

**ESCOP Social Science Subcommittee
Report to ESCOP
July 31, 2000**

The ESCOP Social Science Subcommittee was officially formed in July. However, it had an initial meeting of its organizers in Washington, D.C. during May. The Subcommittee will have its first full meeting on September 14th and 15th in Washington D.C.

The Social Science Subcommittee grew out of the former ESCOP T-5 Social Science Subcommittee. This Subcommittee is composed of Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension faculty from around the nation. Disciplines included among the members are Agricultural Economics, Agricultural Communication, Agricultural Education, the Applied Human Sciences, and Rural Sociology.

Presently, the Subcommittee is working on two initiatives and will contribute to a third. The first is a social science biotechnology initiative. The social science faculties have a long commitment to understanding the social organization and application of biotechnologies. The recent Task Force report on biotechnologies includes some references to social science issues. The Social Science Subcommittee intends to develop an initiative on biotechnology that is both informed by the social sciences and that examines the benefits of multidisciplinary research between natural scientists and social scientists working on these issues.

The second initiative, which is under way, is the Rural Vitality Initiative (RVI). The following is the first draft of the Social Science Subcommittee's statement on the initiative.

Social Science Subcommittee's Rural Vitality Initiative

The Rural Vitality Initiative (RVI) represents the collaboration of ECOP and ESCOP concerns for rural people and their communities. The Social Science Subcommittee of ESCOP's Science and Technology Committee is in the process of proposing several programs that will be subsumed under the Rural Vitality Initiative. A high priority proposal will be a competitive grant program to create public-private partnerships to bring university-based expertise to bear on issues important to rural families, farms, and communities.

The Opportunities and Needs

Even though the 1990s were one of the longest periods of economic expansion in American history, the benefits have primarily accrued in urban areas. Significant portions of rural America continue to be plagued by persistent unemployment and poverty, low agriculture commodity prices, out-migration of the brightest youth, and insufficient social, economic, and physical infrastructure necessary for self-development. But government alone cannot solve these rural crises; families and communities in rural areas need access to state-of-the-art social science knowledge and information so that they can develop credible informed strategies for dealing with a complex set of issues affecting their quality of life.

This initiative recognizes a heightened bipartisan awareness in Congress and the Administration of citizens and communities left behind during this period of prosperity as well as new opportunities to build upon existing capacities of rural people and places. Although approaches to solutions may vary from one side of the political spectrum to the other, there is common interest as well as plans being brought forward to address the issues. For example, HR 815 American Community Renewal Act of 1999 sponsored by Congressman J.C. Watts and others, Congressman Archers efforts to reach agreement on community renewal, the recreation of the Congressional Rural Caucus, and the Clinton administration's "Building Livable Communities" initiative.

The Issues

A broad set of issues affects the quality of life in rural America, including:

- Financial management and the ability to manage risk at the farm, ranch, and family level.
- Workforce quality and job development
- Access to, and utilization of, information technology (cross-cutting issues)
- The impacts of structural change in food/fiber systems
- Community capacity to deal with issues such as brain drain among youth, local services (health care, education, etc.), land use pressures, and others.

RVI in Operation

RVI will be based upon tapping the creative and innovative mix of ideas and information that can put rural people to work, address the needs of communities concerned about youth and families in crisis, and both build and expand on existing social capital in rural America. This proposed competitive grants program would be administered by a consortium of federal agencies and managed via USDA's CSREES Competitive Grants Program. This competitively allocated pool of funds would be designed to support interdisciplinary and inter-institutional teams working on community and family issues in partnership with rural communities and institutions. The objective is to address a wide range of the challenges that rural families and communities face.

RVI projects will not be solely research or extension. Rather, they would be a seamless continuum of activity ranging from discovery to application. These projects will require collaborative partnerships of university faculty, community residents and leaders, and various governmental and non-governmental organizations. The processes for implementing RVI projects will employ participatory techniques more often associated with international, rather than domestic, development efforts. RVI will engage universities and communities in a real-time process of addressing complex problems so that science-based solutions can be identified, implemented and evaluated.

Work has begun on formulating the RVI to address key social and economic issues of rural America, potentially in collaboration with other efforts now being brought forward in Congress or by other groups. The ESCOP/ECOP Rural Communities and Farm Crisis Task Force has been formed to address both the discovery and dissemination phases of the initiative. The social science community is poised to move forward. The Land Grant Universities, through their social science capacity, has the resources and a track record for empowering citizens and communities to find solutions to their concerns.

At this time, RVI envisions a competitive grant program that will include university personnel, communities, and NGO's. Projects that directly address rural community issues through a wide variety of meaningfully involved partners will receive funding priority. In the rhetoric of the Fund for Rural America, these projects will give emphasis to efforts where the rubber hits the road in rural development. Evaluation and accountability will be required, including provisions for evaluation funding for up to 5 years after the rest of the project concludes. Proposals for specific projects and centers will be considered.

Funding priority will go to projects with the following features:

- Research design/program goals demonstrably grounded in community-defined issues and needs;
- Address controversial topics and engage potentially contentious stakeholder groups, provided that the project 1) involves a team with appropriate conflict management experience and 2) develops a conflict management strategy that focuses on capacity building and leadership skills;
- Clearly defined public issue education and communication strategies;
- Decision-making authority vested in local groups (consistent with existing laws);
- Involves typically under-represented groups.