

Building our future together



Rural Action Plan

April 2001

Canada



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of Canada

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Message from the Honourable Andy Mitchell

In April 2000, I had the privilege of hosting almost 500 Canadians from rural and remote communities at the National Rural Conference in Magog-Orford, Quebec.

The conference was held to follow up on the Rural Dialogue launched in 1998 and the National Rural Workshop held near Belleville, Ontario that year. The result of the dialogue and the workshop was the Federal Framework for Action in Rural Canada, with its 11 priorities. Since then, the federal government has continued to build on this framework as we make progress on rural issues.

At the National Rural Conference, participants used the framework as a starting point for discussions on community-led projects, and demonstrated, with exhibits and presentations, what they are doing in their communities. One common thread throughout the sessions was a strong youth component. Youth sent a clear message that they need to be empowered by having a voice in decisions that will affect their future.

The participants at the conference set out what they see as the key priorities for government action in rural and remote communities - a plan of action. In my closing remarks, I made a commitment to turn their priorities into a rural action plan to guide me over the next months.

The issues listed in this action plan identify the concerns that emerged at the conference. Examples of current government actions are also provided for each of the 11 priority areas. In addition, under the heading "Where do we go from here?" is a list of initiatives that are being put into action using existing government programs and programs under development. Throughout this process we will continue working cooperatively with all levels of government to provide a coordinated delivery of these initiatives as well as to ensure they are aware of citizens' concerns about issues under their jurisdiction.

Over the summer I shared a draft version of this action plan with conference participants to get their feedback and to make sure we had captured the essential points raised at Magog. Their comments have helped us ensure that this final Rural Action Plan accurately reflects rural concerns and I would like to express my sincere thanks to them for taking the time to provide their valuable feedback. Some issues that were raised at the conference, or in response to the proposed action plan, require new policy directions

and/or additional funding. I will raise these issues directly with my colleagues to determine how they could be addressed.

Since the conference, the Government of Canada has announced several key items of interest to rural Canadians. These include:

- a commitment of \$175 million for grain roads, and the introduction of a package of reforms to the Canadian grain handling and transportation system;
- the development of seven new rural Smart Communities;
- the introduction of the Canadian Agricultural Rural Communities Initiative, which funds rural organizations, partnership projects, conferences and research;
- the provision of an additional \$90 million over five years for Community Futures Development Corporations/Community Business Development Corporations; and
- new investments totalling \$23.4 billion over five years to support federal/provincial/territorial agreements on Health Renewal and Early Childhood Development. These investments are for the benefit of all Canadians, including those living in rural and remote areas.

This Rural Action Plan is tangible evidence of the Government of Canada's commitment to work for a higher quality of life in rural and remote communities. I invite you to read it and share it with others in your community.



Andy Mitchell
Secretary of State (Rural Development)
(Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario)

Introduction

The Rural Action Plan outlines issues that emerged at the National Rural Conference of April 27-30, 2000 and lists examples of current government actions as well as the next steps the Government of Canada will take in response. The issues are organized around the 11 priority areas of the Federal Framework for Action in Rural Canada that was developed from the Rural Dialogue and the National Rural Workshop of 1998.

Participants at the National Rural Conference discussed progress on the framework over the last two years. They then made recommendations for what they saw as their key priorities and what was required as next steps for the government to undertake.

The Proposed Rural Action Plan was sent to all conference participants. They were asked to comment and to respond to the following three questions:

- ① Have we identified the right issues?
- ② Are the suggested next steps the right ones?
- ③ What next steps, if any, would you propose instead of or in addition to the ones suggested?

Overall, the reaction to the plan was positive. A strong majority of respondents agree that the correct issues have been identified and that the next steps are the right ones. Their comments have been taken into account in the final Rural Action Plan.

The federal government will continue working with rural Canadians to ensure the sustainability of rural communities and will report on progress in the second annual rural report to Parliament.

The Action Plan

Priority Area #1

Improve access to federal government programs and services for rural Canadians

Issue: The provision of government services on-line

Examples of what we are doing now:

The Government of Canada is working to ensure that rural and remote communities are connected to the information highway (see Priority #6). Concurrently, it is ensuring that information about its programs and services is available in various formats, including electronic.

- It has established 121 Service Canada sites, mostly in rural and small urban communities. Its Public Access Program includes a website, the 1-800 "O Canada" phone line, and other services.
- The government distributed "Your Guide to Government of Canada Programs and Services" to 2.3 million rural households in June 1999.

