

# **AGRICULTURE AND RURAL AFFAIRS**

## **I. STATEMENT OF BASIC PHILOSOPHY**

The National Association of Counties (NACo) is concerned about the impact of national, state and local policies and decisions affecting rural counties and counties with significant rural communities threatened by urban and suburban development. Approximately fifteen percent of the nation's population lives in 2,050 counties deemed 'non-metropolitan,' or rural, accounting for over 72 percent of the nation's total land area - according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

In recent years, however, there has been a serious loss of human and financial resources in many counties as a result of economic trends and governmental agencies and their policies. Deterioration of infrastructure facilities and institutions, such as roads, health care and education systems, is prevalent in many rural counties. American agriculture and its related agribusiness remain a vital part of the U.S. economy as well as a major contributor to economic activity throughout the world.

Simultaneously, there are other industries that also are becoming an important part of the rural landscape. Long-term economic trends in rural communities show growth in the service and retail trade industries and a variety of other industries in recreation, food service, education, and health care.

The spread of advanced technology in rural areas especially in communications may make rural areas more attractive in the future to companies offering higher wage jobs. Counties need to recognize the critical importance of technology and the need for an advanced telecommunications infrastructure.

The federal government should develop a comprehensive national rural policy that recognizes the diverse challenges rural county governments are facing and increases the coordination among local, regional and state governments. In addition, the government should look to ways to streamline and simplify federal regulations and grants to rural counties.

## **II. RURAL DEVELOPMENT**

Included as part of the Federal Agricultural Improvement and Reform (FAIR Act of 1996), Congress consolidated a number of rural development programs into the Rural Community Advancement Program (RCAP).

RCAP was comprised of three funding accounts – housing, utilities and business. RCAP provided the flexibility to develop innovative approaches to rural development problems locally. By permitting the transfer of up to 25 percent of the RCAP funds allocated to other programs within RCAP, local officials could direct more assistance towards the enhancement of jobs through education, infrastructure investment and economic development.

In recent years, funds for RCAP programs are appropriated under new and separate accounts within the Rural Housing, Rural Business Cooperative, and Rural Utility Services. RCAP no longer exists in name; however, program operations and implementation, including the flexibility to transfer funds within each account is not changed.

NACo supports this flexibility and urges Congress to adequately fund Rural Housing, Rural Business Cooperative and Rural Utility Services during the annual appropriations process.

Furthermore, NACo supports the Congressional Rural Caucus on issues of mutual interest and believes that the caucus is critically important to articulating the strengths and challenges of rural America. NACo also supports the creation of an interagency taskforce led by the U.S. Department of Agriculture to help bolster resources for rural counties.

NACo calls on Congress to provide needed support to USDA so that it may explore innovative approaches for building community capacity and introduce additional economic enhancement opportunities to rural businesses.

- A. Rural Housing:** Federal regulations often are inflexible and too restrictive in providing adequate quality housing for rural families and transient and permanent farm workers.

Additionally, six percent of rural houses have severe physical problems, including inadequate heating, plumbing, and space. NACo supports the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) housing programs and opposes any effort to move these programs to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

- B. Rural Poverty:** According to the USDA and the U.S. Census Bureau, there are 301 persistently poor rural counties throughout the nation, roughly ten percent of our counties. These areas are defined as persistently poor since twenty percent or more of the population has lived in poverty for a thirty-year time period (measured by the 1980, 1990, and 2000 decennial censuses and the 2007-11 American Community Survey).

- C. Outmigration:** Outmigration poses a significant threat to rural counties across the United States. Nearly half of the Nation's 2,050 nonmetropolitan counties lost population through net outmigration between 1988 and 2008; for over 700 counties, this loss exceeded 10 percent.

### **III. RURAL INFRASTRUCTURE**

- A. Water and Wastewater:** Critical infrastructure, such as water and wastewater, remain a priority for many rural communities. The cost of building, maintaining, and upgrading local water system is a challenge for many small towns and rural counties. Beyond the public health interests, clean and reliable water is a necessity to spur economic growth. Studies have concluded that water and sewer projects can save or create jobs in rural communities by attracting and retaining businesses. Flexible cooperative/collaborative funding opportunities are encouraged.

