showcases different regions of the United States and how regionalization is occurring, as Florida manages urgent water and wastewater needs; as entities in Illinois engage RCAP to facilitate discussion, including ways to fund projects; and as states in the Northeast – a region which has some of the oldest water and wastewater infrastructure in the nation – find ways to stay viable amid demographic changes.

Authors from RCAP regional partners contributed to this issue, highlighting local stories and experiences.

- **Luke Tia with the Southeast Rural Community Assistance Project** walks through three ways communities in his area have discovered opportunities for collaboration, including by accident.
- **Zach Green with the Great Lakes Community Action Partnership** outlines how, as a third-party facilitator, he and his colleagues have worked closely with a unique group invested in securing their region's water resources for future generations.
- **Derik Dressler with RCAP Solutions** describes how three communities are receiving mutual managerial,

financial and compliance benefits through an informal partnership.

RCAP thanks Spring Point Partners for enabling RCAP to facilitate these impactful partnerships and conduct research to ensure lessons learned are captured, broadly shared and applied.

The regionalization examples in this issue of Rural Matters show how small communities are “bootstrapping” and creating their own solutions to tackle challenges. The innovations rural communities are making through partnerships not only better position communities for future economic growth and development but also reflect a greater spirit of entrepreneurship in rural America. As **Jessica Glendinning**, a partner of RCAP's in

the RuralRISE movement, notes in the final article of this issue, **rural communities innovate and entrepreneurs start enterprises at times due to necessity but also because of factors like the trust often built in rural communities and their support of homegrown companies.**

While this issue covers a number of examples, they represent only a fraction of the enterprising work going on across the country to position rural America for the future. We hope you enjoy reading! 🌊

by Ashley Zuelke

Senior Director of Research and Programs, and Laura Landes, Research Associate, RCAP



Rural Landscapes – Candace Balmer, RCAP Solutions



SPRINGFIELD SUMMIT HELPS COMMUNITIES AND PRACTITIONERS SHARE REGIONAL **COLLABORATION STRATEGIES**

By Sarah Buck, Director of Strategic Initiatives & Regional Collaboration
at RCAP and Laura Landes, Research Associate at RCAP

Regional collaboration on water and wastewater services is uniquely difficult to achieve. In a poll taken at a recent event focused on regional collaboration on water and wastewater, 80 percent of community leaders said their community already participates in some other form of regional collaboration (for example, with a regional school district, police or fire department, or a regional economic development council). So why is it so hard to collaborate on water and wastewater? Those challenges that are sometimes unique to water and wastewater, or at least present themselves more strongly in this industry, and what community

leaders can do to counteract them were the focus of an October RCAP event in Springfield, Illinois.

More than 60 people gathered across from the Illinois state capitol to talk about how small water and wastewater systems are finding ways to partner, or regionalize, to resolve challenges and make their systems more sustainable. Small and large nearby communities, state and federal government agencies, private funders, and other nongovernmental organizations and technical assistance providers – such as the Great Lakes Community Action Partnership and other members of the RCAP

network – joined together to learn and move the national conversation on regionalization forward. Conversation centered on regionalization benefits, barriers, and strategies to mitigate those barriers. A wide array of voices contributed, and participants were able to engage with people with whom they wouldn't normally get a chance to connect.

Some themes that rose to the top in the discussions were benefits, barriers, and solutions. The most commonly mentioned benefits to regionalization were:

- Economies of scale
- Improved operations and maintenance



- Increased opportunity for economic development and growth
- Lower future costs and consequently affordable rates
- Better access to equipment, personnel, and funding sources

The most frequently mentioned barriers included:

- Local politics
- Lack of trust
- Fear of the unknown
- Fear of a loss of local control or identity
- High upfront costs and potential for increased costs in the future

Some solutions that attendees came up with to combat the issue of **local politics** were to:

- Ground the case for regionalization in facts and figures

- Work hard to educate the public as well as decision-makers using a variety of mediums – including social media
- Show the cost savings
- Use an unbiased third-party facilitator
- Make sure to find a win-win setup for the partnership
- If needed, try again with new elected decision-makers

To address the **lack of trust**, solutions included:

- make time to listen to the public including the use of public hearings
- Sharing success stories
- Finding shared experiences and commonalities between communities involved
- Taking care to educate the community on what the different partnership options are and what they all truly mean
- Having patience
- Again, finding win-win scenarios for all parties involved