Where do we go from here?

- 1 Assess the existing Service Canada pilot projects. Share and apply the lessons learned from these projects more widely.
- 2 Roll out the \$160 million Government On-line initiative to implement government transactions on line in a manner that ensures access to rural Canadians.
- 3 Develop an Internet gateway to provide rural and remote Canadians with one-stop access to federal programs and services, including a new on-line directory of key programs and services geared to the interests of rural and remote citizens.

Priority Area #2

Improve access to financial resources for rural business and community development

Issue: Provide funding for rural enterprises

Examples of what we are doing now:

- In the first part of the year 2000, the Government of Canada announced an increase in funding to Community Futures Development Corporations/Community Business Development Corporations. Ninety million additional dollars over five years will be contributed to the corporations.
- It also contributed \$80 million to the capital base of the Business Development Bank.
- In 1999, the government announced \$21 million for the Aboriginal Business Development Initiative.

Where do we go from here?

- 4 Improve Community Futures Development Corporations' services to provide universal coverage throughout Quebec and Ontario, as already exists in other provinces.
- 5 Strengthen existing Community Futures Development Corporations and improve services by increasing operating funds.
- 6 Implement a notice process to govern bank branch closures in rural areas where six months' notice will be required.
- 7 Strengthen the credit union movement so that it can better compete with large institutions.
- 8 Work towards providing over-the-counter financial services through Canada Post outlets where there are no financial institutions in the community.
- 9 Promote and use existing institutions such as the Farm Credit Corporation, the regional development agencies and Community Futures Development Corporations to assist in the delivery of services.

Priority Area #3

Provide more targeted opportunities, programs and services for rural youth, including Aboriginal youth

Issue: Increase rural youth participation in community development

Examples of what we are doing now:

- The Government of Canada is contributing \$155 million annually to the Youth Employment Strategy.
- It has also implemented the First Nations and Inuit Youth Employment Strategy to respond to the specific needs of First Nations and Inuit youth.
- Youth issues were highlighted at the National Rural Conference.

Where do we go from here?

- 10 Encourage youth leadership skills development.
- 11 Include youth in future regional and national Rural Dialogue activities.
- 12 Involve youth in activities of Rural Teams.
- 13 Develop and implement, in partnership with other stakeholders, a comprehensive strategy focussing on the prevention of youth crime and victimization across the country, including in rural and remote regions.

Priority Area #4

Strengthen rural community capacity building, leadership and skills development

Issue: Empower community leaders and organizations to pursue economic and community development initiatives

Examples of what we are doing now:

The Government of Canada supports integrated bottom-up community development.

- Human Resources Development Canada's Community Capacity Building approach underpins such programs as the Aboriginal Human Resource Development Strategy.
- Health Canada and Environment Canada sponsor the Community Animation Program on Health and Environment.
- Natural Resources Canada's Community Capacity Building Initiative helps rural, remote and Aboriginal communities develop the capacity to make decisions on land and resource use. The initiative draws on best practices such as the Model Forest Program. The department's Sustainable Communities Initiative, a five-year, \$5-million initiative under the GeoConnections program, will help these communities obtain and use geographical information.

Where do we go from here?

- 14 Roll out the Canadian Agricultural Rural Communities Initiative (CARCI) to support, for example, conferences on rural issues organized by non-governmental organizations.
- 15 Create electronic tools to allow communities to interact with each other regionally and nationally.
- 16 Find new ways to support organizations committed to rural development and capacity building.
- 17 Find new ways to support community leadership development.
- 18 Conduct partnership projects with the cooperatives sector.
- 19 North of 60, continue sustainable community initiatives under the Northern Sustainable Development Strategy.

Priority Area #5

Create opportunities for rural communities to maintain and develop infrastructure for community development

Issue: Provide support for municipal and transportation infrastructure

Examples of what we are doing now:

- The Government of Canada, in Budget 2000, established a \$2.6-billion federal/provincial/territorial infrastructure program, and in collaboration with the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, a \$125-million “Green Infrastructure” program.
- The Strategic Highway Infrastructure Program will invest \$600 million in provincial and territorial highway projects. These projects, in many cases, will help rural communities transport goods to market and give rural residents better access to goods and services.
- On May 30, 2000, the government tabled legislation to create a more efficient, accountable and competitive grain-handling and transportation system that will cut costs for Western Canadian grain producers.
- In April 2000, the government announced an additional \$400 million over five years in capital funding to VIA Rail to address key pressures on its existing system.