- B. Transportation:** Additionally, many counties have to close bridges when they become unsafe and cannot afford to rebuild them. The quality of roads and bridges is declining in many rural areas due to lack of funding. In particular, rural counties are increasingly in need of federal assistance for costly repairs and upgrades to farm-to-market roads – rural roads that primarily serve to transport agricultural products from a farm or ranch to the marketplace. Federal funding for rural roads, bridges, local transit service, and air service needs to increase substantially.

- C. Technology:** Advanced telecommunications are critical to the economic vitality of rural America. According to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), a lack of broadband infrastructure could limit the potential of rural communities to attract and retain businesses and jobs, especially

businesses that are dependent on electronic commerce. The lack of broadband infrastructure in rural communities has severely impaired the potential of rural communities to attract and retain new businesses. Increased deployment of advanced technology has major implications for rural counties including improved healthcare services through telemedicine, long distance education, attraction of quality economic development, and improved wages and employment.

Many rural counties with broad-band service, however, may only have one provider - compared to typically multiple providers in urban areas. Competition for broadband is especially important with regards to quality, costs, and speeds of service. Having little or no choice in broadband providers can cause rural users to settle for inferior/no service.

Advanced technology is a major key to closing the information gap between rural and urban areas. NACo supports congressional and administrative action that hastens the deployment of high-speed broadband technology in rural America. This includes additional sustained funding for rural broadband deployment and support for cooperatives deploying telecommunications services by leveraging and streamlining key federal programs: the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Utilities Service (RUS); the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Connect America Funds (CAF); U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) grant program; and the Rural Infrastructure Program.

- D. Economic Development:** Rural economic development is generally thought of in terms of improving the employment opportunities, incomes, and well-being of the nation's people by strengthening the capacity of rural America to compete in a global economy.

NACo supports holistic approaches to rural development, such as the Rural Collaborative Investment Program (RCIP) and the Strategic Economic and Community Development (SECD) Program. By incorporating elected county and municipal officials, businesses, and non-profits in a multi-county region, these programs would allow multiple sectors a chance to chart the future of their community. Additionally, NACo urges Congress to provide increased funding for local capacity and technical assistance.

NACo also supports improved coordination of the USDA's economic development programs at the state, regional and local levels. Federal agencies should be required to recognize and follow county and regional development plans developed by local and elected officials.

- E. Rural Healthcare:** NACo recognizes the vital role that healthcare plays in rural America. The healthcare industry is an economic development engine and access to affordable healthcare is essential to spur new businesses. NACo supports strengthening the healthcare delivery system in rural America, including ambulatory services.

#### **IV. AGRICULTURE**

- A. Farm Bill Authorization:** The ability of county governments to provide services financed by property and other local taxes is dependent on farm income and rural business. Agriculture is a key component of economic development and should be included in any comprehensive rural development program.

NACo supports expansion of the crop insurance program to include additional crops, livestock, and poultry. Additionally, NACo encourages Congress to provide a subsidy for hay production to assist agriculture communities, prevent soil erosion, and improve water quality.

NACo supports agricultural reforms that will improve health and protect the environment of all Americans through significantly strengthening federal nutrition programs, improving access to healthy food, promoting environmental stewardship and conservation, protecting our food supply, and robustly funding rural development initiatives based on best practices in coordination with local officials. All titles of the farm bill are important to the vitality of our nation, therefore, NACo supports full funding of all titles of this important legislation.

NACo supports investments in infrastructure, entrepreneurship programs and facilities that process, distribute, and develop value-added products using locally-grown commodities purchased from local farmers to meet the demand for local, healthy food.

