

Rural Development and Human Capital Overview

Lionel J. (Bo) Beaulieu, Southern Rural Development Center

A plethora of issues affecting the well being of farmers, and the broader community of which they are a part, are described in the collection of six papers assembled under the theme, “Rural Development and Human Capital. The first article suggests that the health of the agricultural sector is intimately linked to the strength of the communities of which it is a part. As such, it is critical that attention be given to the broader set of forces that are eroding the economic, social and environmental vitality of rural communities.

The role of traditional land-grant universities in conducting vital agricultural research, and extending research knowledge via the teaching and outreach activities of these institutions, serves as the central theme of the second paper. The authors document the changing nature of the partnership that has emerged between the federal government and state land-grant institutions over time. The paper outlines a series of policy options that might be considered in an effort to further advance the agriculture-related research and development activities of our nation’s land-grant university system.

Two audiences that continue to command attention in any debate about rural development policy are hired farm workers and small-scale farmers. Despite the major technological advances realized on many of our nation’s farms, sizable numbers of farms remain dependent on hired labor. However, serious questions regarding the legal status of hired laborers persist. Various options for ensuring an adequate supply of agricultural labor are presented in the article authored by Rosenberg. With regard to small and underserved farmers, Duffy argues that an effective response to dealing with the needs of small farmers is difficult in light of the on-going confusion regarding a definition of small-scale farms. The small farm typology created by the Economic Research Service is proposed as an important starting point for defining this important audience. Next, the roles that legislation, education, and research can play in addressing the needs of small and underserved farmers are highlighted.

The final two papers in this series are devoted to the financial health of the farm sector. Koenig and Doye provide an important overview of federal farm credit policies and programs. They outline a variety of policy options that might be considered by Congress in its efforts to enact programs that effectively address the credit needs of the farmers during this period of significant structural adjustments in agriculture. Knutson and Anderson devote attention to the expanding farm program payments being directed to nontraditional crops, activities that typically have been undertaken outside of the traditional bill authorizing process. They present four viable options for addressing nontraditional commodity payments.