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Perceptions & Misperceptions: An Analysis of Qualitative Research Exploring Views of Rural America

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Method

This phase of qualitative research was designed to explore perceptions of rural areas. In addition, participants were exposed to a series of hypothetical reframes for this issue. Specifically, the research was designed to explore answers to the following questions:

- When people think about rural areas, what associations first come to mind?
- What problems do they believe need to be addressed?
- What are the barriers to people's support for rural areas?
- What connections and associations do people make when confronted with various policy approaches?
- What frames advance appropriate policy alternatives?

To explore answers to these questions, six focus groups were conducted with engaged citizens (i.e., people who say they are registered to vote, read the newspaper frequently, are involved in community organizations, and have recently contacted a public official or spoken out on behalf of an issue.) Half of the groups were conducted with residents of urban areas, and half with residents of rural areas. Focus groups were conducted with residents from the following locations:

- August 23, 2003, Albuquerque, New Mexico residents (from within the city limits)
- August 23, 2003, Residents of rural New Mexico (drawn from small towns and rural areas roughly 30-45 minutes from Albuquerque city limits)
- October 1, 2003, Manchester, New Hampshire residents (from the Manchester and Nashua areas)
- October 2, 2003, Residents of rural New Hampshire (drawn from small towns and rural areas in Northern New Hampshire)
- October 14, 2003, Little Rock, Arkansas residents (from within the city limits)
- October 14, 2003, Residents of rural Arkansas (drawn from small towns and rural areas roughly 30-45 minutes from Little Rock city limits)

Throughout the report, focus group participants are noted by their location and gender. The focus group guide is included in the Appendix.

Strategic Overview

On the surface, urban and rural residents describe a similar view of rural America: places of serenity and natural beauty, populated by hard-working people with strong family values. Rural communities are self-sufficient and interdependent at the same time. Under the surface, however, differing perspectives emerge that undermine public engagement with rural America.

Generally, urban residents believe growth is good while rural residents see growth ruining what is best about rural America. Urban residents tend to believe that little can be done to stop progress, while rural residents believe they can have some control over the outside forces that are having an impact on their communities. In part because they want to stand in the way of inevitable progress, urban residents think rural people are undeveloped and backward. Meanwhile, rural residents think that suburbanites are selfish for moving to rural areas expecting the myth and unwilling to live with the reality. Finally, urban residents assume that if they are being asked to assist rural areas, they are acting out of charity and are giving more than their share. Rural residents, meanwhile, believe they are shortchanged in state budgets since they have fewer voters than urban areas.

Under the Surface	
Urban residents believe:	Rural residents believe:
<i>Growth is good.</i>	<i>Growth is ruining rural America.</i>
<i>Change is inevitable. Nothing can be done.</i>	<i>We can step up against outside forces.</i>
<i>Rural people are backwards and childlike.</i>	<i>Suburbanites are impatient and selfish.</i>
<i>Urban areas give more than their fair share.</i>	<i>Rural areas have no clout.</i>

These tensions influence how Americans react to a policy conversation about rural America. If people believe that the changes rural areas are experiencing are due to the inevitable path of progress, then solutions are invisible. Furthermore, when urban residents see rural people as undeveloped, behind the times, and in need of help, they devalue rural residents’ opinions and undermine their ability to effect change. Finally, urban residents have only shallow connections with rural areas, which allow urban residents to feel distanced from people in rural areas. The result is an “us versus them” mentality, or an assumption that urban and rural people are in competition for scarce resources. All of these barriers need to be addressed to build public support for rural policy.

Addressing these barriers requires the following communications elements:

Urban residents must feel a sense of connection with rural areas based upon mutual well-being, a shared fate. Instead of characterizing rural areas as being in need of assistance, communications needs to reinforce that rural and urban areas

are interdependent. The United States is a machine that relies upon all parts working together -- if rural areas are failing, the nation is broken.

People need to learn causal stories that characterize rural areas and small towns as systems that work well unless outside forces break the system. Causal stories help people to see small towns and rural areas as systems and address the perspective that the challenges facing rural areas are inevitable or too big to address. For example, members of the public already understand the effect of foreign trade policy on manufacturing jobs, so they can readily accept the rural impact of trade policy. Since they already believe government is ineffective, the role of federal policy in causing rural problems is an easy story for people to learn. And since members of the public know the danger of corporate monopolies and the impact of the profit motive on product quality, they immediately understand why family farmers are preferable to agribusiness. All of these stories help to position rural communities as functioning systems that are being pressured by outside forces.

Solutions need to be prominent. Solutions help people understand the nature of the problems and the responsibility for fixing the problems. Furthermore, emphasizing the solution helps people understand that forces are not outside one's control and problems can be fixed.

Rural people should be characterized as capable, responsible, and able to effect change. Effective communications needs to create a role for rural people as well as a role for citizens generally so all are invested in the solutions. When rural people are seen as capable and effective, others are empowered and feel a sense of hope and opportunity.

Generally, these recommendations apply to any specific policy initiative that advocates intend to advance for rural areas. However, as the following analysis indicates, some policies are better suited for advancing the communications frame than other policies.

Images of Rural America

On the surface, urban and rural residents hold similar images of rural America. Their top-of-mind impressions are that rural areas are places of serenity and natural beauty, populated by hard-working people with strong family values. People in rural communities are seen as self-sufficient and interdependent at the same time. Under the surface, however, urban and rural views of rural America are distinctly different, and less idyllic.

Childhood Memories

Nearly every focus group participant expressed familiarity with, and connection to, rural areas. For many urban residents the connection to rural America is based upon fond childhood memories. "I just picture myself growing up," an Albuquerque man explained. "We would always go to the mountains and campfires and the horse shoes and just relaxing and just doing whatever you want." "Rural means like the place where my grandparents [lived]," a Little Rock woman remembered. "I would go visit them in the summer and that was all farm land. My grandfather always wore a cowboy hat and he would -- back in the 60's to late 60's -- he still had a horse and a wagon and he would go out in the pasture and get that horse and hook it up to the wagon and take us out on wagon rides." "My grandfather and uncle had a peach orchard up there," a Little Rock man described. "I'd go up there during peach harvest. You could get sweaty and get peach fuzz all over you and you would itch like nobody's business."

Serenity

The image that came up most frequently across all the focus groups was an image of serenity, peacefulness, and a lack of stress. "Rural areas remind me of not the rush that we have every day here in the city," an Albuquerque woman imagined. "It's peaceful and quiet and serene. I'm glad it takes a half hour to get somewhere." "Just quietness, peace of mind, no traffic, just one car. That's what came to mind for me," a woman from rural New Mexico explained. "Where kids just play," remarked a man from rural New Mexico. "They don't have the worries of in town living."

Related to the concept of serenity is the sense that rural areas are less plagued by the violence people see in cities. "Don't have to worry about a lot of the stuff that is happening with the guns and all the violence and stuff that is going on," stated a woman from Little Rock. "I mean there may be drugs there but it's not as bad. Like she said, just a peace of mind."

Beauty

A second image of rural America is the natural and architectural beauty that people find there. "You are away from an interstate and you see these beautiful homes, these nice, quaint little houses and there is always a flower patch or a flower somewhere," an Albuquerque woman imagined. "That's what made me think of the rural aspect of it. No matter where you are, you are going to have flowers." A man from rural New Hampshire selected a picture of a winter scene to describe his image of rural America: "Rural is

incredibly beautiful in any season and it is what most of us look to experience. This winter scene is very much indicative of New England, northern New Hampshire.”

Family Values and Close-knit Communities

People also imagine that families and communities are closer in rural areas. Strong family values are a large part of what people find attractive about the rural lifestyle. “It seems like most people that live in rural areas choose to live in rural areas because their family values are more centered around the family and not so much towards careers,” a Manchester man suggested. An Albuquerque woman selected a picture of muddy children’s shoes to describe her image of rural America: “It reminds me of children playing in a swimming hole. They've got their shoes all muddy, dirty. There's not much to do in a rural area so you kind of have to play -- the children have to play together and just get to do what they want to do.”

Focus group participants repeatedly refer to members of rural communities coming together to help each other. Community ties seem particularly strong in rural areas, they believe. “Willing to pull together in a time of need,” a man from rural New Mexico asserted. “Incredible sense of unity.” “I think the people in rural areas might feel that they need to know their neighbors and they need to get along with them because they will have a need for each other,” an Albuquerque woman suggested. “You don't call 911 and they're there in 10 minutes. They understand if you need a ride somewhere for a semi-emergency.”