NACo supports the definition of biomass from Titles I & III of the 2008 Farm Act, which states that renewable biomass is:

For federal lands: Materials that are byproducts of preventive treatments (e.g., trees, wood) that are removed to reduce hazardous fuels, to reduce or contain disease or insect infestation, or to restore ecosystem health; would not otherwise be used for higher value products; and are harvested from the National Forest System land or public lands in accordance with public laws, land management plans, and requirements for old-growth maintenance.

For non-federal lands: Any organic matter that is available on a renewable or recurring basis from nonfederal land or land belonging to Indian tribes, including renewable plant materials (feed grains, other organic commodities, other plants and trees, algae), waste material (crop residue, other vegetative waste material including wood waste and wood residue), animal waste and byproducts (fats, oils, greases, and manure), construction waste, and food waste/yard waste.

**B. Family Farm:** NACo supports the concept of family farms in producing agricultural goods. Federal policies should support the maintenance and continued existence of family farms. NACo supports an examination by Congress and the Administration into the declining revenue to agriculture producers from food sales while there has been no reduction in the cost of food.

To keep the integrity of the family farm in place and in turn the fiscal solvency of many counties dependent upon agriculture, NACo supports the beginning farmer loan program. NACo also supports incentives, such as low-interest loans and tax credits, to be provided to young people entering farming and agribusiness in rural areas.

Farming is not simply an occupation but a lifestyle, and it is critical that farmers be able to teach their children and grandchildren how to perform agricultural work safely and responsibly. Statutory child labor parental exemptions should be kept in place in order to ensure the viability of the family farm.

Additionally, NACo supports ‘agribility’ programs within USDA that help physically challenged farmers in their agricultural duties.

**C. Land and Water Conservation:** NACo recognizes the need to protect our nation's most environmentally sensitive lands and waters. Programs such as the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP), Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP), Conservation Security Program (CSP), and others are important sources for technical assistance and are needed to help communities implement many important conservation measures.

NACo supports USDA's Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) and the valuable technical assistance their field offices provide. The NRCS plays a critical role for counties by addressing local conservation issues pertinent to county governments as well as Soil and Water Conservation Districts.

NACo urges Congress to fund and expand backlogged farm conservation programs such as the Conservation and Wetlands Reserve, Buffer, and Farmland Protection Programs. Flexibility should be allowed in the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program to permanently protect locally identified critical habitat areas. NRCS should be the sole federal agency with jurisdictional authority over agricultural wetlands areas in coordination with local officials.

NACo also supports USDA's National Conservation Buffer Initiative and its attempt to encourage the establishment of long-term conservation practices such as the creation of buffer strips, planting of trees for windbreaks, wildlife and other conservation enhancement purposes. This initiative will help landowners make good use of their best cropland and maintain their marginal area lands.

NACo is concerned about the loss of productive farmland to nonagricultural uses because of increasing development. NACo urges Congress, and the USDA to support measures to retain, protect, and improve agricultural land, and conserve topsoil, consistent with local land use policies and controls. An important aspect of the conservation process is the maintenance of financial and technical assistance to establish practical methods to protect farmlands for American farm families and retain farmland to maintain stable production of farm commodities.

NACo recognizes that federal, state and county partnership in coordination should be a partnership enhanced by a common goal in identifying and implementing conservation management practices. This would include the targeting of priority protection areas in developing sound agricultural conservation management programs.

NACo urges the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to use the best scientific data on pesticide use, residues on crops, and toxicity, so that important pesticide uses are preserved; and to work closely with the USDA to improve consultation with all stakeholders.

NACo supports federal incentives that reward American agriculture for the implementation of best management practices that protect the environment and opposes any attempts to impose a federal greenhouse gas tax on livestock.

**D. Pest Management:** Wildlife can cause significant damage to private and public property, including agricultural crops, livestock, forests, pastures, and urban and rural structures. NACo supports USDA Animal Plant and Health Inspection Service (APHIS), Wildlife Service programs and encourages Congress and the Administration to provide necessary resources to strengthen these programs. NACo

also opposes efforts to weaken WS programs, including efforts to decrease funding and change authorized abilities to cooperate with counties and other entities needing assistance.

