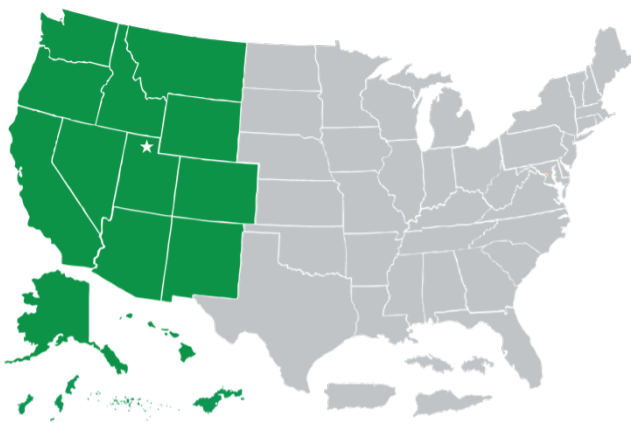




*Investing in Rural Capacity:*  
Key Findings from the  
Western Region



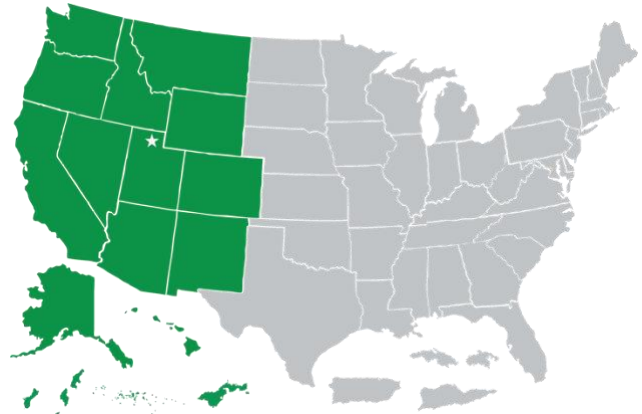
A Comprehensive  
Summary of Findings  
from the National  
Rural Development  
Stakeholder Listening  
Sessions

February 2023

# KEY FINDINGS FROM THE WESTERN REGION

## Introduction

The Western Rural Development Center (WRDC) covers the largest geographic range of all the Regional Rural Development Centers (RRDC). The WRDC's Jurisdiction stretches across 13 states and four territories in the Pacific Basin. Within the region, there are 17 Land-Grant University Systems, 13 Land-Grant Institutions, and for each western state and territory, a corresponding Agricultural Experiment Station. Today, many rural western communities are facing social and economic changes as traditional resource-extractive industries are being removed or replaced. In some communities, this has prompted the adoption of new industries and innovation, while others are experiencing out-migration of people and services, and loss of investment for new or improving infrastructure. Findings from the national survey and listening sessions conducted by the RRDCs provide insights into existing assets, challenges, and opportunities for community and economic development across rural America.



## Western Regional Listening Session at a Glance

- Held virtually on April 13, 2022
- Hosted by Western Rural Development Center
- Number of people who registered: 28
- Number of participants: not reported

## Summary Findings

### Priority Rankings

Top priorities identified by western stakeholders during the regional listening session included economic development, workforce development, health, and physical infrastructure. These findings mirror the top four priorities identified by Western stakeholders in the Fall 2021 survey. A comparison of top priorities and rankings between regions is shown below. (Explore the findings more closely via our interactive data dashboard: <https://bit.ly/RuralRecoveryDashboard>).

## Priority Ranks

	North Central	Northeast	South	West	National Scope	Total
1	Economic development	Physical infrastructure and public services	Workforce development, training, and education	Physical infrastructure and public services	Health	Physical infrastructure and public services
2	Workforce development, training, and education	Economic development	Physical infrastructure and public services	Economic development	Physical infrastructure and public services	Economic development
3	Physical infrastructure and public services	Workforce development, training, and education	Health	Health	Economic development	Workforce development, training, and education
4	Community vibrancy	Climate change, climate variability, and extreme weather	Economic development	Workforce development, training, and education	Community vibrancy	Health

### Recommendations

As a region, survey respondents reported that rural communities are innovative, have plenty of space and natural resources, and a strong sense of community. These are all assets that listening session participants agreed could be leveraged to expand partnerships and resources.

