



Rural Coalition Organizational Development

SUMMARY OF KEY DECISIONS

- Summer/Fall 1977 - First Organizational Meeting of the Rural Coalition.
- Summer/Fall 1978 - First action: letter requesting meeting with Carter.
- Donated staff time from CCC. (Larry Parachini - Interim Coordinator)
- April 1979 - Adoption of basic RC rural policy positions and decision to raise funds, hire staff, and form 501(c)3.
- May 1979 - B. Rose replaces L. Parachini as Interim Coordinator.
- November 1979 - First Retreat. Decision to revise membership eligibility so as not to be exclusive of sub-regional groups and to develop dues structure.
- B. Rose hired as Executive Dire
- September 1980 - Incorporation as non-profit in District of Columbia.
- Draft By-laws circulated among membership including implementation of membership/dues decisions.
- November 1980 - 2nd Annual Meeting adopting initial By-laws and electing Board.
- December 1980 - Application filed for tax-exempt status as 501(c)3.

The Rural Coalition: A Brief History

1978 Representatives of 22 non-profit public interest organizations meet to discuss needs of the rural poor and ways of pressing effectively for more equitable treatment, especially in development of federal policies and delivery of federal programs. They agree to try to improve coordination among organizations working on a wide range of issues.

Rural Coalition is created as an informal coordinating mechanism, with no full-time staff or budget. It's something of an experiment--the first significant effort to develop a strong national voice for widely dispersed grassroots groups attempting to serve the rural poor.

1979 By April, more than 35 organizations are members of the Coalition. Its Working Committee, struggling to address issues ranging from agriculture to welfare rights, concludes that the scope of the effort requires a small full-time staff and commitment to a minimum two-year program. Primary focus will be to try to force federal commitment to a comprehensive, coordinated, fully-funded rural development policy.

Volunteer task forces work on this and related priorities, meeting with White House staff and concerned members of Congress; other task forces focus on the federal budget for fiscal year 1980, problems of community economic development financing, and shortcomings of key rural programs operated by USDA's Farmers Home Administration (FmHA).

Coalition develops a detailed policy paper for use by White House staff. Rural Development Policy: Framework & Recommendations stresses need for a federal policy to synchronize support in program planning, technical assistance, community facilities, employment, training, human services, and encouragement of community-based delivery networks.

The Coalition addresses 12 principal areas: agriculture, (family farms and land use in particular), civil rights (especially voter education and legal services), community facilities and local government, economic development, education, employment (especially public-service jobs and training), energy, environment, health and nutrition, housing, social services, and transportation.

Coalition defines itself as "a developing national organization formed to help shape and influence public policies and processes affecting rural America." Membership is open to any organization willing to subscribe to its Statement of Principles, which essentially addresses the right of all rural people to a decent quality of life and their ability to control the processes that lead to fulfillment of that right.

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1979 (continued) Working Committee meets with President Carter to discuss national rural development policy. President supports many Coalition policy recommendations and commits himself to work for adoption of legislation--but is noncommittal about funding levels.

By November, in addition to extensive work on rural development policy, Coalition has testified on budget issues for FY80, launched an information and advocacy campaign on welfare reform and other issues, and attracted many new members; now has 47 member organizations. A small staff now works out of the Coalition's new Washington office.

Late in December, President Carter announces his "Small Community and Rural Development Policy," noting: "Rural areas are unique. They have not been well served by federal programs. We have been missing a wholehearted commitment...We have long needed to translate generalized concerns about rural problems into a set of specific goals, principles, programs, and mechanisms for effective implementation."

Largely in response to Coalition initiatives, the White House announces "more than 100" government actions to be taken in 1980 to improve rural housing, health, water/sewer systems, education, employment, economic development, energy availability, transportation, communications and the environment. Carter asks Congress to create the position of Under Secretary of Agriculture for Small Community and Rural Development.

Coalition members are pleased with presidential acknowledgement that problems are severe and need to be addressed. But, at the same time, Carter administration is proposing severe FY80 budget cuts in almost all programs affecting rural poor. It's clear that budget battles loom large and will dominate the Coalition's efforts for the foreseeable future.

