

Rural definitions shouldn't be left to feds

CT comment



By Scott Schultz

A Wisconsin Rural Partners forum is important to future definitions of "rural."

The Country Today's staff gathered a few years ago to discuss who might be the newspaper's potential readers. The conclusion was relatively easy to reach; it had been the newspaper founders' aim from the start: The Country Today is "The Newspaper That Cares About Rural Life," so people from all walks of rural life would be the likely readership.

But that day's facilitator, a Chippewa Valley Technical College instructor, complicated the question.

"What's 'rural?' she kept asking.

A simple answer seemed to be that rural can be anything from a place far from major populations to a state of mind for a person who lives in an inner city but yearns for the goodness of the rural countryside.

It turned out that The Country Today staff hasn't been the only group wrestling with the "what's rural?" question. And some of the answers being given might put chills down most common-sense rural people's spines.

Federal analysts think they've come up with a breakdown of a way to answer the question. Their answer at first glance might seem sensible — albeit a bit complicated. But deeper reviews open great questions about the bureau's definitions.

Tell someone in northern Chippewa

County, southwestern Iowa County or western Marathon County that they're part of a metropolitan area and that person's likely to laugh. Or tell people passing Amish families' horses and buggies on Clark County or Taylor County roads that they're sort of rural, but not really, because they're adjacent to metropolitan counties, and the response is likely to be one of confusion.

The definitions, established in 2003, are far more twisted than the previous 1999 definitions that simply pegged counties as being either rural or metropolitan. But even the 1999 definitions had their fault, particularly in describing seemingly rural communities in places such as western Marathon County as being metropolitan, despite being an hour's drive from any real population centers.

It would be easy to shrug off the definitions as being unimportant or nothing more than another bureaucratic exercise. But the definition's effects run deep in rural areas.

Whether an area is defined as rural can mean the difference in all sorts of federal funding programs, state funding and even private nonprofit grants. Funding for rural areas means funding for rural areas — not for urban areas or areas adjacent to urban areas.

"The definition of rural has a direct impact on whether you can get the resources you need for your area," said Kathy Schmitt, state Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection community outreach specialist. "Even some private foundations won't give a community a second chance if it no longer meets their definition of rural."

The issue was apparent in the past year during discussions by the Wisconsin superintendent of public instruction's Advisory Council on Rural Schools, Libraries and Communities. An important part of the state Department of Public Instruction is finding ways to assist rural schools, libraries and communities was to define where those entities are. Some members were surprised to find that their schools and communities — rural as they might be — really aren't rural at all, according to the federal definition.

The Wisconsin Rural Partners organization's leaders also have been grappling with the issue; as with The Country Today, the DPI council and many other organizations, the WRP's leaders find it difficult to define "rural" and that it's virtually impossible to do with the latest federal definitions.

Thankfully, the WRP's leaders are making the definitions a major part of their annual meeting and forum, 1 to 4 p.m. Nov. 2 at the Lussier Family Heritage Center on Lake Farm Road, Madison. Information about the forum and registration is on Page 2A of this week's The Country Today.

The forum will lay out the problems some individuals, organizations, schools and municipalities may have faced as a result of the latest definition.

This is an incredibly important forum that deserves attention from everyone who believes they have a claim on the title "rural."

Hopefully, the forum will lead to more work on pushing to assure that people who are distant from the cities' lights will be able to reap what's due to rural people across the nation.

"Rural" probably is more concrete than a state of mind. But chances are it's much broader than federal analysts want people to believe.

Rural people need to voice their opinions about this issue. It's far too important to leave at the mercy of rural bureaucrats who've never milked a cow near Poniatowski in Marathon County, an "urban" area that's about as rural as rural can be.