Hard Work

Some discuss rural residents’ hard work and struggle to survive. “I've got a friend who is a farmer in Las Cruces and it makes me think of a lot of hard work. She's working all the time,” an Albuquerque woman remarked. “I think about sometimes the struggles that people have being in farm lands,” stated a Little Rock man, “and working hard all day and then you have nice beautiful crops out here and... here comes a big hail storm or something like that. I think of the struggles that people go through.” Still, several suggest that the kind of hard work rural residents experience is rewarding. “You may be dog tired when you come in at the end of the day, but you've got something to show for it,” a Little Rock woman asserted.

Poverty

Some rural residents mention another side of rural America. “It's one thing to be in a rural area and be affluent with resources,” a man from rural New Hampshire suggested. “It's another thing to be in a rural area or perhaps trapped in a poverty situation, so I think there is a great difference.” A woman from rural Arkansas remarked, “There is another rural out there that we kind of associate with. And when I first started thinking about it, that's what I thought of is where people are really hurting and poor and have nothing hardly.” A man from rural Arkansas agreed, “There are still areas in this state where there are dwellings that don't have a drive. They don't have vehicles. They walk to the house. I know people. I know them personally where they've got a half a mile walk from where a vehicle could get to, to where they are actually living and there is no power and stuff like that.”

Additionally, three specific characteristics were explored in greater depth in the focus groups: innovation, diversity, and history and culture.

Innovation/Ingenuity

Initially, people believe that “innovation” describes rural areas. With more conversation, however, it becomes clear that when people are describing “innovation” they are either referring to “ingenuity” or to past inventions.

“Ingenuity” and “self-sufficiency” accurately describe people's image of rural America. “It's kind of like self-sufficient,” a woman from rural Arkansas stated. “I know all kinds of things my grandfather rigged up to make life easier.” “If you have to fix something, you can't just go run out to the store quickly and get whatever you need,” an Albuquerque woman explained. “You might have to deal with what you have and make do because it takes a long time to get to the store.” “In the rural homes where you have junk yards, that's the ultimate recycling,” a woman from rural New Mexico noted. “Nobody who lives a rural lifestyle, they rarely throw anything out because you could use it to do something else.” “Duct tape and wire -- keeps America going,” a man from rural New Mexico summarized.

Those who think of inventiveness tend to refer to historic examples. “It seems like there were a lot of innovations that came from timber mills, places like that, they industrialized,” an Albuquerque man suggested. “Years ago a lot of U.S. patents were generated in the farming industry before the Industrial Revolution,” stated a Manchester man. A Manchester woman added, “That's all I think is ‘cotton gin.’” In New Mexico, a few referred to local arts as reflecting innovation. “Just driving up on Turquoise Trail you would see furniture makers and arts and crafts,” described an Albuquerque man. “Everyone has their little thing going.”

Some question whether “innovation” really fits rural America, in part because “innovation” means “high-tech” to them. “High tech equals city,” insisted a Manchester woman. Another clarified, “Although now really with high tech, you can do that anywhere.”

They struggle to find a reason why rural Americans would be more innovative than people in other areas. Solitude is the only reason they can determine. “I think you don't have the distractions of the city,” a woman from rural Arkansas suggested. “It always reminds me of a peaceful place. Like when you are just sitting out there with nature, your mind can just think without being distracted.”

While a conversation about innovation and ingenuity creates a positive image of rural America, it may also reinforce the notion that rural America should take care of itself. “They have learned to be self sufficient in their own way,” a man from rural Arkansas described. “They've developed their own culture, and their own ways of life to exist. And they're not relying on the outside world. They're taking care of it right there within their own community, even so much as relying on talents from other people. That makes them closer and you know a tighter knit group of people.”

Diversity

To most Americans, “diversity” means racial and cultural diversity. While rural communities across the country may reflect a mix of races and cultures, most focus group respondents believe that individual rural communities tend to be very homogeneous. If there is diversity, they believe it is due to migrant workers or urban flight. “If you're looking at really long-rooted working communities they aren't [diverse],” a woman from rural New Mexico suggested. “If you look at places like Minnesota, the Midwest, I think you find cultural groups that have moved into an area and established farming traditions and the diversity will be for people who are expatriates of the urban environment who are moving in. But I think there are some parts of the country where you see great uniformity among rural communities.” “If we're looking at the whole country, obviously there is diversity throughout,” a Manchester man explained, “but you have different workers that come from the Caribbean and Mexico during the summer.” “I go up into rural areas and see little diversity,” a man from rural Arkansas complained. “I refer to it as kind of clannish. They see you coming and they look at you as an outsider, and you're not one of them.”

However, when people consider other kinds of diversity, such as economic class or rural areas being distinctive, they are more willing to see “diversity” as an appropriate descriptor. “You might have one family here that is just doing terrible and then this family here has got that big farm or whatever they are making is real good money,” a Little Rock man stated. “Just to see the difference between the families living so close together but yet so far apart. To me that's -- when you say diversity, comes to mind.” “Children do different things [here] from what is done elsewhere,” stated a woman from rural New Hampshire. “That's what makes this country what it is, I think. It's that diversity...in the country they learn something else and that occupies their time and gives them education.”

The word “diversity” is problematic because it causes people to think of race and ethnicity. However, the notion that rural areas are unique places, distinctive from urban areas and from each other, may help as one element in effective communications since it emphasizes that a “one size fits all” strategy is not appropriate for rural policy.

History and Culture

“Places of history and culture” describes rural areas well, focus group participants insist. Some refer to landmarks as examples of the history and culture in rural areas. “It seems like there are more historical structures standing because you don't have the push of the city or the suburbs tearing them down,” stated a woman from rural Arkansas. “Where I lived in Massachusetts there were lots of stone walls and the stone walls were created because of when they were trying to clear the land, it was all full of stones so they heaped them up and made walls,” noted an Albuquerque woman. “Those walls were over 1,000 years old.” “Then you've got your covered bridges here in New Hampshire, not only New Hampshire but all of New England,” suggested a Manchester man. “Well, it's the roots of America when you get right down to it,” a Little Rock man insisted.

Others share a more personal description of the history and culture that rural areas represent. “Family history,” remarked an Albuquerque man. “I know my grandparents have land in places here in New Mexico...It's our history. That's where we got our culture from. They

tell us this thing right here used to be the church. It used to be the town hall. The guy that lived in this house used to fight with us, family feuds that went on in the mountains.” After describing specific examples of local history, a man from rural New Hampshire summarized, “So I feel that independence swirl around this area. The history is very, very rich to me. A day doesn't go by when I don't feel that history.”

Problematically, emphasizing the history and culture of rural areas may not advance a public policy conversation . At best, it triggers a sense of loss and a desire to protect and preserve. “I experience a loss of a culture,” a woman from rural New Hampshire shared. “I remember when I moved here in the late 60's. There were cows everywhere... I feel that the North Country culture is pretty eroded and that chain is being broken as our children feel the need to move on.” However, as we will see, the Protection Frame is not one of the more effective approaches to building policy support.

Under the Surface

On the surface, people hold positive perceptions of rural America and want to support and maintain this way of life. Under the surface, however, there are patterns of thinking that illuminate the tensions and barriers to mobilizing public support for rural areas. Several underlying conflicts are discussed in the following section:

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Growth is good.* *Growth is ruining rural America.

One underlying assumption consistently voiced by focus group participants is that economic growth is desirable. “If you're not growing, then you are going backwards. If you are staying the same, you are actually really going backwards,” a woman from rural New Mexico insisted. “You've got a Wal-Mart; people are going to stop,” a Little Rock woman in explained. “You've got a restaurant; people are going to stop to eat. They want to go shopping. They want to go looking around and seeing what the town is all about.” An Albuquerque woman made this underlying assumption apparent to participants in the group discussion: “A lot of people think that if you have more houses and you have more people living in your community, and once again they're going to be contributing to the tax base; that is progress.”

Several urban people recognize that people in rural areas may not want growth, and several rural focus group participants speak eloquently of the damage that so-called progress can bring. “They want to take up farm land that has been there for centuries and tear up a really

rural lifestyle and it is all in the name of progress,” a man from rural New Mexico complained. “We have one community out there that they put a recycling septic system in next to a cemetery. There are people that have been buried in that cemetery since the 1600s, and now their graves are being flooded with contamination from the septic tank.

Change is inevitable. Nothing can be done. We can step up against outside forces.