**E. Farmworkers:** According to USDA's Economic Research Service the total U.S. agricultural labor force has declined over the past century and hired farm workers have become the largest proportion of all farm workers. An estimated half of hired farm workers lack the legal status to work in the U.S. These workers are a major presence in rural communities across our country and are vital for the economic health of our agricultural sector, from large producers to family farms and ranches. The H-2A visa program – the nation's only legally sanctioned guestworker program – does not have the capacity to handle the nation's demand for hired farm workers. NACo supports a sensible and orderly guestworker program for farm workers that significantly simplifies administrative requirements for all employers equally, provides temporary legal status and protections for migrant farm workers, and the possibility of obtaining permanent legal residence in the United States.

In addition, NACo supports the following principles:

- **The Future Flow of Agricultural Jobs:** The continuous flow of a legal, reliable and stable workforce is necessary to ensure the future of agricultural production in the U.S.
- **Wages:** The wage must be an economically viable rate for agriculture, representing the local area.
- **Private Right of Protection:** There must be protections in place to ensure that agricultural employers are not at risk from class action litigation.

**F. Property Rights of Horse Owners:** NACo calls for the humane treatment of horses in the ownership, raising, transporting, and processing that is carried out under the supervision of USDA. NACo opposes efforts to curtail the property rights of horse owners and specifically opposes efforts to amend the Horse Protection Act to prohibit the shipping, transporting, moving, delivering, receiving, possessing, purchasing, selling, or donation of horses and other equines to be slaughtered for human consumption, and for other purposes. This federal legislation will make it illegal to transport horses to a packing plant or to release any horses to any Canadian or Mexican packing plants, thereby totally shutting down the “harvest” market for used and unwanted horses.

Only about 6,000 spaces are available nationwide for horse rescue facilities and the vast majority are already full. Unwanted horses are detrimental to county governments as horse owners release their unwanted horses into the wild, thus making it the county's responsibility to collect and dispose of them. Horse owners who wish to seek an additional value for their spent horses by sending them to slaughter should have the right to do so. Those who wish to retain them to die of old age, or euthanize and bury them on the farm or ranch should have that right as well.

**G. Renewable Energy:** NACo supports comprehensive legislation to encourage and enable American Agriculture to provide at least 25 percent of the total energy, including wind and solar, consumed in the United States by 2025 while continuing to produce abundant, safe and affordable food and fiber.

Biomass fuels (ethanol, bio-diesel) are paramount not only to the reduction of pollution in counties throughout the nation, but also serve as revenue generators for many farmers that are struggling with

low prices for their crops and increased costs of production. Their use and development should be encouraged and enhanced by Congress.

While NACo is supportive of tax incentives to increase usage and reliance on renewable energy sources, it opposes mandates that will result in undue fiscal hardship to rural and agricultural users.

In addition, NACo supports the increased use and promotion of wind energy. Wind energy represents a clean and renewable source of electric power and it has great potential and should receive tax credits for production.

**H. Drought and Natural Disasters:** The results of droughts and other natural disasters cause great economic loss, high unemployment, and other long-range problems. NACo is concerned about the adverse impact these weather-related disasters have upon counties and other local governments.

NACo urges the Administration and Congress to adopt a national drought policy consistent with the recommendations of the National Drought Policy Commission's report: *Preparing for Drought in the 21st Century*. These programs should provide for long-range solutions to minimize the effects of future droughts and disasters as well as the economic revitalization of the community.

NACo urges Congress and the Administration to pass disaster assistance aimed at farmers during times of drought and abnormal precipitation.

**I. International Trade:** NACo believes that the competitive position of U.S. agriculture in world markets would be enhanced by the removal of certain barriers to trade in some foreign markets and by the termination of subsidies by foreign competitors.

NACo supports legislation that provides for uniformity in product grade, quality and inspections standards for all imports and exports.

NACo is opposed to the use of agricultural commodities as an embargo tool for U.S. foreign policy. The use of commodity embargoes has an adverse effect on long-term market demand and thus on the rural economy.