Where do we go from here?

- 20 Ensure the infrastructure program is designed to meet the priorities of rural and remote Canadians.
- 21 Federal/provincial/territorial negotiations on the Strategic Highway Infrastructure Program will likely lead to the signing of agreements that will take effect in 2001.
- 22 Monitor, through an independent third party, the impact of the changes to the grain handling and transportation system on farmers, the Canadian Wheat Board, railways, grain companies, shippers and ports.
- 23 Compile a list of possible service changes to VIA Rail’s national network that would restore previously abandoned services or that would enhance the performance of the corporation.

- 24 Work cooperatively to ensure that the Independent Transition Observer is informed of rural issues related to air transportation in small communities, including those in rural and remote regions.

Issue: Provide affordable housing in rural areas, particularly in the North

Examples of what we are doing now:

- The Government of Canada spends \$1.9 billion annually to support existing social housing and housing renovation programs, which extend to rural and urban areas.
- A GST rebate for rental housing was introduced in Budget 2000.

Where do we go from here?

- 25 Continue and expand the current partnership for affordable housing.
- 26 Consider using some of the new federal infrastructure funds to develop affordable housing.

Priority Area #6

Connect rural Canadians to the knowledge-based economy and society and help them acquire the skills to use the technology

Issue: Provide rural and remote communities with telecommunications infrastructure

Examples of what we are doing now:

The Government of Canada's Connecting Canadians initiative includes a number of measures to make Canada the most connected country in the world.

- The Community Access Program (CAP) currently has 4,500 rural sites.
- The government has committed \$60 million over three years for 12 Smart Communities demonstration projects, including seven in rural and remote communities.
- The Computers for Schools program provides schools and libraries with surplus computers and software donated by governments and businesses.
- VolNet (Voluntary Sector Network Support Program) helps volunteers develop computer skills, and provides computer equipment and Internet connectivity and support.

Where do we go from here?

- 27 Encourage partnerships between the public, private and cooperative sectors to increase the understanding of telecommunications and expand telecommunications infrastructure in rural and remote communities.
- 28 Expand the network of Community Access Program sites to 5,000 in rural and remote Canada.
- 29 Roll out the seven Smart Communities projects in rural or remote areas.

Issue: Help rural businesses develop e-commerce opportunities

Examples of what we are doing now:

- The Connecting Canadians initiative is promoting the growth of e-commerce.

Where do we go from here?

- 30** Work with businesses to promote rural applications of new technology including e-commerce applications.

Priority Area #7

Strengthen economic diversification in rural Canada through more targeted assistance

Issue: Develop value-added industries and tourism in regions dependent upon primary production

Examples of what we are doing now:

- Natural Resources Canada is providing \$15 million for Canada's three forestry research institutes. This money will help the forestry industry develop value-added products and will go towards maintaining Canada's expertise in forestry research. Another \$15 million will be spent on geoscience, to stimulate investment in mining.
- Indian and Northern Affairs Canada supports economic development in First Nations and Inuit communities.
- Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada has been investing \$60 million a year in the Canadian Adaptation and Rural Development (CARD) program, which helps communities adapt through research, innovation and other means.
- The federal government has invested \$68 million in the Cape Breton Growth Fund to help the Cape Breton economy adjust to declining coal production.
- Early in 2000, the Government of Canada announced \$1.1 billion in safety-net and emergency assistance to agricultural producers for each of the next three years, as well as a \$240 million one-time aid package to some Manitoba and Saskatchewan farmers.

- In June 2000, the government announced a three-year, \$10 million Agricultural Environmental Stewardship Initiative, to help farmers on a number of key environmental issues.
- In August 2000, Fisheries and Oceans Canada announced a five-year, \$75-million Program for Sustainable Aquaculture in Canada. This will help the aquaculture sector improve its environmental performance and achieve its full economic potential.

Where do we go from here?

- 31** Work through government departments, agencies and organizations such as Community Futures Development Corporations to develop and promote programs that encourage diversification into value-added sectors.
- 32** Work with the provinces and territories to ensure that the appropriate agricultural safety nets are in place.
- 33** Implement the new Agricultural Environmental Stewardship Initiative.
- 34** Establish new Partnerships for Community Economic Development in rural Atlantic Canada.
- 35** Develop sustainable and viable new fishing opportunities that reduce the level of dependence on existing fisheries and thereby increase their value.
- 36** Roll out the Program for Sustainable Aquaculture Development.