To combat a **fear of the unknown or of high costs**, participants suggested:

- Educating the public on the process
- Showing them the cost increases that should have been happening over time but were not
- Providing as much data as possible up front
- Sharing comparable case studies
- Using social media to disseminate information

The RCAP research team also used the summit as an opportunity to gather feedback on research being done at the national level on regionalization in small, rural communities. RCAP has been interviewing community leaders and technical assistance providers with experience working on regionalization initiatives, both successful and unsuccessful. The goal is to publish information that local community leaders can use to figure out what type of regional partnership, if any, is right for them, to avoid some common pitfalls,

and implement best practices when working to build a partnership. The team has come up with some initial findings which were presented at the summit, and participants were asked to rate how much they agreed or disagreed with each one. Overall, attendees confirmed many of RCAP's findings of what considerations community leaders need to have at the beginning of the process and throughout. RCAP's findings will recommend the appropriate building blocks and guiding principles for community leaders thinking about how to plan for the sustainability of their system by working with others.

These findings will be published in early 2020. They will include sections that can be taken as standalone, in order to maximize its usefulness to busy community leaders in small, rural areas who might be interested in pursuing regional solutions to their water and wastewater issues.

RCAP is able to undertake this research and hold convenings like the one in Springfield because of funding from Spring Point Partners. Next year, RCAP will host two more events focused on regionalization. One will take place in early 2020 in Pennsylvania and will be focused on communities and how they can work towards regional collaboration, similar to the recent event in Springfield. A second event will take place in late 2020 in Washington, DC, and focus on policy recommendations for different levels of government, focused on government, making regional collaboration easier to pursue and complete successfully.


If you are interested in learning more about RCAP's Regionalization work or would like information on either of these upcoming events, please contact Sarah Buck, RCAP's Director of Strategic Initiatives & Regional Collaboration (sbuck@rcap.org). 



Figure 2. North Florida water and wastewater operators, RCAP staff, and SERCAP staff at the operator breakfast in Cross City, Florida

GETTING STARTED: HOW FLORIDA COMMUNITIES FIND COMMON GOALS FOR COLLABORATION



Figure 1. Tony Dvorak, Technical Assistance Provider, SERCAP

Luke Tia, Technical Assistance Provider, SERCAP

One of the most difficult parts of a successful regional collaboration project is simply getting things started. Collaboration only happens after communities have identified common goals and needs. Discovering these goals can happen through a variety of ways. For example, they can be discovered by “chance”, they can be self-identified by the communities, and they can be discovered through Technical Assistance Provider facilitation. In some cases, it may be mandated by the state, but this is not the preferred impetus.

In Florida, regional collaboration is an important way for small rural water and wastewater systems to improve their technical, managerial, and financial capacity. Despite its sizable aquifer and many rivers and lakes, the state faces a water shortage threat as populations continue to increase. With more than 21 million

residents, 1.9 million of which are rural residents, Florida is now the third-largest state in the United States by population. With a growing population, demand increases, so water supplies will decrease, and water costs may increase. In addition, many of the state’s estimated 2.6 million septic tanks pose an environmental and public health threat from leakage into waterways, coasts, springs, and aquifers.

Given Florida’s urgent water and wastewater needs, it is essential to understand the different ways regional collaboration can get started. This awareness can help communities, agencies, and technical assistance providers to encourage, identify, and assist with future collaboration opportunities. The following examples of regional collaboration provide models for identifying future projects and give several takeaway points.

Discovering Regional Collaboration Goals by Chance

Sometimes regional collaboration can occur seemingly by chance. One example is an instance of informal cooperation between Moore Haven and Everglades City, two small cities in South Florida. This opportunity was discovered by Tony Dvorak (see Figure 1), a Technical Assistance Provider with the Southeast Rural Community Assistance Project (SERCAP). Tony was providing technical assistance to each community’s water system when he discovered that each city’s water plant possessed a chlorinator that would actually work better for the other city’s system. Realizing this, Tony facilitated an equipment exchange and taught the operators how to build and maintain the exchanged chlorinators. The systems were not aware of this opportunity, and it met a common goal to improve each system’s efficiency and water

