Seizing New Opportunities in Rural America:
General Discussion

Moderator: Larry Meeker

Mr. Meeker: Let’s now turn to our panel questions. We’ll do as we did before, take two or three questions at a time and then let our panelists respond. Who would like to begin?

Marcie McLaughlin, Minnesota Rural Partners: I’ve heard mentioned three times an important issue that we’re facing in our state, and I would venture to say that many states are facing. Something that we’ll see in the year 2050 and was located in the white area on your map, and that is the assimilation of the new immigrant populations into rural America. So, I would lay that in front of you as something that we all need to be watching and be prepared for.

Mr. Meeker: Okay, another question.

Bryan Edwardson, Cargill, Inc.: I don’t want this to be misinterpreted, because I work for an agricultural company. But given the title of the symposium, I’m just curious to sort of throw out a big picture question. And this stems from an observation that we have a Department of Housing and Urban Development and we have a Department of Agriculture, of which a small agency is the Department for Rural Investment. I’m just curious if it isn’t so simple to think that perhaps we need a Department for Rural Development?

Mr. Meeker: Okay, another question.

John Dean, Glenwood State Bank: We seem to be talking about rural areas, remote and nonremote. In remote areas, it seems we should have to look at either raising the profit to farmers that are staying there or bringing in other industry for employment. But when you get the nonremote areas, which are next to the cities—and I don’t know what the solution is, maybe the panel does—but when you have a small town outside of Kansas City, maybe 15 or 20 miles, with an agricultural area between that and Kansas City, I think you’ll find that the bulk of the people move out to that small community. They move there because they like the open spaces, they like the schools, they like the baseball fields, they like the soccer fields, they like the golf course, and all those things, but they won’t support the area. They’ll go to the dentist in Kansas City, they’ll go to the doctor in Kansas City, they’ll go to the lawyer in Kansas City, they’ll bank in Kansas City. They almost live out there as cocoons. They come out there for rural life, but they don’t support it. Now, there’s a social problem that has to be addressed if those communities are going to stay the way they were when people moved out there. Does the panel have any thoughts or ideas on that?

Mr. Meeker: Okay, we have three really good questions. Let me sort of summarize them a moment and then let the panelists take their pick. One, assimilation of new immigrants—a big issue, and something I personally know about in my old hometown. Second, related to the title of the symposium, the notion that perhaps we need a “Department of Rural Development” in the U.S. government. Finally, this issue of remote versus nonremote communities. Remote communities perhaps needing other industry. Bedroom community implications for the nonremote with people who are not really willing to support those ameni-
ties that they’re moving there for, going into town for banking, dentist, other kinds of services.

So, let me turn this over to the panel.

Mr. Jischke: First, the efforts at assimilation must be deliberate and systematic, anticipatory. The needs of these communities, at least in transition, have to be dealt with directly. I think there are examples in communities. I was commenting to somebody on the break about the success of a whole community of Bosnians that have come into a town in Iowa. They have become successful and the town’s very proud of them. But, there were absolutely deliberate efforts with language and the transition. And second, to reinforce the comment that Professor Cornell made, it has to be undergirded by a pretty deep respect, and therefore, include an understanding of the traditions and cultures of these immigrants. It is a matter of respect, but it ultimately also has to do with preserving their integrity, their sense of themselves, and it has to be done respectfully. That is all possible, and it seems to me, as I tried to suggest in my prepared comments, that it’s a pretty rich tradition in this country. We are, almost all of us, descendants of immigrants.

Mr. Meeker: Interesting observation, I think, about the cultural respect involved.

Mr. Cornell: I’d like to add just one thing to that. I actually took a cab in from the airport last night that was driven by a Curd from Iran who had been in this country for about five years. I asked him how it was, and he said, “For me it’s terrible. I miss my homeland. For my four kids, it’s wonderful.”