### Physical Infrastructure and Public Services – Western Region Survey Results

<b>Assets</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Access to land and space for further infrastructure development</li> <li>• Lower construction and development costs</li> <li>• Sense of community and desire to work together on projects</li> <li>• Sense of self sufficiency to aid in becoming more economically and climate resilient</li> <li>• Existing or soon to be expanding broadband</li> </ul>
<b>Challenges</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limited broadband and wireless phone service</li> <li>• Limited housing and transportation, including public transportation, roads, bike trails, or walking paths in the community</li> <li>• Distance to goods to services</li> <li>• Land use and zoning conflicts</li> <li>• Funding</li> <li>• Aging infrastructure and discord between future community and economic development plans and how it has been done in the past</li> </ul>
<b>Opportunities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expansion of broadband</li> <li>• Open space for renewable energy projects</li> <li>• Affordable housing incentives and transportation improvements</li> <li>• Technical assistance, research, and funding</li> <li>• Education opportunities that invest in climate mitigation and local leadership training</li> </ul>

Perception of low/no capacity at respondents' institution to address the challenges and opportunities:

- 69%

**Recommendations for future investments – Western Region Listening Session Results**

- Invest in affordable housing infrastructure and quality of life services to improve the community’s ability to recruit and retain talent
- Invest in local governance by providing funding and technical assistance to address land use, resource allocation, and priority topics in rural communities
- Create incentives to adopt climate mitigation strategies

**Economic Development – Western Region Survey Results**

<b>Assets</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Large open spaces and natural amenities</li> <li>• Strong sense of entrepreneurship, innovation, and community involvement</li> <li>• Tourism, recreation, and travel</li> </ul>
<b>Challenges</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of a trained workforce</li> <li>• Limited goods and public services within the community (affordable housing, healthcare, financial services, shopping/retail)</li> <li>• Disagreement on where community and economic planning efforts should be placed, especially in rural communities with a strong tourism industry or history of resource-extraction (i.e., mining)</li> <li>• Lack of broadband or technologies to grow skills and infrastructure</li> </ul>
<b>Opportunities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Startup funds, incubation effort, and training for business owners and innovators</li> <li>• Broadband access, digital assistance and tools, and remote work capabilities</li> <li>• Workforce development</li> <li>• Local and regional collaborative governance</li> </ul>

Perception of low/no capacity at respondents’ institution to address the challenges and opportunities:

- 60%

**Recommendations for future investments – Western Region Listening Session Results**

- Invest in research, technical assistance, and professional development opportunities to address workforce needs
- Build bridges between urban and rural populations to encourage resource sharing and policy planning
- Advocate for/facilitate urban investment in rural infrastructure
- Expand extension research and resources to include broader mission of economic development
- Encourage place-based research and case studies of small-town successes

## Health – Western Region Survey Results

<b>Assets</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Health departments and food bank programs in some areas</li> <li>• Land and natural resources that could be used to benefit healthy behaviors such as fresh food and recreation</li> <li>• Extension and other organizations that provide programming and resources on topics such as nutrition, food access, and health</li> </ul>
<b>Challenges</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limited health services</li> <li>• Lack of qualified workforce to work in healthcare</li> <li>• Geographic isolation and distance to services</li> <li>• Lack of funding and access to broadband</li> <li>• Mental, behavioral, and substance abuse</li> <li>• Food insecurity or too few healthy food options</li> <li>• Lack of cultural support for healthy lifestyles and equitable access</li> <li>• Healthcare costs</li> </ul>
<b>Opportunities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Telehealth and mobile clinics and health services</li> <li>• Trauma informed care</li> <li>• Funding and capacity building for local services</li> <li>• Increase connections between local food growers and consumers</li> <li>• Improve training, outreach, and education opportunities to address servicing rural population needs</li> </ul>