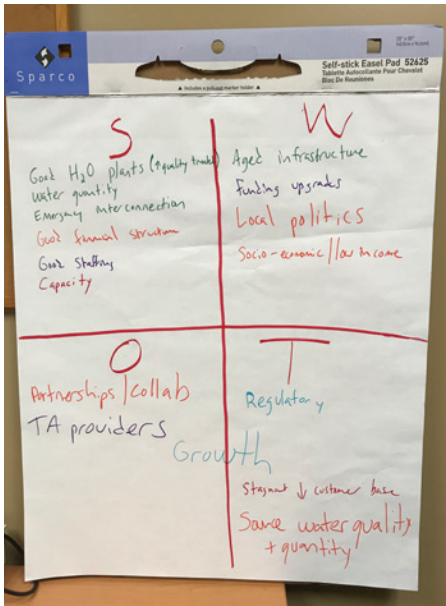


Figure 3. Summary of all SWOT Analyses

quality. Although this can be considered a chance discovery, it was only possible because Tony was working with both communities and was able to see the potential connection and mutual benefit. This highlights the value of increased communication and sharing of information between systems.

Self-Identifying Regional Collaboration Goals

Many regional collaboration projects are identified by the communities themselves. One or more communities will realize that some form of collaboration is a possible way to overcome a current challenge. One such case was with the Jefferson Community Water System in the early 2000s. The system is located in North Florida's Jefferson County and serves a population of more than 1,100. County residents created the system because they were unhappy with their water quality from personal private wells, which were susceptible to contaminants. Since the nearby water system lacked the capacity to connect all the residents, the residents developed a new non-profit county-wide system. In this example, the communities agreed on their common

goal through a grassroots movement. Assistance from technical assistance providers and state agencies was focused on facilitating the process.

Discovering Regional Collaboration Through Technical Assistance Provider Facilitation

As non-biased third-parties, technical assistance providers like RCAP can help water and wastewater systems identify common goals and opportunities for regional collaboration. SERCAP hosted two events in September 2019 to facilitate such exploration and discovery. The two events were an Operator Breakfast and a Regional Collaboration Workshop.


The Operator Breakfast (see Figure 2) was a free breakfast for local water and wastewater operators and was hosted in Cross City, a North Central Florida city of 1,700 residents. The breakfast was an opportunity for the operators to build relationships, share their experiences, system needs and goals, and perhaps discover new opportunities for regional collaboration. Eight operators and managers as well as five RCAP and SERCAP staff attended the breakfast, which allowed for a casual environment where operators and system staff could build trust. Although some of the operators were slow to share, they were interested in continuing the meeting on a quarterly basis. Of note, one attendee mentioned to RCAP staff that he was already engaged in regional collaboration with other wastewater operators through coordinating and rotating the common responsibility of transporting lab test samples. One takeaway from this event is that operators may have more knowledge and experience than they are initially comfortable sharing. Building trust and identifying opportunities for collaboration often take time.

The Regional Collaboration Workshop held in Gainesville, Florida, garnered a total of 28 attendees, including 18

city and town representatives, six RCAP and SERCAP staff, two USDA staff, and two industry consultants. After an introductory presentation on regional collaboration, the attendees were split into geographically co-located groups for interactive exercises. The exercises were designed to help each community explore their individual needs, shortcomings and goals and then find opportunities to work with neighboring communities.

One activity was a SWOT analysis. A SWOT analysis is a method used by organizations to assess their strengths and challenges, specifically looking at internal strengths and weaknesses and external opportunities and threats. Each group completed an analysis for their community's individual water system and then compared their findings with others for commonalities and opportunities for collaboration. A final summary of each group's SWOT findings (see Figure 3) showed that, as a whole, the systems are in good operating condition but face many financial, political, and regulatory challenges. Many systems saw regional collaboration as a realistic opportunity. This exercise revealed that even if communities do not perceive that they have specific common goals, they may still be interested in exploring regional collaboration opportunities.

Final Thoughts

Despite differences, each method for discovering common goals for collaboration can be encouraged through additional activities such as (1) a network for sharing information, (2) education on regional collaboration options, and (3) strong internal and/or external leadership. However, even after common goals are established, achieving collaboration can be a long and difficult journey. Nonetheless, the establishment of a common vision is an essential foundation for a successful regional collaboration process. 