While the loss of rural places may be regrettable, many urban residents believe that change is inevitable. “I drove through Merrimack the other day and there are all kinds of new buildings,” a Manchester woman reported. “They’re doing a new school. Do the people have a choice? The people living in Merrimack, do they want it to be another Nashua? Well it is whether they wanted it or not.” “There are some situations where there is no choice,” a Manchester woman remarked. “The ruralness is going away in exchange for the bigger city-type feel.”

Urban people do not necessarily link these problems directly to a specific cause. In discussing how rural areas will be different in 100 years a Manchester woman responded, “They are going to look like Nashua and Manchester.” They see family farms being replaced by conglomerates, but do not have a personal stake in influencing that trend. Note the following exchange:

I just see more and more of the land being gobbled up by the really big conglomerates. (Little Rock man)

Moderator: What's the problem? Why is that a bad thing?

I don't know that it is necessarily is a bad thing other than it is awfully bad for the family farmers. (Little Rock man)

In discussion, rural people are more likely than urban people to explain the causes of problems. For example, a woman from rural New Hampshire discussed the effect of urban flight on housing prices. “I think we are seeing the people moving up from Massachusetts, Connecticut and Rhode Island at a rapid pace... the prices of our homes have gotten out of sight. I thought at one time I would sell my two-story home and get a one-story as I got older and prepare for retirement. I can't see that happening now.” Another woman from rural New Hampshire tied the growth of agribusiness to the deteriorating environment: “Just complete and utter contempt for our environment. And 100 years from now I'm horrified to think how many species you'll only see in a zoo. Things like local farms will all be huge enterprises, Agri-Mart and all these people that sponsor PBS will be running huge, huge farm operations.”

If problems can be addressed, and change is not inevitable, then it is up to the people who live in rural areas to fix their own problems. Those urban residents to state this viewpoint are trying to deflect any of their own responsibility. “I believe in self-determination and people that are living in rural areas have to decide,” stated an Albuquerque woman. “They are there because they choose to,” an Albuquerque woman remarked. “They could move.

Nobody is forcing them to live there.” Rural residents who state this viewpoint are not trying to deflect responsibility; rather, they are empowering themselves to take control. “The community should be responsible for it,” remarked a man from rural Arkansas. “Those that live in the community. You've got to take care of your own.” “The people,” stated a man from rural New Hampshire. “They have to vote for the right representatives.”

In addition to the presumed responsibility of people within the community to fix the community, some focus group participants see locals as more credible spokespeople for advocating policy change. They are wary of “outsiders” who want to help. In reaction to a school principal as a spokesperson in some of the written materials reviewed by his focus group, a man from rural New Mexico stated, “he probably lives locally, so he's going to be more in tune I think.” In reaction to another spokesperson advocating policy change in the test materials, a woman from rural New Mexico stated whether the spokesperson was from the area would influence her level of trust: “Is he local? If he came from there, then I'm going to feel a little more likely to trust him but if he is from the city coming out and saying well okay, what does he really think of us and is he really trying to benefit us, or is he telling us what is right for us?” The concern, according to some rural residents, is that outsiders may not respect their views. According to a woman from rural New Mexico who was reacting to a spokesperson from a non-governmental organization quoted in the test materials, “They have a tendency to be a little arrogant and force their ideas. They see rural people as being less intelligent or less knowledgeable. I guess I've seen that a lot.”

Rural people are backwards and childlike. Suburbanites are impatient and selfish.

Due to the damage they see occurring in their towns, several rural people characterize suburbanites as impatient and selfish. They are ruining rural areas by flocking there while expecting all the conveniences of urban life. “They want to have their Circle K's nearby or their great big grocery stores,” a man from rural New Mexico complained. “They want to have their conveniences and as a result of the growth in the name of progress, the community itself has gone down the tubes.” “We've got this big huge push of people from Little Rock and all these places,” a man from rural Arkansas explained. “They want their little piece of heaven but they want all the amenities that come with it and it's hard. We try to get sewer in place. We do have a community water system, and we have sewer but they want it right then, right now. They want all these amenities but they are not willing to put forth the effort to try to get it.”

In trying to avoid progress, urban residents think people in rural areas are at best, naïve, and at worst, spoiled children. “I think they're trying to avoid the growing pains,” remarked a Little Rock man. “They want to grow but not the pain that comes along with it.” “Here you are stuck back 30 years ago mentally and nobody tells you how to grow with it,” a Little Rock woman expressed. “They don't give you any help in that regard, so of course you're afraid of what you don't know.” At the same time, people say that they want to hear the voices of rural residents in news reports about issues facing rural communities. A farm wife is “a reality person,” “grassroots,” and “speaks from the heart.”

Urban areas give more than their fair share. Rural areas have no clout.

In the competition for state resources, both sides – urban and rural – assume they are not getting their fair share. One significant barrier to building support for rural policies among urban residents is the assumption that urban residents are being asked to give to, or provide charity to, rural areas. “That's out of my pocket for another community,” asserted a Manchester man. “We're putting a lot of our taxes out there that I don't see it helping,” a Little Rock man complained.

This mindset reminds people that resources are limited and they want to make sure that they achieve a fair share of state funding. “You have a lot more residents living in Nashua than there is Berlin, New Hampshire or even some of those little dinky towns,” a Manchester man explained. “Some of those towns up there get four or five times the monies that they need for education to begin with. You know that, right? What do we get in Nashua?” A Manchester woman added, “We never get our fair share and we're losing more.”

Meanwhile, rural residents insist that they are at a disadvantage in the competition for resources. They argue that rural areas have fewer votes; therefore they have less clout in the state legislature. Note the following conversation among residents of rural New Hampshire:

The three northern counties up here can be out-voted by the city of Manchester.

I guess it feeds into what Ned just said, and it sounds a little wacky but you know we have federal policy where it's one person, one vote. Guess what? If you don't have the people, you don't have the votes so consequently rural America doesn't have the political votes.

So consequently when you're down in the legislature or in the Senate or what have you, we raise a couple of hands and it's three square blocks in Concord that has a similar vote, you know. It puts us at a tremendous political disadvantage. It's not only so in New Hampshire. It's so in rural America.

And it punishes those who live here.

While they want state resources, they are suspicious of politicians, and do not see them as credible authorities on rural issues. People reject politicians as spokespeople saying that a politician: “wants tax money,” “preserving his job,” “dismissed him immediately,” “a necessary evil,” and “What's he getting out of it?”

Policies and Problems

Focus group participants considered a series of policy recommendations for rural America. Importantly, the purpose of this conversation was not to select preferred policies for further communications efforts. Rather, the objective was to explore associations with each policy to determine opportunities and barriers for communications generally. Furthermore, these policies provide a benchmark for testing the frames.

The kinds of problems focus group participants associate with rural areas are the economy, education, limited opportunity, farm consolidation, transportation, declining resources (e.g., water in the West) and health care. They know very little about anything that is being done to address these problems.

Importantly, as people discuss these issues, they are rarely able to associate any particular rural aspect with the problem. The resulting conversation, then, becomes the typical conversation around these issues. For example, the health care conversation becomes about cost and the pros and cons of socialized medicine. The conversation considering child care reflects people's conflicts about women in the workplace. The lack of a cohesive understanding of the rural aspects of these issues is both a barrier and an opportunity. The lack of understanding could be a barrier to taking action. However, if urban people share some of the same concerns with people in rural areas, there is an opportunity to have a dialogue that lifts both communities.

Health care: Focus group participants want to reform the health care system. They believe that costs are out of control, insurance companies have too much power, and too many are without insurance. Some strongly support socialized medicine, while others believe that will make health care worse. Like the other policies, much of the subsequent conversation touches on the typical public responses on this topic. However, in some groups participants discussed uniquely rural aspects of this problem, such as the difficulty in accessing care. Health care is critically important for rural areas because “that is something that you cannot 100 percent take care of on your own,” as one woman from Albuquerque put it. “To live you need to have some kind of medical care,” another Albuquerque woman remarked. In addition, the health care policy discussed in the focus groups included a reference to migrant workers, which undermines support for health care reform. Many focus group participants assume that migrant workers are illegal immigrants. “Are the migrant workers citizens, we're talking about?” a woman from rural New Hampshire asked. A woman from rural Arkansas asked, “Are migrant workers the same thing as being not from this country?”

Child Care: Child care is not a rural problem, according to focus group participants. In fact, some wonder why people in rural areas would need child care. “Most of them are home to watch their kids,” an Albuquerque woman argued. “That's why they stay there and if they work, they work around that.” An Albuquerque man added, “That goes back to they choose to be there and why should we foot the bill for something that they are choosing?”