I think we have to remember that generally assimilation has been a generational process, that the trick is to provide a set of services or ways to accommodate the migrant generation, but the critical thing for their children is the schools, and the systems that they enter into. The children typically have a very different experience. Assimilation very often happens whether you’re trying to promote it or not when you get generational transmission. And it may seem like a problem in the first generation. But historically it’s not a problem—not for all populations in this country—but at least for white populations in this country, the problem has tended to go away generationally.

Mr. Isserman: My reaction to the immigration question was to wonder whether we’re talking about the difficulty of the adjustment by the immigrants or by the rural folks themselves. I think a big part of the latter is how the immigrants are perceived. If finally there’s a doctor in the town clinic again and there hasn’t been one since the last one died, I think the immigrant is most welcome and gets the benefit of the doubt.

I think we have a long-standing perception of immigrant workers as scabs. The movie *Matewan*, which took place in the coal-mining town of West Virginia, makes this really clear. If there’s a perception that the companies are playing off the immigrant workers against the African-Americans and the mountain folks, it’s a very different situation of adjustment that’s being talked about. And I think probably in today’s Minnesota setting, it might have something to do with meat packing, is that right? And meat packing raises lots of other passions and issues, and maybe we have to fear for the immigrants that are sometimes caught up in it because the industries are of mixed populability depending on who has the contract or not, probably, in that area. And, in that sense, the immigrants are seen as a tool and it’s a different kind of situation.

And all of this happened, because in 1965 we changed the immigration law to make it easier for Irish families to be reunited. And Representative Seller testified on the floor of the House that this change in law would have hardly any effect at all on immigration from Asia. So, we have a checkered past in dealing with this, but it’s a tradition. Rachel Calof, the author with whom I began, came to the United States as a 16- or 17-year-old whose husband took
her to the homestead, which was going to be theirs. They didn't get married until each of them filed separately so that each of them could get a double allotment. But there is an immigration heritage in this land that you were talking about. They found the Native Americans to be very helpful to them. I don't know if you can invoke their help where you are.

Mr. Meeker: Good comments. How about the topic of Department of Rural Development? We have Department of Housing and a Department of Agriculture. What about a Department of Rural Development?

Mr. Isserman: What's it going to do? That's the question, right? We have a secretarial level Department of Veteran Affairs. It hasn't made a difference. I don't know, is it political symbol or is there some real action that you expect? And if it is real action, and you can itemize the agenda, I think you're probably a lot closer to having an effective Department of Rural Development and effective policies. I think that goes in general for rural policy. If we can state what we're after, something bigger than our share or our share of the limelight, it stands a better chance and it deserves to exist.

Mr. Jischke: I think it would be very interesting to study from a diversity point of view. I think you have to be absolutely clear what the national interest is in such a department in order to give it a mission that is appropriate. But I am struck by Professor Cornell's observations that in building communities, local control and ownership, and local institutions are far more powerful. I mean we have a whole humor about this, "I'm here from the federal government and I'm here to help you" sort of jokes. I think you have to be absolutely certain why it should be done at a national level, what it would do, and then I'd still be a little skeptical about whether it would work.

Mr. Meeker: Turning to the third question on the list, I think the issue really focuses on rural areas near metropolitan areas, where there's not support, at least locally, for many of the things that are necessary in the community, the doctors, the rest of it. People want the amenities but really don't want to pay for them. What do you think?

Mr. Fox: It seems to me that people do that for a wide range of services. From healthcare, driving by the rural hospital to the movie theater to get popcorn that was talked about before. A lot of it has to do, of course, with sufficient demand to deliver the service in rural places. But, of course, some of it has to do with people who have patterns of life already in place, and they're used to a doctor or dentist in the city, and if they can access them nearby, they'll continue to do that. And, it will take a long time to change the pattern that they have in place.