RCAP HELPS ILLINOIS ALLIANCE MOVE THEIR VISION FORWARD

By Zach Green, Sr. Rural
Development Specialist,
Great Lakes CAP

Due to some recent legal changes, communities near the Kankakee River in northeastern Illinois are working together to plan for the future of their water systems as a group. In an effort to secure water resources for their region, seven communities have formed the Kankakee River Valley Water Planning Area Alliance (KRVWPAA). Joe Cosgrove, who has been a driving force and advocate of the formation of the group, requested RCAP's assistance to help facilitate the process with the

Alliance. Many community and county members have been attending the Alliance's monthly meetings including: The Village of Godley, The Village of Essex, Custer Park, Diamond, Grundy County, Coal City, Braidwood, The Village of South Wilmington, and Grundy County Economic Development, as well as members from MG2A (an engineering firm).

The Alliance is moving toward constructing one shared treatment plant. A discussion recently took place

regarding the steps needed to move forward. Due to restrictions placed on their permit to pump water from the Kankakee River, the timeline has been expedited considerably. Discussions on what needs to be done with the Department of Natural Resources permit to ensure that it doesn't lapse also took place. RCAP assisted in identifying key questions regarding initial ownership of the shared resources, construction, and the future governance structure. At this time, those involved agreed that the Village of Godley would take ownership of the structure initially, with the possibility of turning it over to the Alliance in the future.

While the Alliance is still in its infancy stage, the group is starting to formulate a larger vision. RCAP assisted them by identifying both potential issues that need to be addressed currently and those that will need to be addressed as the group continues to move forward.

A growing discussion among Alliance members concentrates on the future and the possibility of evolving into a co-op model. The group continues to touch on this subject and started seriously thinking about this idea as a potential outcome. RCAP provided other examples of systems that have moved to this model and discussed some of the advantages and disadvantages that come along with it. While the group did not make a final decision on this yet, they requested RCAP bring in an expert on the co-op model to speak with them at their next meeting.


Regional RCAP Coordinator, John Rauch, and Sr. Rural Development Specialist, Zach Green, are currently working on a tool for communities to utilize when having these discussions. "The idea is to provide a framework so that communities know their options and can look at all of the pros and cons before making a decision," Rauch

noted about the tool. RCAP plans to bring this tool to a future meeting, and work through it with the group.

The alliance recently has turned to discussing the issue of funding. RCAP reviewed several of the funding options available to the group. While initial funding may be a potential issue, the alliance is working to find their best options. The group hopes to better understand all options after the completion of a regional alternatives training that will be provided by RCAP in early December.

"It is nice to have RCAP facilitate the project, to keep things on track" said Kathy Elliott, the attorney for Goldey Public Water District. RCAP has been

assisting in moving the project forward by not only working with the group as a whole, but with each community individually as well. RCAP has been assisting several of the member communities with rate analyses, water audits, and asset management. In a project such as this, it is extremely important each community is provided with a great deal of information, which allows them to make informed decisions for their water future.

RCAP plans to continue to attend and facilitate the Alliance meetings and will continue to provide support toward decision making that will affect the future of this project. 



Infrastructure – Carlos Velazquez Figueroa, RCAP Solutions



SMALL SYSTEM COLLABORATION: AN AGE-OLD SOLUTION FOR MODERN CHALLENGES

Derik Dressler, Regional
Collaboration Specialist,
RCAP Solutions

In a typical small drinking water system across America it is becoming increasingly difficult to sustainably provide the level of service it once provided. The ability to plan for, achieve, and continually provide safe and affordable drinking water to customers thereby protecting public health is limited. There are many factors lead to this unfortunate reality: an overwhelming majority of rural systems are challenged with aging infrastructure, tightening regulations, superficially low water rates, rising costs, and limited budgets. Simply continuing the same mode of operation as in the past without change will only lead to the same and worsening outcomes. Understanding the need to alter the way a small system does business is imperative.

What then can a small system do to survive? Simply raising rates to obtain more financial resources is only a small part of a complex answer. Ask

any operator or member of a water board the last time rates were raised and how well it was received by the public. Additionally, if the revenue from raised rates only supports unwise investments, then the revenue is not effective. The small system is finding itself at a critical time where much of the distribution system is nearing the end of its useful life and major improvements are necessary. Combating aging infrastructure in a small system can be a monumental task that proves not to be feasible due to escalating costs. Low interest loans and grant monies are becoming more difficult to attain. In this modern conundrum, it may be time for the small system to consider an old idea to address new challenges: regional collaboration. Many small systems may already be practicing this idea in some form without even knowing it. Regional collaboration seems to make sense when we consider 93 percent of the country's public water systems



serve fewer than 3,300 people and of those systems, 80 percent are located within 5 miles of another drinking water system.