**J. Outreach Partnerships:** Across the country, counties partner with federal, state, local and tribal governments; public and private sector interests; non-profit organizations; and colleges and universities to fund community outreach and educational initiatives.

NACo reaffirms the importance of the work of the outreach programs and calls on federal, state, local and tribal governments; public and private sector interests; non-profit organizations; and colleges and universities to maintain their support. NACo also calls upon the Extension Service to ensure that services adapt regularly to the needs of counties and create a formal process to ensure that counties play a partnership role in selecting extension staff and the topical focus of local agents.

NACo supports the mission of the USDA and encourages it to focus on expanding the competitiveness of American agriculture and supporting rural businesses and industries that enhance rural development and quality of life in rural communities.

Research and extension activities that address the constantly changing economic and technical changes in agriculture are strongly supported by NACo. That includes placing a higher priority on research regarding alternative uses of agricultural products and identification of potential new uses including specialty markets that provide opportunities for agricultural entrepreneurs.

- K. GMO Regulations:** NACo supports a comprehensive plan to address the co-habitation and protection of genetically engineered and non-genetically engineered crops to provide a strong and robust agriculturally-based economy. NACo supports policies provided by the U.S. Department of Agriculture that standardize or unify regulation of genetically engineered crops which alleviate the need for county or municipal governing bodies to regulate, investigate or enforce regulation of related ordinances or laws.

## **V. FOOD SAFETY**

Protecting the welfare of all American consumers, especially our children, is the responsibility of public officials. Maintaining confidence in our nation's food supply benefits agricultural producers and food manufacturers located throughout our nation.

- A. Processing Plant Inspections:** NACo urges USDA not to exempt any particular type of processing method from rigorous inspection. NACo supports the food safety inspection system for meat processing plants. This new system replaces a sight and smell technique with scientific methods and should help other processing plants better target and reduce harmful bacteria on their products.
- B. Use of Pesticides on Imported Products:** The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the EPA, and other federal organizations place controls on the legal use of certain pesticides and chemicals in the United States; however, it is common practice in many foreign countries to use pesticides and other chemicals that have not been approved or have been banned in the United States. Food products treated with these pesticides and chemicals are routinely imported to the United States; therefore, NACo urges Congress to support programs that allow for voluntary labeling of American made products in an effort to differentiate American products from imported products. NACo urges Congress to support voluntary country-of-origin labeling (COOL) provisions in any agricultural authorizing or appropriation bills. NACo strongly urges the federal government to encourage that all fruits, vegetables, meats and other foodstuffs entering the United States be legibly and indelibly labeled in such manner as to indicate to the consumer the country of origin.
- C. Food Importation:** NACo supports full financial assistance to producers in the event of a national animal identification system to comply with the system. Furthermore, NACo urges the USDA to mandate that all countries wishing to import livestock to the United States must meet or exceed U.S. standards of care regarding Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) and foot and mouth disease. NACo urges the USDA to continue the ban on importation of livestock from countries with confirmed cases of BSE and/or foot and mouth disease and strengthen enforcement standards in order to guarantee safe food for our nation. USDA should conduct inspections at the site of production of all food products that are exported to the United States financed by the producer.
- D. Healthy Food Access:** NACo supports the promotion of healthy diets, including strengthening incentives and infrastructure to encourage more fruit/vegetable production. Incentives and



infrastructure include better access to fresh foods, investment programs promoting healthy food, expansion of programs that help communities invest in retail markets and food-based businesses, and increasing access to farmers markets. NACo also supports farm-to-school programs that bring fresh locally grown food into school lunch programs.

- E. Locally Grown Initiatives:** NACo supports local food producers that sell direct to consumers and calls on USDA and FDA to continue providing outreach and technical assistance to these producers to ensure that they are implementing best practices in food safety.
- F. GMO Disclosure:** NACo supports a national policy on the disclosure of genetically engineered ingredient or content information, which can alleviate the need for state, county or municipal governing bodies to regulate, investigate or enforce regulation of related ordinances or laws. National disclosure policy should recognize the safety of genetically engineered ingredients and balance providing interested consumers with means of accessing information about genetically engineered foods without unnecessarily stigmatizing the technology. Means of providing information to consumers could include various means such as electronic or digital links, or a QR code.