Those who support the child care policy discussed in the focus groups do so because they believe child care is a problem generally, not because they see anything particularly problematic about child care in rural areas

Economic Development: Nearly all focus group participants agree that economic development is an important policy for rural areas, and they recognize that successful economic development has to be approached with the interests of the rural community in mind. They do not want to destroy what is unique about rural areas by bringing in the wrong kind of development. “If you bring in too much, then it is not going to be rural any more,” an Albuquerque man explained. “I think [incentives] would be a great idea for mom-and-pop start-up businesses,” a Manchester man stated. “I think it has to be well thought out because it doesn't do any good to have an incentive program and bring a business in that doesn't fit that community,” a woman from rural New Mexico cautioned.

Getting ahead of this conversation by defining appropriate economic development is an important step for communications. Otherwise, rural areas could be positioned as fighting the inevitable. When one Albuquerque resident suggested that rural areas may not want economic development, other focus group participants replied that change is inevitable. “I think eventually the population is just continuing to grow,” an Albuquerque man remarked. “We're going to wind up moving, pushing big business into rural areas whether we like it or not.” An Albuquerque woman added, “Well, they're not going to have any say so about it.” To avoid the “change is inevitable” conversation, communications needs to define the criteria for economic development that will assist rural communities, not destroy rural communities.

Education: Focus group participants have mixed feelings about policies concerning school size and location. They believe there is an advantage to smaller schools closer to home (a shorter commute, closer ties to the community, and more individualized attention from teachers), but they also believe that large, centralized schools are the only economically feasible way to provide students with the opportunity for a variety of courses. “Probably they have more of a one-on-one relationship with their teachers in a small school,” a Little Rock man surmised. “I guess that could be good or bad. Obviously, the bigger ones, the pluses are they probably, if they are funded properly, could have more of the technical advantages that the small schools can't afford to have. It's a tough call.” Few want to choose between these two alternatives.

Though they are conflicted about school size and location in rural America, participants are very clear that education is a high priority for rural areas. Education is a powerful issue because it provides opportunity for the future. The difficulty in communicating rural education policy is to define opportunity and being for rural areas rather than an opportunity to leave rural areas.

Organic Farming: Focus group participants support helping farmers switch to organic farming because they see it as good for people's health and the environment. “We ingest an awful lot of chemicals,” a Manchester woman stated. “I grew up in the DuPont era when they told us ‘better living through chemicals.’ I don't think they meant for us to ingest them.

I think that's why we are having all the health problems.” Some mention the economic benefit to small farmers as a secondary reason to support this policy. “You are competing against huge farms today, so you need a unique selling position -- marketing 101,” a Manchester man explained. Some believe that organic farming cannot realistically be done on a wide scale. “You are talking about millions and millions of acres, you just can't do it,” argued a man from rural Arkansas. “We'd starve to death in a year's time.” In contrast, residents of rural New Hampshire have seen the success of organic farms locally. “That organic niche represents 20 percent growth where the rest of agriculture is flat or declining,” a woman from rural New Hampshire remarked. “So it's a real opportunity and plus it's kind to the environment.”

These conversations indicate that if this policy is perceived to be “about” organic farming, then the public will debate health consequences, costs, and feasibility. However, if organic farming is one solution to a broader problem, i.e., strengthening family farms, then the policy will achieve far more public support.

Living Wages: Most focus group participants are unfamiliar with the concept of living wages. While several believe that wages are a problem and would like to see low wages addressed, several participants are uncomfortable with “guaranteeing” wages for people in rural areas. A Little Rock man warned, “If you get too high priced, they are going to bring in labor from Mexico or somewhere else.” “How can you force businesses to pay a living wage any more than you can force them to offer health insurance?” a woman from rural New Hampshire asked. “Can you see somebody at McDonald's making \$11 an hour?” a man from rural New Mexico asked.

Changing the Conversation

Advocates for rural areas face a number of challenges in building broad public support for rural policies. Though people have positive associations with rural areas, there are a number of beliefs that undermine policy support. If people believe that the changes rural areas are experiencing are due to the inevitable path of progress, then no solutions are apparent. Furthermore, while urban residents believe people in rural areas are hard-working and morally good, they also see rural people as undeveloped, behind the times, and in need of help. These perspectives devalue rural residents' opinions and undermine their ability to effect change. Finally, urban residents have only shallow connections with rural areas -- nostalgic memories, desirable vacation spots, future retirement home, or a resource for food. These shallow connections allow urban residents to feel distanced from people in rural areas. The result is an “us versus them” mentality, or an assumption that urban and rural people are in competition for scarce resources. All of these barriers need to be addressed in communications to build public support for rural policy.

During the focus groups, participants were asked to read a series of news articles (developed by FrameWorks and Public Knowledge) that each represents a different frame for communicating about rural America. This section reviews participants' reactions to

the frames. The tested news articles are included in boxed sections within the section that discusses reactions to that article.

Preservation Frame

The Preservation Frame is a very familiar story. After reading this story, focus group participants discuss how the people in rural areas are conflicted about the future. Many see progress as inevitable, and view those opposed to progress as naïve people who are causing rural areas to be left behind. Several want to protect Yorkville after reading this story, but they are largely in a museum mindset, meaning that they see rural areas as a part of American heritage that should be protected. This frame is largely ineffective in advancing rural policy.

This article was designed to reflect the typical story of a disappearing small town. It reflects a two-sided debate between those for progress and those against change.

Focus group participants report that this is a familiar story. In every group, participants could describe similar situations that they had either experienced or read about. “I think this profile fits so many of the communities that are surrounding Albuquerque right now,” stated a woman from rural New Mexico. “And the voices that are reflected in this article are voices that I've heard for 13 years in the Village of Corales.”

These kinds of stories create a negative image of rural America. Some urban residents position rural residents as being like spoiled or scared children who need to grow up. “I think they're trying to avoid the growing pains,” remarked a Little Rock man. “They want to grow but not the pain that comes along with it.” “Here you are stuck back 30 years ago mentally and nobody tells you

In the Path of Progress: Preserving Yorkville

Like small towns everywhere, Yorkville is struggling with how to adjust to progress. It will be harder to capture Yorkville's rural heritage as the farms around it now begin to sprout houses and shopping centers. And preserving open lands is important to Yorkville.

People who live in the area have mixed views on the new housing developments that are springing up around Yorkville. Frank Ahrens, who lives in neighboring Oswego and comes to Yorkville for senior citizen club activities, has a concern. "It's some of the greatest land in the world, and here we plant houses on it. I mean, it's gone forever," he said. Sophie Taylor, owner of the Main Street Diner in the heart of town, is concerned about the impact: “Economic development on the edge of town will end up draining the life out of Main Street. Our unique shops and restaurants will close, and we'll look like every other shopping mall in America.”

Joseph Clark, a city administrator disagrees, "This is a small town that is in transition. We're preserving the small-town image, and I don't believe anything that is happening at this point is hampering that character. I think the developers want to capture that, too." Local businessperson Ann Arnold stated, "There is a segment that would like to keep it the way it was 30 years ago. There is nothing wrong with them, but they cling to the past and refuse to accept the reality that there is going to be growth. We need to try to make it happen the way we want it to, and it should be balanced."

“Life is hard everywhere, but especially for rural people,” says Mary Grimes, a farm wife who has raised six children in Yorkville, all of whom now reside elsewhere. “But we get by. We take care of each other – neighbors, friends. Sometimes the system breaks down, and that's why there is a government safety net, I guess. But you pick yourself up and you go on. Far as I can see, it's a question of degree. You aren't going to transform Yorkville into a fairy tale place by putting in a couple of factories or strip malls.”

Currently, the town council and state legislature are debating options to preserve Yorkville's small town character, including zoning restrictions, grants for the historic preservation of buildings, and tax subsidies for small businesses.

how to grow with it," a Little Rock woman expressed. "They don't give you any help in that regard, so of course you're afraid of what you don't know."

Others see this as the kind of conflict that occurs everywhere. According to this view, not everyone will agree about everything, so people need to just move on. "I think they've got the same problems that everybody has whether it's rural or the city," an Albuquerque woman explained. "You are going to have growth and you have to plan for the growth and you have to decide what you want and what you don't. And some people want this and some people want that. That's just kind of a universal problem." Another added, "Everybody is not going to agree on everything. They are just going to have different opinions."

