

## **Southwest REAP Annual Narrative Report 2001**

**To: USDA Office of Community Development**

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**Executive Summary** – This past year marked the sixth anniversary of the Southwest REAP Zone. This event was commemorated by the final signatures to the five year extension of the Memorandum of Agreement between the USDA and the two North Dakota REAP Zones through 2005.

### **Tourism**

<http://www.dakotawestadventures.com> This year, SW REAP was involved in an important project called the Western Experience Vacations Marketing Plan. This new partnership provided a regional identity for western experience vacation providers and created marketing tools including a web page and a brochure. The purpose of REAP's involvement is to provide on-farm non-farm income to existing rural families. Studies shows those leaving the farm move to very urban areas outside North Dakota. It is important to find ways to keep rural farm and ranch families here. In addition, all types of tourism bring people to North Dakota. And that's important to alleviating out-migration. Partners in this project included the Forest Service, the REAP Investment Fund, Inc, over 60 western vacation providers, eight development corporations, and the North Dakota Tourism Department and the North Dakota Department of Commerce.

### **Technology**

Computer Labs – SW REAP funded eight community computer labs this year. The labs are locally operated and maintained and are open to the public for use. Three of the labs are mobile and wireless and include LCD projectors, printers, and scanners. These three labs could be used in tandem for large events or training efforts. Four other labs are school based but are open for public use and a county development corporation operates one.

The purpose of this activity is to create community computer labs in six counties to assist in technology education and computer competency of the community, businesses, and the workforce as well as provide exposure to the global economy through the Internet. Funding for this project comes from two sources: (1) a Community Development Block Grant Economic Development Initiative Grant -\$70,000, and (2) a USDA Rural Business Opportunity Grant -\$80,000. Local match provides the operation, housing, and maintenance for the labs.

SPICE Consortium – This fall, six rural communities and Dickinson State University will be linked by an interactive video conferencing system. SW REAP choose to support this project with a \$10,000 ITV equipment donation to each

school participating given that the beneficiaries (the schools) must be willing to allow the community, the university system, and businesses to reasonably access the video conferencing equipment. Funds are from the USDA RBOG grant.

RBOG Technology Grant – In addition to the items listed above, this grant provided for an IT Coordinator for Adams and Bowman Counties, education grants for low-income people to received technology training, and training support dollars for Explornet and Women in Technology.

## **Planning**

Regional IT Strategic Plan - In partnership with the CONAC REAP Zone, an IT Strategic Plan was begun in FY 2001. Hundreds of local people participated in technology groups, community meetings, and interviews while information was gathered concerning our region's current IT capabilities and future needs. CEO Praxis of Grand Forks is conducting the plan with contributions from Joel Kotkin, a nationally noted researcher and author. This plan is to be completed in FY 2002.

Strategic Planning - In another project, SW REAP, the Forest Service RCA grants program and the ND Division of Community Services partnered with the Communities of Beach and Taylor to begin a strategic plan for each. Preliminary meetings have been held in these projects.

SW Area Development Professionals Marketing Plan – This project began a marketing plan for the region. Development professionals also attended related national events including the Power Generation Convention in Las Vegas and Governor Hoven's invitational event to showcase North Dakota in the San Francisco area.

Bowman County Strategic Plan Update - This project provided funding to update the 1998 Bowman plan that was developed for the Empowerment competition that same year.

Wind Energy – SW REAP created a ten county partnership this year that completed a \$5,000 wind survey for the area. This survey determined the possible sites for wind monitoring towers. Two monitors funded by the Division of Community Services were erected in Bowman and Belfield. Another tower was erected in Dunn County through local support and REAP assistance of \$5,000. In 2002, SW REAP will strengthen the partnership and raise \$35,000 in funding to erect three more monitors in the partnership area.

Hettinger Housing Impact Study – This project provided for a housing needs assessment for the city of Hettinger. The survey was contracted to Dickinson

State University and indicated the need for single family units. The city is looking to partner with the Affordable Housing Developers, Inc. to meet this need.

**Most Significant Accomplishment** – The single most significant accomplishment of the SW REAP Zone in FY 2001 would be the focus on technology.