Priority Area #8

Work with provincial and territorial governments to examine and pilot test new ways to provide rural Canadians with access to health care at reasonable cost

Issues: Improve access to health services by supporting the development of innovative models that respond to the health concerns of rural Canadians

Promote health status improvement through health promotion and disease prevention in collaboration with the provinces and territories

Support provincial and territorial efforts to encourage the recruitment and retention of healthcare professionals in rural areas

Examples of what we are doing now:

- In Budget 2000, the Government of Canada provided \$2.5 billion more in Canada Health and Social Transfer to the provinces and territories. Some of this money will support health care.
- Some projects under the Health Transition Fund support home-care in rural areas and improve rural access to health care through telehealth technology.

Where do we go from here?

- 37 In collaboration with provincial and territorial governments, fund pilot projects in rural areas to develop innovative health care delivery models.
- 38 Support the development of Info-Technology applications in health care for rural and remote areas.
- 39 Promote the inclusion of a rural perspective in national research efforts (eg. Canadian Institutes of Health Research).

Priority Area #9

Work with provincial and territorial governments to examine and pilot test new ways to provide rural Canadians with access to education at reasonable cost

Issue: Provide access to adult literacy and distance learning

Examples of what we are doing now:

- The National Literacy Secretariat funds rural literacy projects.
- The Public Service Commission's Regional Offices offer distance learning.
- Human Resources Development Canada's Office of Learning Technology supports distance learning.
- CanLearn Interactive provides information, products and services to help rural Canadians with career-oriented learning.

Where do we go from here?

- 40 Promote the use of new technologies for distance learning.

Priority Area #10

Foster strategic partnerships, within communities, between communities and among governments to facilitate rural community development

Issue: Strengthen the Rural Lens and broaden the Rural Dialogue

Examples of what we are doing now:

- The Government of Canada uses the Rural Lens to ensure that its policies, programs, services and regulations meet the needs of rural and remote Canadians.
- The Rural Dialogue has guided the government's rural initiative since 1998.

Where do we go from here?

- 41 Consider creating an advisory committee of rural citizens to advise the Secretary of State.
- 42 Increase the involvement of rural organizations and individuals from different groups, including First Nations, Métis, Inuit, visible minorities, youth, women and volunteers in Rural Team activities.
- 43 Enhance the Rural Dialogue On-line Discussion Group by conducting electronic town halls, such as interactive sessions with the Secretary of State.
- 44 Conduct regional dialogue activities with partners through 2001.
- 45 Host another national rural conference in 2002.
- 46 Include more grassroots material, particularly from youth, in the *Rural Times* quarterly newsletter.

Issue: Improve the delivery of the Canadian Rural Partnership Pilot Projects Initiative

Examples of what we are doing now:

- The Canadian Rural Partnership's Pilot Projects Initiative has funded 239 innovative community development projects across Canada in the past three years.

Where do we go from here?

- 47 Process Canadian Rural Partnership Pilot Projects applications in a timely manner.
- 48 Target pilot projects to address clearly defined problems, and to meet specific objectives.
- 49 Share pilot project results with rural citizens through various venues, including the Rural website, the *Rural Times* newsletter and rural newspapers.

Priority Area #11

Promote rural Canada as a place to live, work and raise a family recognizing the value of rural Canada to the identity and well-being of the nation

Issue: Recognize and acknowledge rural Canada

Examples of what we are doing now:

The Government of Canada has several initiatives to inform all Canadians about rural and remote Canada.

- Statistics Canada has released several bulletins on issues affecting rural Canada.
- Forty thousand teachers' guides on Canada's farming heritage were distributed to organizations, libraries and schools across the country as part of Heritage Day 2000 celebrations.

Where do we go from here?

- 50 Use parliamentary structures to publicly promote the importance of rural Canada to all Canadians and highlight the concerns of rural Canadians, for example by tabling the Annual Rural Report.
- 51 Continue the Rural Exhibits Program in order to connect rural and remote regions to the Government of Canada, to provide information about federal programs and services to communities outside major cities, and to foster ongoing dialogue with rural and remote Canadians.
- 52 Continue the Secretary of State's dialogue with rural and remote communities in Canada and use the knowledge gained to enhance the application of the Rural Lens.
- 53 Ensure that good news stories about rural Canada are circulated to a wider audience through radio clips and newspaper stories.
- 54 Continue working with non-governmental organizations on initiatives to promote rural Canada.