Throughout the groups, but particularly in the urban groups, people talked about change as being inevitable. Nothing can stand in the way of progress. "Even our own jobs, the jobs that we do know, we are probably not doing them the same way we did them 15 years ago," a Manchester man described. "Change is inevitable. You've got to plan for it. That is all there is to it. We all go through it. You can't help it. It's a way of life; that's the way it is. Deal with it."

Others discussed the need to preserve and protect the rural way of life. "If they want to maintain the rural characteristics of some areas," an Albuquerque woman stated, "that is going to take money to purchase that land to leave it as is because the large farms and so on while they are very scenic, a lot of them back East are being sold for housing developments. . . I praise people like Ted Turner who is going out and buying up." The preservation discussion positions rural areas as museum exhibits. "There is a big town out in Colorado," a man from rural Arkansas explained, "an old mining town and that sort of thing. They won't allow McDonald's to move in there because they've got the old West buildings and that sort of thing. McDonald's would love to come along and put something like that in there and the town won't allow it because that impacts the image of their community. I can understand them passing rules and regulations and legislation to not compromise that integrity." This framing is problematic because it makes rural areas artificial, in which case there is no value inherent in a rural system.

The paradox of this article, according to a man from rural New Hampshire is, "How do you grow and stay the same?" Several participants, particularly those in the urban groups, could not get beyond this question and simply believed that rural areas would have to either grow or die. Some rural residents however, asserted that local control is the answer. "A lot of the sprawl and development is the result of multinational corporations that don't care a thing about the local community," a man from rural New Hampshire warned. "So consequently, you can't look to them to have an interest in that. They come and they go." Another suggested, "I think you deal with that by having a local control and local interest." "I think if you can develop a community consensus in terms of what you all want to see your community look like," a woman from rural New Mexico suggested, "there are ways that you can work together to accomplish the diverse goals without too much shock to the system."

However, even if people come to the desirable conclusion that locals need to work together to determine their future, if they do not value rural areas as a system, the result could easily be rural communities that look like suburbia. For example, a Manchester woman with direct experience in redevelopment described Nashua as “one of the only cities in the country that had a viable downtown as well as strip malls and a huge south end mall. So it can be done, but as I'm reading this I find myself agreeing with the first set of people. I find myself agreeing with the second set of people and I think the answer is right there at the bottom. You can have all of those things. You've just got to have everybody working together to make sure you keep what you have, but allow growth and development.”

Innovation Frame

The Innovation Frame has some advantages and some disadvantages. The policy featured in this frame communicates a lot about the challenges facing rural areas. Both urban and rural residents see computers and Internet access as a way to improve education and opportunity. It also helps to define the types of economic development that can strengthen rural areas without destroying the character of an area. However, the Innovation Frame reinforces an image of rural people as undeveloped and backwards, and causes some to question why rural areas should be given extra funding. If the specific example were reframed as rural empowerment and appropriate economic development, it might be a more effective approach.

“Innovation in the Heartland” was intended to draw upon positive images of the rural American past (barn raising and ingenuity) and update that image for today by characterizing rural Americans as innovative, diverse and preparing for the future economy. Unfortunately, this frame had some unintended consequences.

Innovation in the Heartland

In the midst of serene landscapes and small towns where everybody knows everyone’s name, there is a new, innovative rural America that is emerging. Rural Americans have a tradition of innovation and making do with what they have. They also have a tradition of coming together to improve the community for all as characterized by the barn-raising that are a part of rural history.

Well there is a new type of barn-raising that is occurring in Springfield, a small town with fewer than 15,000 residents. This past week, more than 100 residents came together to create a computer center in the local middle school. “This center will be a wonderful resource for the entire community,” according to Scott Carlson, the school’s principal. “It will enhance the educational experience for our students, and since it will be open to everyone, it will give everyone in the community access to global information and learning experiences.”

“People think of farms when they think of rural places,” explained Ann Wilson, a spokesperson with the Alliance for Technology Access. “But farming only employs a small percentage of people. Many rural areas actually have more self-employed people than urban areas and they rely upon the success of small businesses that funnel resources back into the community. At this computer center, we’ll be providing training and resources that will help small businesses thrive and train our young people for jobs that won’t require them to move away to other states.”

State Senator Carl Morgan was able to acquire state funding to help pay for the center. “Rural communities are very diverse and have diverse needs,” he said. “For too long, we’ve allowed federal rural policy to be defined just by agriculture policy. Instead, we all need to look at rural areas in a new way, and work with them to bring the education and jobs here that they need to thrive.”

Instead of creating a positive image of rural Americans preparing for the future economy, the example of a computer center as a local resource seems to reinforce the image of rural Americans as backwards. Urban residents repeatedly referred to rural Americans as childlike and undeveloped as they discussed the utility of the computer center in a rural setting:

You know what bothers me about this? Computers are a wonderful thing and it's going to be open to everyone. They are all excited about the learning experience and what are they going to learn? These people have never had a computer and what do they think about? They think about what they see on TV. Oh, chat rooms. They're going to use it for fun and games. They're not going to use it for what it is meant for in the very beginning unless they have someone there to tutor them and teach them. So it's going to be a toy. (Little Rock woman)

It's just an excitement for them just like someone who has never had a TV. (Little Rock woman)

Because you provide them with a computer doesn't mean that the result is going to be that they are going to educate themselves. (Albuquerque woman)

Some, however, defend rural people and characterize them as being in need of access or knowledge, not as being lesser people. "Everybody from rural areas aren't just hillbilly dumb type people," a man from Little Rock argued. "You've got a lot of people out there that are seeking knowledge but they just don't have access to it." "I'm thinking of the people I know who are currently farming their father's land," an Albuquerque woman remarked, "and they are people who have gone to New Mexico State or some place in the agricultural program and they are graduated and they are back on the farm. They are just smarter because they have learned about the soil. They've learned about all this other stuff and they're smart farmers."

The barn raising approach also has unintended consequences. Since the image is one of rural people coming together to help each other, urban residents wonder why tax dollars from other parts of the state would go to help this community. "That's out of my pocket for another community," asserted a Manchester man. "I'm talking about old-fashioned barn raising idea of how they used to help that community, not tax another one and force this community over here to help this community. Barn raising, come together." Instead of connecting urban and rural America, this frame reminds people that resources are limited and urban residents want to make sure that they get their fair share of state funding. "You have a lot more residents living in Nashua than there is Berlin, New Hampshire or even some of those little dinky towns," a Manchester man explained. "Some of those towns up there get four or five times the monies that they need for education to begin with. You know that, right? What do we get in Nashua?" A Manchester woman added, "We never get our fair share and we're losing more."

One positive aspect of this frame is that it allows people to see options for bringing economic development to rural areas while maintaining the rural character. Rural people were particularly eloquent in making this point. "You can live anywhere and survive

economically if you have a creative business that has access to a computer,” a woman from rural New Mexico remarked. “So I guess this is one way that rural communities could diversify their economies.” “You don't have to have huge industrialization,” a woman from rural New Mexico suggested. “You could have very responsive small businesses producing products that they sell over the Internet.” A woman from rural New Hampshire who works in real estate discussed the importance of high-speed Internet access to their local area’s future economy:

“We're trying to get [business] to come in because we see the need to have something other than a Wal-Mart for our kids to go to work whether they are just going to be making \$9, \$10 or whatever, even if they make that. We're trying to get maybe some high tech companies to come in, but yet you've got the flip side. We don't have the high-speed Internet. With today's technology you don't need to be in Boston to run a business.” (Rural New Hampshire woman)

In addition to economic development, some rural people discuss the ability of technology to help people become better-educated citizens. “It also borders on a good education of the people such that they have the ability and the skills in order to make decisions that would be most appropriate for them,” a man from rural New Mexico stated, “but they cannot without having a broad base and knowing where to go for information, or how to develop the critical skills for thinking. These are necessary for individual success.”

Rural people place enormous importance on this policy. “High-speed Internet access is a lot like the interstates to rural America,” a man from rural New Hampshire explained. “It's really an extremely important thing, and I think that rural America, certainly the North country in New Hampshire, could benefit from that tremendously.” “You can live in an isolated area but you can't be isolated,” a man from rural Arkansas summarized.

Rural Poverty Frame

People understand that rural poverty is real. However, in equating rural and urban poverty, the Poverty Frame causes people to associate their stereotypes of urban poverty and crime with the problems facing rural areas. The cause of crime, then, is broken families and immorality. The solution is charity, not policy. This is not an effective frame to advance rural policies.

