Life on Frontier is Tough; Policies Make it Tougher

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by Thomas D. Rowley, RUPRI Fellow
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A lot of the challenges in rural America stem from the very things that make rural, rural. When you're few in number and living far from the city, you've got a tougher row to hoe. It's tougher to get jobs (let alone good jobs), tougher to get health care, tougher to get government services, tougher to get... well, just about everything. When you *can* get them, many things cost more simply because there are more miles to cover and fewer people to foot the bill.

Now multiply those challenges ten-, twenty-, a hundredfold, and you can picture what it's like on the frontier, 814 counties stretching across half of the Nation's land that constitute the ruralest part of rural America.

Unfortunately, the picture gets worse.

First, the frontier's major economic activities - farming, ranching, mining, forestry, and oil and gas exploration - are prone to boom and bust. Second, its other mainstay occupations in recreation, tourism, and migrant farming are seasonal. Finally, enormous swaths of frontier land are owned by the federal government, and therefore off the property tax rolls and subject to use restrictions. (Frontier land not owned by the government bears its stamp just the same because of federal policy's heavy influence on frontier industries.)

To say that life on the frontier is tough is an understatement. Information from the Frontier Education Center in Santa Fe, New Mexico, illustrates.

According to the Center, the 50 poorest counties in the U.S. are frontier counties - not because the people don't work, but because their jobs pay so little. Nearly a quarter of all frontier

counties are what USDA calls "persistent poverty counties" - places with poverty levels of 20 percent or more for the last four decades.

In addition, as many as 78 frontier counties across 21 states - home to a quarter of a million or so people - have no health care services. Zero. The majority of frontier counties have two or fewer health care services of any kind. On much of the frontier, the nearest medical help can be an hour or more away.

As for help, many federal programs offer little at all. In communities where population density is sometimes measured in square miles per person, not the other way around, meeting eligibility requirements can border on the impossible. Serve at least 100 people to get funding? Not where there are only 200 people, period. Cough up $50,000 in matching contributions to get a grant? How, in a community of 500 dependent on low-wage jobs and surrounded by federal land that pays no property tax?

Carol Miller, the Center's director, knows firsthand about frontier living, residing in tiny Ojo Sarco, a village of almost 200 in Rio Arriba County, midway between Taos and Santa Fe. "We say 200 people, because that's how many we need to have a volunteer fire department. Really, it's only that many on Mother's Day and Christmas."

According to Miller, the federal government owns 87 percent of the land in her county and last year gave the county $600,000 in payments in lieu of taxes (PILT) - compensation that supposedly takes the place of property tax.

The key word is "supposedly". Nationwide this year, the PILT program will pay local governments $218 million on 614 million acres, a paltry 36 cents an acre. As in years past, that dollar amount is but a fraction of the $345 million Congress authorized - a figure that is probably too low to begin with.

Miller says that with such a small amount of private, and taxable, land in Rio Arriba, there is no way to raise property taxes enough to afford the services that residents need. The problem is exacerbated by the county's high rate of poverty.

"It is unethical," says Miller, "for there to be persistent poverty in federal lands counties."

Through land ownership, policies, and programs, the federal government drives the economy on the frontier. In places--by omission, commission, or both--it's driving it straight into the ground. The eight million people who live there and provide the Nation with food, fuel, and a whole lot more deserve a whole lot better.

About Thomas Rowley:
Thomas D. Rowley is a RUPRI Fellow, the editor of The Rural Monitor, and a freelance researcher, writer, and editor.

Previously, Tom served as a project manager at the TVA Rural Studies Program at the University of Kentucky, an editor of Forum for Applied Research and Public Policy, and a rural development analyst at the Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture. While there, he also worked with the National Rural Development Partnership and its State Rural Development Councils, the National Commission on Agriculture and Rural Development Policy, the President's Council on Sustainable Development, and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

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