

## WAKE UP CALL: The National Vision and Voice we Need for Rural Canada

**Rural Canada** helps fuel our national economy and define our national character. But the towns and villages that make up rural Canada are fighting for their lives, struggling against growing odds to secure a future for themselves in a country they helped build.

The natural resources, energy, agricultural products and raw materials extracted from rural areas now make up 50% of Canada's exports. These industries are driving corporate profits, paying billions of dollars in taxes every year, and crating spin-off jobs and new growth in Canada's urban regions.

Yet rural communities aren't enjoying the success of the industries they help to build or growing with the economy they do so much to support. Instead, rural Canada is in crisis. It is quiet crisis but one that, if left unattended, will leave rural Canada increasingly weakened and less able to play its essential role in Canada's economy and national life.

That the crisis has been building for decades makes it no less a crisis. Urbanization, international trade, immigration, environmental stress and past political agendas have damaged the organization of rural society, creating hardship and anxiety as livelihoods disappear and traditional support networks weaken.

The recent global economic collapse has exacerbated long-term trends,

highlighted in 1996 by the Canadian Rural Restructuring Foundation: "Rural Canada has dying villages and towns, is losing population, and has substandard social services including a chronic shortage of doctors." The 2006 Census showed that rural Canada's share of the national population fell below 20% for the first time in our history, furthering a long decline.

With shrinking tax bases, limited revenue sources and rapidly aging infrastructure, rural municipalities are struggling to provide the basic services and community facilities their communities need to attract and retain residents and businesses.

It's hard to get attention for a quiet crisis, apart from occasional news stories when the last mill closes in a one-industry town. Events like the mountain pine beetle infestation, the devastation of the beef industry by mad cow disease or the closing of fisheries on both coasts are treated as discrete stories that slowly fade from public awareness. The rural element in these events is often overlooked, although of course most of the people affected live in rural Canada.

Those who live in rural Canada and those who study in agree that the long decline that began in the 1920s has not abated, and that without effective intervention by governments it will continue and accelerate. This report takes the pulse of rural Canada and of the federal government's role in promoting rural sustainability. It asks and answers the question: "Why should

rural Canada matter to Canadians and their governments?"

Some believe that rural Canada is a drag on the national economy and on urban areas, and that the market forces and outmigration should be allowed to solve the problem. Commenting on the 2006 Census results, a national newspaper columnist wrote that the data demonstrate that rural Canada has become "so irrelevant demographically that it increasingly exists only in myth."

This report argues that, despite growing urbanization, rural communities remain critical to the economic, social and environmental fabric of Canada. A strong national economy needs all regions functioning well to operate efficiently. And although rural Canada will not disappear, as long as natural resources remain important to our national economy, and chronically weak and under performing rural Canada is not good for those who live there or for the national economy and urban Canada. Balance is needed in economic development, which calls for public policies that can accommodate both rural and urban areas.

This is a national challenge requiring a national response. Rural Canada is well represented in the House of Commons, and the federal government has initiated numerous policies and spending programs over the year to address rural issue. But the federal role in rural communities has been hamstrung by a lack of co-ordination across federal departments, the absence of long-term strategies and funding commitments, and inadequate rural representation at the federal cabinet table. The report looks at possible changes to the federal machinery of government to strengthen its role in dealing with rural issues. The recent launch of two regional development agencies makes this particularly relevant. If designed well, they will provide an opportunity to engage and embrace rural Canada in federal decision-making. If designed poorly, they will further compartmentalize and complicate federal rural policy and programs.

The economic base is the determining factor in the viability of most rural municipalities. Promoting economic development



and diversification in these communities would make them less dependent on single industries and natural resources and would lessen the strains of a boom-and-bust local economy. The provision of adequate public infrastructure is even more critical for rural, remote and northern economies, which must overcome or compensate for limited accessibility and economies of scale to compete effectively.

For the most part, each order of government has its own visions and strategies for rural development. An effective response to the challenges must integrate the rural development policies and programs of all orders of government. Effort must be made to avoid a one-size-fits-all solution by recognizing the unique challenges and opportunities that exist in rural, remote and northern communities.

Dealing appropriately with rural issues can generate significant benefits for urban areas. Urban economies continue to rely on rural areas for natural resources, food, water, waste management, carbon sequestration and recreation. This report argues that it makes sense to consider new rural

initiatives as urban investments as much as rural ones.

The report sets out the following recommendations for the Government of Canada that will help equip rural Canada to meet its economic, social and environmental challenges.

1. Rural Canada needs a champion at the federal cabinet and to integrate and coordinate the actions of various federal departments
2. Rural communities need enduring commitments – a long-term plan – from the Government of Canada to ensure that rural priorities receive the sustained resources and attention required to tackle problems with deep roots and to implement strategies with long time horizons.
3. A one-size-fits-all approach to rural policy-making will not work; solutions must be tailored for a responsive to the diversity of rural Canada.
4. The Government of Canada must ensure it provides the appropriate departmental structures, mandates and resources to support an enduring, horizontal, collab-

orative and well-resourced commitment to building and sustaining rural Canada, now and in the future.

5. The vision and strategy for rural sustainability must be developed across departmental silos and in partnership with all three orders of government, industry and community groups.

The global economic meltdown has hit Canada's cities and communities hard. This has highlighted the outdated fiscal, institutional and political framework in which all of Canada's municipal governments operate. It has also created the opportunity for those with vision to rethink the way governments work together in Canada.

If we want the post-recession world to include a stronger and more competitive Canada, it must also include stronger and more competitive communities—rural and urban. When it comes to building a strong national economy and healthy communities, there is no rural-urban divide. There are only Canadian communities, ready to work but needing the tools to compete. It's time to make sure they have those tools. ■

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