The Rural Poverty Frame was designed to create a different picture of rural America -- a picture other than the serenity and idyllic landscapes that most people imagine. Instead, this frame seeks to make people aware of the scope of rural poverty and the consequences of that poverty – drugs, crime, health problems, etc. It closes with a public-health prevention frame, to move people toward an array of solutions.

Most focus group participants believe that rural poverty is real and many agree that poverty can lead to crime and drug use. “Yes. What it says is what is really going on,” stated a woman from Little Rock. A man from rural New Hampshire explained that poverty “exists in spades in rural New Hampshire. I was absolutely shocked a couple of weeks back. I had an early morning appointment with the director of [a local] health care center. It was Friday morning early and there was a line of people around the block. The director said, ‘You know what they’re there for? It’s for food handouts. They distribute food for the U.S. Department of Agriculture.’”

Rural Poverty

Ask a person to imagine rural America, and most will think of beautiful landscapes and quaint towns. But the reality in much of rural America is persistent poverty that can lead to crime and the same kinds of problems that plague big cities.

Lack of job opportunities has led to entrenched poverty in many areas. "You've got counties where there are no jobs and the income is below poverty level, so you have groups trafficking in drugs who take advantage of that, and you have local sheriffs and small-town police chiefs who have very limited resources," Samuel Brown, a local law enforcement officer said.

"You have many rural areas that are persistent poverty pockets, in essence rural ghettos," said Joseph Donnermeyer, professor of rural sociology at State University. "They were once isolated and were protected by that, with lower crime, but now better communications have broken down that buffer so they begin to resemble poor neighborhoods of big cities, where people are segregated by poverty."

Poverty, matched with isolation, has created other problems as well. Health care and an opportunity for a college education, for example, are non-existent in many areas. Reverend Zachary Wear, a minister serving 3 rural counties in the state, seeks to improve conditions. “We need to invest in developing a rural economy that *prevents* health problems,” he says. “Housing, sanitation, child care, employment prospects, degree of isolation, access to culture and transportation, work environment—these are as important to rural health as hospitals and medical professionals.” To address these needs, Wear and a coalition of community leaders from rural counties are going to the state capitol to request funding for infrastructure development and regional planning grants.

Equating rural and urban poverty and crime causes people to associate urban stereotypes with rural areas. Those associations cause them to insist that the problem is immorality, not poverty. Some reject the idea that poverty necessarily leads to crime or drug use.

“We had poverty in the Depression,” a Manchester man explained. “We had two-parent families and we didn't have teenagers like they are describing right now. So people were poor but there wasn't crime. So there is a difference in what is causing this crime right now.” This approach distracts several focus group participants from addressing rural poverty. Instead, they discuss their perceptions of the causes of drug use and criminal behavior. “It's a broken family that is causing all this,” argued a Manchester man. Another agreed, “In the old days morality was the biggest thing. You were brought up in a family atmosphere. If things were tough, you would work together to solve the problem, but morality was the number one thing.”

Though most believe that this article reflects reality, the Rural Poverty Frame is not effective in building support for policy, particularly among urban respondents. Instead, sympathetic urban respondents want to act charitably. “We've got places like that here in Little Rock as well as all of the eastern, toward the Mississippi,” a Little Rock man noted. “It's not just the government that has a responsibility to do something about that. It's people like us that have an extra \$20 in our pocket at the end of the month to give to an organization that can help those people.” The charity solution eclipses the policy solution.

Problematically, a charitable mindset also immediately cues all of the concerns people have about charities. “One problem with people giving their money is that we have a nature of distrust that the money is not going to be used for what they say it is going to be used for,” a Little Rock woman complained. Another replied, “If you don't think it's going to go for food, donate the food. Or if you don't think it is going to go for paint for the house, buy paint. Donate paint.”

Rural respondents, however, are more likely to turn their sympathy into support for policy solutions such as economic development or improved education. “As much as rural areas don't want economic development,” a woman from rural New Mexico stated, “if it would allow people to stay in those rural areas and keep people out of the cities and have quality of life, the quality of life that they want. But they would have to put up with some economic development.” Another added, “It would have to be economic development that goes with that community.” “There needs to be some innovation around the strategies that are considered,” a woman from rural New Hampshire suggested.

Finally, the Poverty Frame subtly reinforces negative perceptions of rural people and causes many to blame the poor for their own poverty. As noted above, some suggest that broken families lead to crime and poor people can't be trusted to do the right thing with donations. Others, including people in rural areas, are more assertive in criticizing the poor:

It takes a lot of money to feed a drug habit. Where is that money coming from? If these people can afford to feed a drug habit, they jolly well can afford to go out and spend money on some other things instead of feeling sorry for themselves because they are drug addicts. (Rural New Mexico man)

It is a matter of choice. People do choose to have the beer; give their child the beer; have marijuana. That's a choice; they consciously make that choice. They don't go

to school. That's their choice. And unfortunately, some of them do choose to live in poverty because it is just too much of an effort to do anything else. (Rural New Hampshire woman)

I notice here it says housing. Is that a big problem? People provide their own housing. You don't need to sit on your butt and let the place fall down around your ears but that happens a lot. (Albuquerque woman)

Connection Frame

As noted earlier, urban residents' connections to rural areas are typically shallow – fond childhood memories, vacation spots, etc. Respondents' reaction to the Connection Frame demonstrates that developing a stronger sense of interdependence is one important component of an effective strategy to build public support for rural policies. The Connection Frame effectively builds this sense of connection. However, one of the examples of connection, rural pollution, was so new and powerful that it overwhelmed the other points in the article. If developed over time, rural pollution could be compelling. At this point, however, it is such new information that it causes people to question the credibility of the article particularly when compared to urban pollution.

This frame was developed to create a sense of connection between rural

We're All Connected – Boundaries Blend Between Rural and Urban Areas

All the nation's geographic regions, urban, suburban and rural, are connected in ways less obvious than the national highway system. Increasingly it is becoming obvious to social and environmental scientists, urban planners and legislators that, if one part of the system breaks down, it affects us all. Of course the most obvious ways rural and urban areas are connected are through resources. Stretched across the nation, from Arizona and New Mexico through Texas and Georgia and into Virginia and Maine, small rural communities form the base of the national supply chain. They produce most of the oil and much of the ore, fiber and food that we all rely upon.

But recent decisions may affect the long-term stability of these regions and with it our resources. All along the nation's back roads, hundreds of towns are teetering in the recession, and some worry that they may never recover. In past recessions, even if they did not bounce back entirely, at least they survived. But this time around, as the overall economy begins to show some signs of healing, things are ominously different in many of these rural towns. New trade agreements have erased quotas and tariffs that long insulated United States industries from foreign competition. For these already-struggling communities, the first post-globalization recession may break the old sequence of boom-bust-boom, and erase any hopes of long-term survival.

We are connected in some surprising ways as well. Pollution in rural areas is severe, not because of urban industry, but because farms send fertilizer and animal wastes into the groundwater and into rivers. Across the country, metropolitan water agencies are battling increasing pollution from the countryside. The river pollution is spreading and causing dead zones in the open seas. A recent study by the Pew Oceans Commission, an independent group examining government policies, called huge livestock feedlots and farm fertilizer runoff among the fastest-growing sources of pollution in oceans thousands of miles away.

As a result, the \$171 billion, 10-year farm bill, once seen as a parochial issue for rural lawmakers, has been scrutinized by members of Congress from urban and suburban districts who realize that these upheavals in agriculture have implications beyond the grocery store. All issues, from trade treaties to health and environmental policies, need to take into account their impact on all parts of the country if we are to keep the nation in good working order.

and urban America. It relies upon resources, the economy, foreign trade, and the environment to develop a sense of connection between rural and urban America. This frame successfully creates a connection, which is an important component of building support for policies for rural America.

Several focus group participants discuss the interdependence of rural and urban America after reading this article. "It's all a fabric. We're all interrelated," a woman from rural New Hampshire expressed. "If one part of the system breaks down, it affects us all," suggested a Little Rock woman. "You have to look at your country as a team," a Little Rock man stated. "We're all on the same team. What's bad for one team member is bad for all of us." "Connection -- especially in today's world what affects anywhere in the world affects us," a woman from rural New Mexico explained. "The breakdown in the terrorists, the pollution, wars -- that has an effect on everybody."

Using environmental issues to create a sense of connection might be effective if it is developed over time. Few urban residents had heard anything about environmental degradation in rural areas. For some, this was surprising and new information that got their attention and created a motivation to act. "I'm not really sure if the farmers are aware of that problem," a Little Rock woman worried. "That's really got me thinking about that now whereas before I hadn't really thought about it." "I think we should be addressing this problem," a Manchester woman stated. "It's nothing that has ever even caught my attention, quite honestly, before this." A Manchester man added, "I've never heard of it until now."