Perception of low/no capacity at respondents’ institution to address the challenges and opportunities:

- 56%

## Recommendation for future investments – Western Region Listening Session Results

- Train and equip community leaders, Extension, and health professionals with inclusive practices relevant to the communities they serve
- Acknowledge the importance and impact of sense of belonging and social determinants of health on individual and community health status
- Acknowledge historical traumas and distrust of external systems in relation to health equity, access, and education
- Create opportunities for co-creation of community projects and initiatives
- Build trust between educators, researchers, decision makers, and the populations they serve

*(continues on next page)*

## Workforce Development, Training, and Education – Western Region Survey Results

<b>Assets</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Access to rural community colleges</li> <li>• Secondary/post-secondary vocational/technology schools</li> <li>• Local knowledge and skills</li> </ul>
<b>Challenges</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of a trained workforce</li> <li>• Limited housing and transportation options</li> <li>• Challenges in retaining workforce, competing with urban areas</li> <li>• Aging populations</li> <li>• Limited access to financial resources such as funding for training/programming and startup investments</li> <li>• Lack of broadband access</li> </ul>
<b>Opportunities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offer a variety of training opportunities including mentorship, apprenticeship, certification, and other trade skills development</li> <li>• Research and initiatives focused on skillsets and entrepreneurship</li> <li>• Funding and transportation initiatives focused on rural development to support a local workforce</li> <li>• Invest in skillsets and training for new and emerging industries such as clean energy, remote work, and agritourism</li> </ul>

Perception of low/no capacity at respondents’ institution to address the challenges and opportunities:

- 46%

### Recommendation for future investments – Western Region Listening Session Results

- Increase Extension resources, technical assistance, and sharing of best practices as a means for uplifting rural workforces
- Help communities identify and apply for relevant funding to expand programming and training opportunities
- Leverage existing Extension resources and physical spaces, like state specialists and schools, to expand community efforts, like skills development and leadership
- Increase transparency and accessibility to local governance and the decision-making process to address public services and amenities needed to retain a local workforce
- Provide training opportunities outside of Extension to help local workforces acquire new skills and earn competitive wages

## Roles for the Regional Rural Development Centers (RRDCs)

The listening sessions were intended to inform a broad range of rural development partners, including leaders with the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Land-Grant Universities, among others. Given their focus on building capacity across organizational and state lines, the RRDCs may play several roles in advancing the strategic investments addressed in this report. These include the following themes.



**Reaching across 1862, 1890, and 1994 Land-Grant University systems to collaborate on priority issues.**



**Conducting, translating, and disseminating research through journal articles, special issues, briefs, and presentations.**



**Scaling Extension outreach through curriculum development, training, gauging impacts, and showcasing promising practices.**



**Helping to acquire and leverage funding for research, Extension, and scholarship.**



**Actively encouraging the integration of research and Extension on key issue areas.**



**Facilitating workshops, listening sessions, and dialogues for innovative problem solving.**



**Convening researchers, Extension practitioners, and rural development stakeholders on high priority issues.**



**Building and coordinating multi-state teams.**

## Notes

Information in this report is excerpted from a report titled “*Investing in Rural Capacity: Comprehensive Summary of the National Rural Development Stakeholder Listening Sessions.*” The report shares findings from a national initiative conducted through the Regional Rural Development Centers (RRDCs).

For a comprehensive description of methods and participants, download the full report at:

<https://www.usu.edu/rrdc/listening-sessions#reports>

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## For More Information

More information, including the comprehensive listening session report, survey report, supplementary materials, and an interactive data dashboard, is available at:

<https://www.usu.edu/rrdc/listening-sessions>

Learn more about the Regional Rural Development Centers at: <https://www.usu.edu/rrdc/index>