Collaboration is comprised of four primary tiers: informal cooperation, contractual assistance, joint powers agency, and ownership transfer. Procuring bulk chemicals and sharing among other local systems or assisting nearby communities with main breaks are good examples of informal cooperation. Contractual assistance is services provided by another entity under contract like lab or operational services. A joint powers agency is when two or more communities form a regional joint authority for the benefit of all. The authority could own and manage shared source water, a filtration plant, or a management structure to provide services to each of the represented individual systems. Ownership transfer is to sell or relinquish all system infrastructure and assets into one for the benefit of the community served and can be physical and/or managerial in nature. Keep in mind, regardless of which tier in the collaboration spectrum, the end goal is to provide safe and affordable drinking water to customers thereby providing public health protection.

The Rural Community Assistance Partnership (RCAP) recognizes the challenges for small systems across the nation and is taking a renewed approach to assist in this regional

collaboration effort. In Pennsylvania specifically, RCAP has a staff member dedicated to this initiative.

Several training events were held in October 2019 in the state and offered free of charge to system operators, managers, and public officials in two Pennsylvania counties: Monroe and Tioga. The goal of the trainings was to openly discuss the challenges and potential solutions involving some level of regional collaboration. RCAP also provides technical assistance with on or for regional collaboration. RCAP staff can be the neutral third-party intermediary between systems in formulating regional solutions. Please continue to look for more information as RCAP will be hosting a Regional Collaboration Summit in the spring of 2020 in central Pennsylvania! The summit will include local officials, national leaders and experts in the field of regional collaboration. This summit will serve as a great platform to share and discuss the many benefits of collaboration. Often in rural America the only challenge preventing the fostering of great partnerships is communicating clearly between neighboring systems. Staff from RCAP can fill this void and ensure interested parties are represented fairly without having longstanding perceptions or negative notions of neighboring communities that many times plague rural communities. RCAP staff can assist in identifying and assessing the specific challenges for each system

making it easier to develop strategies for solutions. While it is clear every system is unique, the challenges we face as rural communities tend to be the same.


Regional collaboration is business as usual in some parts of the country, including the small community of McClure Borough located in Snyder county, Pennsylvania. Water and wastewater operator, Bill White, has been operating both systems for 20 plus years. White is the only operator for this town of 850 people. The community's groundwater well and distribution system delivers roughly 60,000 gallons of water per day to customers. The small community of McClure has experienced many challenges over the years: an aging population and businesses folding have driven many of the younger generation out to larger communities where there are more opportunities. This change in population has put a strain on the water system. At one time the community was served by an unfiltered surface source prompting them to build an expensive filtration plant. Increasing regulatory requirements in the last ten years have made it difficult for the community to maintain compliance with regulations and provide affordable drinking water rates. Luckily, in 2008, Well #4 was developed and provided enough groundwater that the system could save money by eliminating the use of a surface source and abandoning the filtration plant. Though this saved resources for the community in the short term, challenges continue in the operation of the water and wastewater systems.

Regulations continue to tighten, infrastructure deteriorates, and repair costs escalate. What then can a small system do? "We are doing small things everyday" White states, "we have Beavertown and Spring Township where we share multiple resources to help out." Beavertown Borough and Spring Township are neighboring

communities roughly seven miles from McClure. Each operate their own water and wastewater systems there as well. While all three distinct water systems are unique in source, treatment, distribution, governing board, rates, etc., they continue to wrestle with the same challenges. As White explains, the relationship these communities have with one another, is obviously a clear example of mutually beneficial informal cooperation. This partnership, collective, collaboration or regionalization, whatever you name it, at its root, leads to or equals is increased capacity development. Capacity development is the process through which drinking water systems acquire and maintain the technical, managerial, and financial capabilities to consistently provide safe drinking water. These three systems

help each other through both the lending of equipment and labor. Managerial discussions on rates, assessing assets, and guidance are ongoing. Financial capabilities are enhanced by saving money on expensive equipment the neighboring community may already possess and can lend out.

All three communities use the same contracted lab to provide lab services as they take weekly samples to fulfill permit requirements for all the water and wastewater plants. Every Thursday morning the operators for the three systems meet at the Beavertown wastewater plant as the designated pick-up location for the lab courier. "This is always a good opportunity to bounce questions off of each other regarding each of

our systems." The systems will also buy parts together and split up the orders to save money since buying in bulk tends to be cheaper. Each of the communities also have access to the other's inventories: "This comes in handy when you are repairing a leak in the middle of the night and need a special fitting or clamp, you know you have access to the other systems' inventory if needed" White explained. His remarks about this cooperative among the three communities clearly show all three benefit from the collaboration; the operators have benefitted from this relationship for the last several decades. More importantly, knowingly or not, the customers have received the benefits from this collaboration as well. 