## **VI. METHAMPHETAMINE & OPIOID/PRESCRIPTION DRUG ABUSE EPIDEMIC**

Over the last decade, devastating and highly addictive drugs have spread across the country, especially in rural counties, most notably methamphetamine and opioids. NACo supports appropriate funding for research, enforcement, treatment and education of users and their families dealing with these epidemics.

Investigation and subsequent arrests, corrections, court costs, treatment and clean-up are all direct costs to county governments as a result of the skyrocketing use of meth and opioids, prescription drug abuse and the manufacturing of meth. These costs extend beyond the user and dealer. Many times the families and young children living with them are in need of social services, further exacerbating county governments' limited resources.

NACo urges Congress and the administration to commit more resources to fight these harmful epidemics. Specifically, NACo supports the Methamphetamine Remediation Research Act of 2007, P.L. 110-43, which provides a research program for remediation of closed methamphetamine production laboratories. NACo also supports grant programs to facilitate the creation of methamphetamine precursor electronic logbook systems and programs that fund training for healthcare providers on appropriate opioid and painkiller prescribing. Furthermore, NACo supports accreditation efforts for recovery programs, both residential and out-patient.

## **VII. STATEMENT OF COMMITTEE PURPOSE**

In addition to studying agriculture and rural development issues and recommending NACo policy positions, the Agriculture and Rural Affairs Steering Committee has an oversight role with other policy committees on issues affecting rural counties. This committee will recommend issues to be studied, indicate the impact of policies on rural counties, and seek input into policy Resolutions drafted by other policy committees.

## **AGRICULTURE AND RURAL AFFAIRS RESOLUTIONS**

### **Resolution on H-2A Administrative Rules Reform**

**Issue:** The U.S. Department of Labor should consider reforms to existing H-2A administrative rules by addressing the following items: 1) Streamlining housing, transportation, and worker certification approvals; 2) Re-evaluating housing program components to include a discussion of vouchers, wage offsets, and a pre-employment housing needs survey; 3) Clarifying the term *seasonality* and providing flexibility for farm worker movement to respond to production needs; 4) Creating a simplified application processing system with a central portal housed under the United States Department of Agriculture; and 5) Modernizing farm worker recruitment methods to ensure timely certification and arrival of farm workers.

**Adopted Policy:** The National Association of Counties (NACo) urges the U.S. Department of Labor to reform existing H-2A administrative rules to modernize and simplify the H-2A application and certification processes and expand farm worker flexibility to ensure that a reliable and capable workforce is available for the nation's farmers and ranchers.

**Adopted | July 15, 2019**

### **Interim Resolution to Amend the Highway Beautification Act to Improve Agritourism**

**Issue:** Efforts to improve rural economies through new agritourism activities are being hindered by a lack of outdoor advertising on highways that receive federal funding.

**Adopted Policy:** The National Association of Counties (NACo) supports amending the 23 U.S. Code § 131, Control of outdoor advertising pursuant to the Highway Beautification Act (HBA), to allow appropriate and attractive outdoor advertising signage to include off-premise directional signage in agriculturally-zoned districts for agritourism activities to foster economic vitality for our rural communities and counties.

**Adopted | March 2, 2020**

### **Interim Resolution on Farmer Suicides**

**Issue:** Support the Seeding Rural Resilience Act (S. 2599) to reduce the growing rate of farmer and rancher suicides.

**Adopted Policy:** The National Association of Counties (NACo) supports the Seeding Rural Resilience Act (S. 2599), which seeks to curb the growing rate of farmer and rancher suicides by creating a Farmer-Facing Employee Training Program, developing a mental health awareness and destigmatization campaign and establishing a task force on rural mental health.

**Adopted | March 2, 2020**