For other urban residents, the environmental issue as portrayed in this article was not effective, because they found it difficult to believe that farms could place such a burden on the environment. "Fertilizer" appears to be a particularly problematic example. "Most of the fertilizer in farming is all natural," a Manchester man insisted. "Animal wastes are recycled. It's called manure and people pay big bucks for good manure to grow crops," argued an Albuquerque woman. "So I really question that...maybe chemical fertilizers from growing crops can seep into water supplies." Including the impact of pollution on oceans creates another barrier -- people are largely unaware of the status of ocean health and some believe the oceans can take care of themselves. "Because open seas," a Manchester man argued, "they take care of themselves. Everything is moving around, mixing around."

Rural people have a better understanding of the pollution in rural areas. "Along the river you've got thousands and thousands of acres of farm land. All the chemicals are running in there," a man from rural Arkansas described. "The only thing I try to fish is north of Clarendon on the White River side because it is not quite as polluted." "I don't think it just has to do with industry either," stated a woman from rural Arkansas. "I know where I live it's very common for people to run raw sewage just out from underneath their house or run a line out. It goes down into ground water and we're all on well water."

Still, most focus group participants, urban and rural, find it difficult to believe that rural areas create more pollution problems than urban areas. This comparison undermines the credibility of the point and is not necessary to create a sense of connection. "We have several of our lakes here are environmentally dead because of the gases coming in from the

power plants in the Midwest and the mid-Atlantic area,” a man from rural New Hampshire remarked. “I don't think we're sending anywhere near as much pollution to them as they are sending to us.”

Finally, people already know the story about U.S. manufacturing jobs being lost overseas, so they can quickly understand the impact of foreign trade policy on rural areas. “A lot of companies had manufacturing plants spread throughout the rural areas of this country, and a lot of them are no longer in business,” a Little Rock man asserted. “The companies are in business but those plants in this country are not in business because they're being done in Mexico or China or some other foreign country.” People do not necessarily want protections, but they do want fair rules. “If they are not playing by the same rules that our farmers are playing by, it's like an unfair advantage,” a man from rural New Mexico complained. If these problems are allowed to continue, the consequences are severe. “We've got a big turnaround in the types of jobs that are now being offered to the younger people coming up,” a Manchester man worried. “I'm hoping to latch onto mine until I retire and then I don't have to worry about it.”

Causal Story Frame – Policy

The Policy Causal Story Frame provides a new perspective on rural issues that builds support for policy solutions. First, it begins to educate people that farm consolidation is not just about economies of scale. Focus group participants are appalled that federal policy would advantage agribusiness. They do not want food to be controlled by a few major corporations, which they believe will happen if farm consolidation continues. Importantly, this frame shifts the family farm issue from an American Heritage or Protection Frame, toward a more compelling frame about survival and David (the public) versus Goliath (agribusiness). When the issue is framed in this way, the public has a strong personal interest in making sure that family farms do not disappear.

This frame incorporates a causal story -- corporate takeovers and federal policy are combining to break family farms and the small-town economy. Therefore, the problem is not perceived as flawed farmers or the inevitability of progress; the problem is portrayed as the negative influence of huge corporations and poorly designed federal policy. This is an effective approach, in part because ineffective government and corporate greed are two stories that people already know.

People assume that family farms are failing because the family farmer is not able to produce food as

Outside Forces Breaking the Small Town Economy

Family farms in America are disappearing at a rapid rate and taking small towns with them, due in large part to federal policies that benefit corporate farming at the expense of family-run enterprises. Rice farms in the Mississippi Delta are just one example of a national trend that is occurring in all parts of the country.

From a distance, the rice capital of America resembles a small metropolis; its grain elevators and processing mills rise from the delta plains like so many skyscrapers plunked in the middle of unending rice fields. Up close, however, this town of 10,420 people gives an entirely different impression.

Smack up against two of the United States' biggest rice processing businesses lie neighborhoods of rundown houses. In the surrounding countryside, decaying towns offer evidence that the area's smaller rice farmers are going out of business at one of the fastest rates in the country. "This is what happens when a town loses its middle class," said John D. Crow, who operates a bed and breakfast.

This region, whose farmers have helped make the United States the world's third-largest rice exporter behind Thailand and Vietnam, offers one of the starkest examples of the unintended consequences of the federal farm subsidy program. The subsidies have been lopsided. The top 1 percent of farmers and farm groups in the federally defined Mississippi Delta region receive 26 percent of the subsidies, or \$1.9 billion. The bottom 80 percent receive only 9 percent, or \$686 million.

Senator Blanche Lincoln, who comes from this area, argued in a recent speech that federal agriculture policy was harming rural America. "It is not only our farmers who are suffering as a result of failed government policy," Ms. Lincoln said. "The institutions of small-town and rural America -- local banks and merchants, feed and supply stores, equipment dealers, even corner groceries and family-owned hardware stores -- are all caught in the web of financial collapse."

Perhaps most striking is the pace of consolidation of big farms -- what a state official referred to as the "plantation effect." Because large landowners receive the largest subsidies, they are buying out smaller owners, leading to what the Agriculture Department calls a "rapid decline" of family properties under 100 acres and the rise of old-fashioned tenant farming. Over three-fourths of rice farms are worked by tenants or part-owners, the department says. What is needed, according to Senator Lincoln, is an overhaul of agriculture policy that will allow family-owned properties to thrive once again, which will reinvigorate the economy of surrounding towns.

efficiently as industrial farms. When people are simply considering the price of food, they believe that inefficiency in food production should not be rewarded. If family farms are less efficient, they assert, they should go out of business. "Some of these mega agriculture companies do have a more efficient system," a man from rural New Mexico explained. "It's survival of the fittest. Those who can run things better and in a more efficient manner are going to be able to expand because of their efficiency." "Ultimately, if your only goal is to have lower prices, you would wind up with one provider," a man from rural New Hampshire stated. "If you eliminate the Justice Department and anti-trust laws you would wind up with one provider. I don't think that is necessarily the best thing for our country. But if you don't have something to stabilize prices, that's what will happen."

However, when they are considering the consequences of profit motive, they become very concerned about relying upon corporations for food. "Eventually, if you just have a Home Depot and a Wal-Mart, they're going to dictate all the prices," a Manchester man warned. "And people have to get up and go to the farms and support those farms, too. They can't just go find the most convenient place and drive in there." "I think in the short term they are more efficient, but I think in the long term it is like Wal-Mart," a woman from rural New Mexico asserted. "Yeah, it's great; there are cheaper prices but for how long? Yeah, there will be jobs but they are minimum wage jobs. They treat their employees terribly. They shut down all your local people and then where do those people, where do they get their money? So I think you have to be careful about effects of scale. They are not always [good] in the long term."

Several respondents also worry that the rise in corporate farming is part of a broader trend of a disappearing middle class. "We're helping create these monopolies rather than doing what it says in the last paragraph," suggested a woman from Manchester, "which I believe is a necessity and it's greed. The rich get richer and the poor get poorer. We are losing our middle class and our government is helping [to make] that happen."

Furthermore, some believe that corporations may not value the local environment or add to the social fabric of the community the way that family farmers would. "Corporations are more likely to damage the environment," suggested a woman from rural New Mexico, "like the ranchers now fighting the oil and gas companies because they come out and they are destroying things because they're not local. It's not their land." "Riceland [a large Arkansas-based cooperative of rice, soybean and wheat growers] is making all this money and I can't see where they're putting it back into the community," a woman from Little Rock complained. "I mean you've got just terrible decaying areas of the town, like it says here. For the life of me I can't figure out how that is happening. People have been working at those Ricelands for 25 years and only making \$8, \$9 an hour."

Past experience has taught people that cheaper is not necessarily better, and a few are beginning to worry about the effect of industrial farming on the quality of food. "You get more quality with a small farmer," a Manchester woman surmised. "A large farmer, he can cut back on different things where a small farmer takes pride in his farm, I think."

The flaw in federal farm policy is a critical component of this frame. Without it, people would simply complain about corporations and see the only solution as purchasing their food from farmers' markets. By calling attention to farm subsidies, this approach allows focus group participants to see the solution as fixing the federal policies to lend more support to family farmers. "It's almost like we need a redefinition of what agriculture is," a woman from rural New Hampshire stated. "I mean it's almost the industrial scale of agriculture versus the small farmer." "The top 1 percent of farmers get all that money," a Manchester woman complained. "It's just unfair. It's like why is it that way and why have we let it?" "The subsidies were put in place and our tax dollars were going to help individual farmers," a woman from rural Arkansas explained. "I don't think the feeling is that the subsidies are there to help corporations that are making millions of dollars."