Communities – Seth Loht, RCAP Solutions

INNOVATION IN RURAL AMERICA:

IT'S NOT AN OXYMORON

By: Jessica Glendinning, Content Writer & Strategist,
RuralRISE partner & Rural Matters guest contributor

**WHEN SOMEONE MENTIONS
"RURAL" AMERICA, WHAT'S
THE FIRST THING YOU
THINK OF?**

Maybe it's cattle, corn, and soy. Maybe it's idyllic landscapes — mountain views, rushing rivers, and sunsets over an uninterrupted horizon. Or maybe it's memories of your favorite vacation out in the middle of nowhere, sitting around a campfire and watching the stars.

But chances are, innovation and entrepreneurship aren't the first words that come to mind.

While it might surprise you, all over the country rural communities are overcoming stereotypes and embracing an entrepreneurial mindset.

WHEN RURAL LEADERS GATHER

In May of 2018, 175 leaders from over 25 states assembled in rural Appalachia to highlight the unique challenges and opportunities facing rural entrepreneurship and ecosystem development. In September of 2019, this group grew to over 200 when

they met in rural Arkansas – and all 50 U.S. states were represented.

Over the course of the three day summit, attendees actively participated in conversations, activities, and exercises that focused on how to support entrepreneurial growth in rural communities.

Conversations during these summits centered around the unique challenges and opportunities that come along with being an entrepreneur in a rural area.

If you didn't get a chance to "sit around the table" during those conversations, here are a few key findings that came out of these conversations:

- To drive new programs in rural areas, organizations should partner with local, trusted community-based organizations.
- For many rural communities, access to stable, consistent broadband or wireless connectivity continues to be a challenge.
- Rather than trying to reinvent the wheel, rural communities can identify

programs that are already working, and figure out how to scale them.

But above and beyond the conversations about how organizations can build better entrepreneurial ecosystems, there were some surprising insights from the three days.

8 SURPRISING TRUTHS ABOUT RURAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP

While rural America does have a lot of cattle, corn, and soy... that's hardly the whole story.

Let's take a look at some of the reasons our nation's next "big thing" may very well come from a small town you've never heard of.

1. INNOVATION LIVES OUTSIDE SILICON VALLEY

By nature, rural communities are innovative. We have to be.

In places like San Francisco, New York City, Tokyo, and London, the tech sector is where innovation thrives. Tech innovation has long dominated the conversation when it comes to disruption and new industry.



But what about innovations in the way our food is produced to cope with changing weather patterns? Or small communities developing new and unusual ways of doing business, because the old models don't work the way they used to.

Innovation doesn't necessarily look like the next Facebook or Google.

2. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IS THE NAME OF THE GAME

Entrepreneurship and small business growth are at the heart of opportunity in rural communities.

When life in your small town is dependent on tourism, and the supply of tourists starts to dry up, what do you do? You might choose to cling to what worked in the past... or maybe your community gets a chance to shift direction and build a new economy.

All across America, there are small towns that have faded into poverty after industry jobs disappeared. And there are also small towns experiencing a revitalization, with small businesses opening up and rural entrepreneurs deciding to put down roots or return to their hometowns.

Opportunity abounds when you shift your viewpoint.

3. RURAL LIVES OUTSIDE THE BOX

Rural communities have unique opportunities (and challenges) when it comes to entrepreneurship and innovation.

Travelers to rural areas are often caught off guard when they can't get a cell phone signal. And anyone looking for a broadband internet connection... well, there are entire swaths of our country where 6 mbps is "high speed" internet, and gigabit fiber is something fairytales are made of.

But rather than complain about these challenges, the rural entrepreneur gets a chance to rise above. We get the

opportunity to think differently — and to work in creative ways. We focus on the resources we do have, and use them to the best of our ability.

We think outside the box, because we have to.

4. IMPACT IS MEASURED IN PEOPLE

In a large city, businesses can come and go without many people even noticing they were there in the first place.

But in a rural community, one new small business can have a profound impact on the entire town. Because of close relationships and a commitment to choose local, small communities can be the reason those businesses thrive.