1980 Rural Coalition now has four active task forces--with member organizations loaning staff time and talent--working on rural development policy, federal budget, Farmers Home Administration, and energy. Two others are forming, to work on rural unemployment and health and welfare problems.

Work on rural development policy legislation continues through the year. In September, Congress passes the Rural Development Policy Act of 1980, creating an Under Secretary for Rural Development in USDA, setting up a monitoring process including annual reports to Congress on projected expenditures for rural development programs, and establishing a variety of administrative mechanisms to improve coordination of policy.

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1980 (continued) For the Coalition, passage of the new law doesn't represent a total victory, because it lacks teeth. Perhaps more importantly, severe budget cuts in low-income housing, health care, public assistance, public-service employment, and many other areas demonstrate that the administration is retreating from the exemplary rhetoric of the new law.

The Coalition works to see that the Act is implemented, but it's an uphill struggle. Other areas demand attention too. Attempting to respond, the Coalition stretches its limited staff, volunteer aides, and finances to the breaking point. By the end of 1980 the Coalition counts 22 areas of activity. The Coalition is working to--

- improve the accountability of the Community Services Administration to the rural poor
- help a member organization, the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, to defend itself against politically-motivated attacks by federal agencies, including the FBI
- implement the Home Mortgage Disclosure Act, which requires lenders to provide information that can be used to determine patterns of credit discrimination
- prevent defunding of the Emergency Land Fund, a member organization, by the Community Services Administration
- develop a complete analysis of EmHA water/sewer regulations to improve eligibility of low-income housing projects
- block proposals by mining companies advocating use of stripped mountaintops as sites for federal low-income housing projects
- develop policy positions on impact of gas rationing in rural areas
- block dismantling of food assistance programs threatened by budget cuts
- improve coordination of efforts by organizations working to increase capacity of small communities to govern themselves
- improve effectiveness of organizations struggling to protect small farmers, especially black farmers in the South, against foreclosures and tax policies barring them from land ownership...

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1980 (continued)...and, among many other things, backstopping efforts by rural telephone users to protect themselves against sudden cost increases related to deregulation. Busy year--but the outcome of the November elections suggests that 1981 will be busier by far.

1981 Like other public interest organizations, Rural Coalition is staggered by the White House budget cuts. Many efforts are shelved while the Coalition's federal budget task force mounts a damage-control operation.

Coalition initiates an expanded effort to improve communications and coordination among member organizations, built around publication of a regular Rural Coalition Report that provides the only comprehensive analysis of budget cuts affecting rural areas and programs, and proposes specific alternatives.

Budget cuts and appropriation battles dominate Coalition's time and energy throughout the year. But Coalition task forces press on with other efforts and score modest victories. Water/sewer task force succeeds in forcing reform of FmHA regs and maintaining program funding levels. Coalition generates effective membership support for extension of Voting Rights Act and preservation of Legal Services Corporation.

Coalition develops membership education campaign on the 1981 farm bill and its importance to family farms, food stamp programs, land use policy, and preservation of black land ownership in the South.

Coalition publicizes national protest by farmers over discrimination in FmHA loan policies and agency's failure to support limited-resource and beginning farmers. Work on farm bill and related areas gives Coalition a more solid base for future efforts on these key issues.

Coalition struggles to help coordinate member organizations' efforts to protect programs and initiatives across the entire range of rural problems; develops educational materials on block grants and impact of reduced federal funding. Coalition members intensify efforts to advise congressional representatives of specific effects of cutbacks.

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1982 Administration launches a second round of cuts in domestic social programs and Coalition members respond. Coalition prepares detailed analysis of 21 specific program cuts, develops membership education work on budget alternatives (military spending, tax policies), then moves to sustained effort to explain cuts in rural areas to key Congress committees.

Coalition operates with seriously reduced funding and staffing, a consequence of concentrating on aiding members with maintaining holding operation against further federal budget cuts. This strategy produces some successes but Coalition's Board and its Working Committee recognize need to begin overhauling priorities in order to generate additional funds adequate to support small staff and broad range of sustained multi-year efforts.

Coalition convenes "Rural Summit" in June. At its conclusion, more than 70 organizations have joined (and balance of membership has shifted from Washington-based toward more locally-based organizations) and they give Coalition a clear, urgent mandate to press on.