The provision of community computer labs in each county is extremely important. Though we felt a little behind the times with this project, the labs are being welcomed by schools, rural business, the elderly, and of course Generation X – our target market. It was with some surprise we found the elderly population to be just starved for this knowledge – they really want to learn about and be part of the global world that is emerging through the Internet.

SW REAP's contribution to the ITV systems in our schools insured that those systems will be available to businesses and the rural community. These systems are just too expensive right now to have more than one in a small community. The use of that technology may make it possible for some rural businesses to participate, communicate, and compete globally.

This focus was made possible by the USDA RBOG IT Grant awarded to the REAP Investment Fund Inc.

**Community Participation** – It is important to note that the SW REAP Zone is an eight county area, roughly 10,000 square miles and approximately 40,000 people. Therefore, the definition of community in this section of the report encompasses 27 small towns and many rural residents.

Community participation has been rewarding. The SW REAP board meets each month in a different location to allow residents throughout the region to attend. Usually interested people, regional development corporations, the county newspaper, county commissioners, and some city officials attend.

Public participation in problem solving has grown. Communities are beginning to see the importance and need for community plans and creating partnerships. As stated in the Executive Summary six separate efforts created planning partnerships last year.

Additionally, the "Dakota West Adventures" identity for the western experience vacation providers is fostering opportunities for those folks to know one another and to partner and package their vacation products including, lodging, horseback riding, hunting and fishing. This group includes a large number of farmers and ranchers in agri-tourism businesses.

**Partnerships and Alliances – (1)** The two North Dakota REAP Zones and three Champion Communities came together to form the Champion REAP Alliance.

The purpose of the Alliance is to provide technical assistance and support to its membership towards alleviating out-migration. This project is under the direction of Dickinson State University. **(2)** The Executive Summary details many projects that show the partnerships encourage by SW REAP and the projects that resulted from those partnerships. **(3)** The wind energy partners are currently in the progress of formalizing the ten county partnership into a consortium to encourage wind development in the state and region.

**Problems/Obstacles** – One of the opportunities for ranchers is calf and lamb backgrounding. Backgrounding is the practice of feeding cattle to a slaughter weight. In North Dakota, spring calves are normally sold in the fall to feed lots found in the lower states. These feedlots then feed the cattle to the slaughter weight and sell them. North Dakota ranchers don't feed to slaughter weight because it is thought that because of the colder winters, cattle consume more feed to keep warm and therefore reduce or eliminate any profit the rancher may receive through backgrounding. There is quite a bit of evidence that backgrounding creates a market for locally grown feed and if done properly, can add a good profit to cattle and lamb operations. However, there is resistance from ranchers to change their operations and invest in backgrounding systems.

**Solutions** – REAP has partnered with nine state and local entities in a ten-year \$254,000 project to study backgrounding specifically in North Dakota. This study should provide methods in backgrounding and research to support the practice as a financial opportunity to the area ranchers. It is estimated that if we provided backgrounding to 106,000 animal units annually, the economic impact would be \$8.6 million. Benchmark 43.

**Best Practices** – **(1)** Benchmarks. The benchmark system has provided accountability and uniformity to the development process. **(2)** Meeting in locations throughout our region has allowed community participation. **(3)** Mandating project match on loans and grants has required local buy-in. **(4)** Creating partnerships has strengthened our position on issues and increased knowledge that has enabled us to create and implement solutions. Partnerships include universities, job development authorities, development corporations, local and state extension services, rural development staff, financial institutions, county and city officials, and state agencies.

#### **Plans/Prospects for the Future -**

**(1)** A problem facing rural areas right now is the lack of voice and presence. Our newspapers, radio, and TV stations are owned by outside interests located in urban settings. When stories and news reports in the daily urban newspapers do mention rural areas they are often negative and frankly, it appears they go out of their way to paint a dreary picture of a dreary existence.

The SW REAP Board will be discussing how to present a voice and presence at their annual meeting in April. Possible partnerships and programs have been

discussed already. **(2)** It is ironic but that there are jobs available in our rural areas that aren't being filled. These jobs are in the trades and professional areas – jobs that require education or expertise. It is even more ironic that the eleven North Dakota universities and several trade schools churn out these people. But North Dakotans aren't staying. We need to increase wages, create incentives to stay, and create incentives to buy businesses in rural areas.