A note of caution: communicators need to be careful in describing the flaws in federal farm policy. People already believe the government cannot do anything correctly. If advocates intend to fix farm policy, the complaint cannot be so strongly worded that it completely undermines federal policy. For example, one Albuquerque woman responded to this story by characterizing government as "putting their big nose in it trying to get their fingers in the bucks."

Causal Story Frame -- Economy

This approach is very effective in eliminating many of the barriers outlined earlier in this analysis. It tells people that rural areas can continue in a vibrant way -- they do not have to disappear. It also positions residents of rural areas as powerful, rather than powerless. People who live in rural areas quickly identify with this story and feel empowered by it. They have either lived this story, or they know of people in other towns who have lived this story. Problematically, this article places all the responsibility on rural residents to fix their problems. To be more effective, it would need to incorporate a state or federal role in achieving the solution – by offering planning grants or serving in an advisory capacity, for example. Otherwise, the reader simply sees this as a nice story with no role for people outside the community.

“Restoring Main Street” begins with the solution instead of the problem. It portrays rural people as knowledgeable and as capable of addressing their own problems. It also incorporates a causal story -- a once vibrant town is being affected by the economy, urban flight, and the rise of industrial farming. This frame is effective in educating people about the right approach to economic development.

This is a story of renewal. “Hope for the future,” a woman from Little Rock summarized. “They got tore down; they came together and they built it back up.” A rural man from New Hampshire described the situation as “Rebirthed itself. And all because the people of the town wanted

Restoring Main Street

There is a vitality to Circleville these days, that hasn't been seen in decades. After years of planning, residents' vision has finally been achieved – a vibrant town with economically secure residents who plan on staying.

Fifty years ago, this County seat was a bustling town where rural families would congregate for festivals and good times. But a series of economic downturns and property failures, followed by the rise of corporate industrial agriculture, changed the face of the local economy.

The decline of family farms and ranches was followed by encroaching urban life. City residents seeking a rural lifestyle came to the area, bringing with them a higher cost of living and the large national retailers found in the suburbs. “We watched one shop after another close as new residents chose to shop in the strip malls outside town,” said long-time resident Helen Otis. “Before you knew it, good jobs were harder to find, because all the services that relied on agriculture incomes left town – shops, banks, dentists, doctors all started to leave.”

“We could either decide that the changes we were seeing were inevitable,” explained Joe Davis, of the Rural Development Initiative, “or we could get together to figure out how to rebuild our town.

Ten years ago, county residents put together a task force to understand the outside forces that had damaged the town's economy and put in place the changes that would repair the damage. The town's plan called for zoning restrictions, tax credits for small business owners who set up shop in town, tuition repayment programs for doctors and dentists who agree to move to Circleville and funding to help locals shift to profitable agriculture markets such as the growing market segment in organic products.

There is still work to be done, say local residents, but life has come back to the town, and with it, renewed hope for the future.

it to happen, not because some outside forces said, 'you should do this. You should do that.'" If the residents of Circleville had not taken these actions, the consequences would have been severe. "I think they would have gone the way of all these small towns in Arkansas," a Little Rock man asserted.

This is an empowering story for both rural and urban residents. "Circleville is what America should be all about. This is the American way," stated a man from rural Arkansas. This approach reminds people of the efficacy of citizen action. "I have an issue. I call my representatives," a Manchester man explained. "That's more or less the same idea. You get a bunch of people doing the same thing together." "They had a goal and they worked toward it," a woman from rural New Mexico stated. "I think it provides hope that it can be done."

Instead of thinking of progress as inevitable, some people begin to consider the value of individuality and diversity. "I see it when I travel throughout the country," a Manchester woman asserted. "Everything is the same. We've become so homogenous; it's disgusting. You want to go and you want to bring something back from a different region or whatever, and you've got a GAP t-shirt." Another added, "People are trying to bring individuality back and certainly our downtown reflects that, and I think it's terrific."

One weakness of the frame as expressed in the article is that it reinforces the notion that rural communities are responsible for addressing their problems alone. This is a positive image of rural America. "They were going to keep it alive come hell or high water. They were determined," an Albuquerque woman said enthusiastically. However, placing so much responsibility on rural residents allows urban residents to distance themselves from rural problems. Some are very sensitive about the notion that outsiders would interfere in the decisions of a rural community. "They decided they have a problem and they do something to solve the problem themselves," an Albuquerque woman noted. "It's one thing for a small group of people to go and ask for outside help. It's another thing for big brother to come in and say, 'Oh, you have a problem and so I'm going to help you.'"

A second weakness is that a few find this story somewhat unbelievable (a weakness that would be overstated in the research process). "Fairy tale," remarked a Little Rock man. "I don't believe it for a minute." "I find a little bit of it very hard to swallow insofar as you're talking about a very rural community and things start to build up and good jobs are leaving all of a sudden," stated a Manchester man. "What good jobs were there when you really think about it?" "All they did was took a bunch of money and threw it at the problem," a Little Rock man complained. "How many small towns really have that kind of money?"

Importantly, residents in rural areas could find commonalities between their own situations and the Circleville story. "This is what we're trying to do," asserted a man from rural Arkansas. In recalling her experience in redeveloping Nashua, New Hampshire, one woman remarked, "When it's about the city and making it look good, take care of it, improve it, I don't think politics entered into it. I think it was a concern of people living here." There was an extended conversation in the rural New Hampshire focus group about the experience of redeveloping Littleton, New Hampshire, because many focus group participants were directly involved in this endeavor. In fact, a person who is credited with

sparking the rebirth of Littleton was a participant in the focus group. According to these participants, the Circleville story reflects the experience in Littleton. They relate this story with extreme pride. "I think Littleton faced up to the fact," a man from rural New Hampshire described, "and there were enough citizens, enough business owners like Ned and others that realize that something had to be done; otherwise, they were going to go down the drain. And I think Littleton is an example for the entire state and perhaps for northern New England on how to resurrect yourself by pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps. We did."

Some residents of rural Arkansas reported witnessing a failed attempt at resurrecting a small town. In response to the question, "Do you feel like you can be a Circleville?" a man from rural Arkansas responded, "No, I don't think we can now. They took several hundred thousand dollars to redevelop downtown Pine Bluff several -- probably in the millions. I don't even know what they've done with it. They spent two hundred and something thousand dollars right across the street from the courthouse to put in telephone posts for art."

Conclusions

To build support for rural policies among urban residents, urban residents must first feel a sense of connection with rural areas. This connection needs to be more than fond memories of childhood or a vacation. It needs to be based upon the perception of mutual well-being, a shared fate. Therefore, advocates should not characterize rural areas or rural problems as separate or isolated. Instead, communications needs to reinforce that rural and urban areas are interdependent -- what is good for one is good for us all. To the extent possible, rural problems should be discussed within a broader national system indicating causes and consequences.

Many of the challenges facing rural areas are seen as inevitable, outside control, or too big to influence. A causal story (economic, policy, or other influence) helps to make the problem seem manageable and fixable. Members of the public already understand the effect of foreign trade policy on manufacturing jobs. They can easily incorporate the rural impact of trade policy into the story they already know. While fewer people are familiar with farm policy, they are very familiar with the story of ineffective government. The role of federal policy in causing rural problems is therefore an easy story for people to learn. Importantly, advocates need to be careful in characterizing government as ineffective if they expect the public to support a government role in fixing rural problems.

Solutions need to be prominent because the solution helps people understand the nature of the problem and responsibility for fixing the problem. Furthermore, emphasizing the solution helps people to understand that forces are not outside one's control and problems can be fixed.

Effective communications needs to create a role for rural people as well as a role for citizens generally. When rural people are characterized as capable, responsible, and able to effect change, others are empowered and feel a sense of hope and opportunity.

Finally, some of the policies are likely to be more effective than others, at least initially, in building this frame. The dominant frames on health care and education, for example, could create more challenges in communicating the frame since they can more easily slip into a charity mindset or a perspective of "let's help those poor backwards people." Furthermore, the obvious causal stories that can be written about these two issues tell more about the problems in health and education than about problems in rural areas. However, responsible economic development, trade policy, and farm policy are likely to be more effective in building the frame since they can be communicated with all of the elements listed above.