For example: the local daycare center that allows new parents to get back to work without worrying about who's taking care of their kids. Or the small cidery or craft brewery, where everyone in town hangs out on a Friday night, bringing life back into a downtown area and drawing more new businesses to open.

When your community cares, small businesses win.

5. METRICS NEED DIFFERENT MEASUREMENTS

In urban areas, "success" is often measured by metrics like the number of new businesses started, and the number of new jobs created.

But how we measure entrepreneurship in rural communities needs to be different than how our urban counterparts are measured. When you're talking about numbers in the hundreds, rather than tens of thousands, even a few new jobs can have a significant impact.

And unlike the venture capital landscape of Silicon Valley, even small amounts of risk capital can have a big impact. Rural communities are used

to making do with very little funding, and small investments go much further in rural areas.

Even small shifts can have a big impact.

6. GOOD FENCES MAKE GOOD NEIGHBORS

Okay, so this one isn't *really* a surprise for anyone living in the country.

Local relationships are the biggest currency in rural settings, and trust matters. Too often rural communities have witnessed well-intentioned outside organizations attempt to develop and implement new programs and activities, without taking into account the efforts already taking place.

Rather than leveraging pre-existing relationships with the community members, organizations, schools, or faith-based groups who are already operating in the area, these outside organizations see an "opportunity" and end up walking all over the community they want to help.

It's better to work together, listen to each other, and collaborate in a way that facilitates trust.

7. WE'RE BETTER TOGETHER

Once you've been in business long enough, you learn that nothing great is accomplished alone.

Building rural entrepreneurship demands creating new and innovative partnerships, and being open to learning from what others have done (and are doing). It's not just neighbors helping neighbors — it's community coming together to build something bigger than the individual.

After last year's RuralRISE Summit, there were a number of organizations that took these kinds of relationship-building lessons home with them. From the rural entrepreneurship hub collaborating with local businesses to build stronger partnerships, to the

organizations from different states who committed to sharing what's working, "together" is the name of the game.

In business – and in life – it's all about who you know.

8. IT'S WHO YOU KNOW

Ever tried to get a program or project off the ground in a new place, where you didn't know anyone?

It's true in both urban and rural areas: connection and relationships are key to business and organizational success. The power of the group can often be the difference between failure and success.

Rural entrepreneurial ecosystem building is a community, and creating

connections is at the heart of what RuralRISE hopes to accomplish.

Now you might be left wondering: with the opportunities and challenges surrounding rural entrepreneurship, what are the next steps?

YOU ARE INVITED

Community. Relationship. Connection.

It's all well and good to talk the talk. But how can you act, and take advantage of the opportunities that lie ahead for rural communities?

We may be biased, but we believe the RuralRISE Summit is a great place to get started. RuralRISE is a community of organizations that aims to increase opportunities and prosperity for small

and rural communities across the United States.

Recognizing that innovation and entrepreneurship are blind to location, RuralRISE seeks to increase the opportunities, increase accessibility, spotlight innovation, entrepreneurial and start-up activities that work in a rural context.

It's time to both have the important conversations around rural entrepreneurship and bring those conversations home. Are you in?

Planning for future RuralRISE summits is already under way. To join a working group or to subscribe to alerts, please visit <https://www.ruralrise.org>. We'd love for you to join us. 🌊



RCAP in the Field – Joseph Lawrie, Great Lakes CAP

Upcoming Events & Trainings

SPONSOR	EVENT	DATE
Midwest Assistance Program	Wastewater Operator Training	■ December 10, 2019
American Water Works Association (AWWA) / RCAP	2019 Regulatory Update: Webinar	■ December 11, 2019
RCAC	How to Prepare for a Sanitary Survey: Online Training	■ December 12, 2019
RCAC	Hydrant Installation	■ December 12, 2019
Great Lakes CAP	Water Audit Basics and Risk Assessment Emergency Response Plan	■ December 12, 2019
American Water Works Association (AWWA)	EPA Water Compliance Training	■ December 17, 2019
Midwest Assistance Program	Backflow Training	■ December 19, 2019

For more events and trainings, visit rcap.org/training and wateroperator.org.

Rural Community Assistance Partnership

*A non-profit network reaching rural and small communities in all fifty states to improve quality of life by starting at the **tap**.*



Puerto Rico and USVI
(Northeast RCAP)

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Midwest RCAP

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www.map-inc.org

Southern RCAP

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