But, I think we have to keep in mind that people don't think about the economy in terms of urban versus rural. It's a regional economy in which they consume. Just like they don't think of the economy as this county versus that county. These are artifacts, and from an economic perspective, they don't exist. What exists is a regional environment in which people consume services. Some they go further distances for than others. If they want a professional sports team and they're not at a university, they travel a further distance. University of Illinois has it; University of Tennessee does not, just to go on record.

But, it differs on the service. I guess the point I'm making is that the region differs by the service that people are looking for. But, people don't think rural-urban. They think about meeting the needs and satisfactions that they have in mind.

Mr. Meeker: Let's turn to three more questions.

Steve Taylor, New Hampshire Department of Agriculture: Last week, the governor of Pennsylvania held a press conference and announced that in the first 100 days of 2000, the state of Pennsylvania had purchased development rights on 100 farms. In 1998,
the New Jersey voters by referendum voted to bond up to $2 billion to purchase development rights on New Jersey agriculture land. Every state in New England has a purchase and development rights program to buy and protect farms. I was wondering if we in the Northeast are nutty in pursuing that kind of public policy, or is that a sound investment?

Bill McQuillan, City National Bank, Greeley, Nebraska: This issue really, in the end, is jobs. And I think some of us are leaning in that direction, to deliver information-based databases, whatever, to rural America. And my thought is, if we can, would it also make sense to deliver new jobs, whether they be federal and/or state and/or county for that matter, to rural America? I mean, we can access those databases from anywhere now. It just makes sense to me that we could save a lot of dollars by doing that, certainly, because people that typically live in these communities might work for a little less. And the people that have the jobs might transfer in and would probably be able to live cheaper. It's just a thought that might possibly work, and I'd like you to comment on that. Thanks.

Richard Lloyd, The Countryside Agency: We've heard a lot today about economic opportunities and community needs. I'm just wondering where does the environment work into all of this? A decade or so ago, we had the Rio Earth Summit, and the buzz phrase that we were all supposed to come away with was the concept of sustainable development, whereby you try and pursue economic goals and social goals side by side with environmental conservation and improvement, if possible. And on our side of the Atlantic, we're trying to pursue what we call integrated rural development where we try to pursue all three of those and create win-win-win situations. What I've heard a lot about today is very much the emphasis on the economic and the social, but the environment doesn't seem to fit in anywhere, which I think is rather worrying. Perhaps you can reassure me.

Mr. Meeker: Three questions. Two of them I think do have a link, the environment question here last and the development rights on the farms that are in New England, and that is a big effort in New England. The third question dealing with jobs and perhaps how we can deliver those to rural America. Let me turn this to our panelists.

Mr. Cornell: What are communities, what do they want to preserve, protect, change, see different? If we are serious about communities doing their own strategic thinking, then we have to be serious about deferring to their conception of what kind of future they're trying to build. The communities that I work with, many of them make very explicit decisions about what is the degree of environmental deterioration that we are willing to accept as the price of this particular strategy. And they make those same kinds of calculations about other things—what's the degree of indebtedness we're willing to take on, what's the degree of loss of political autonomy, or presence of noncommunity members, growth by bringing in outsiders. It seems to me that, if we're serious about local control, we must put those kinds of decisions in the hands of those who live in the community. And if they care about the environment, presumably they'll act in that fashion, and if they don't, well, that's what local control means. It makes sense.

Mr. Meeker: Maybe just as a follow-up with you, Steve, on the issue of development rights on farms in the Northeast. Do you have any idea if that's engaged in, perhaps by someone from the outside?

Mr. Cornell: Yes, I was going to say that I don't think that is happening just in the Northeast. We're certainly seeing that in Arizona, and I think in fact, all up and down the intermountain West—the move toward PDR is big and growing, as far as I can tell. I think the question you're raising is whether bringing in outsiders is an appropriate way to do it? But again, that's a question for the person who cur-
Currently owns the development rights. They can sell it to anybody they want to.

If the state of Arizona decides to buy up development rights, that seems to me to be between the state and the current owner of those rights. I personally would like to see it happen because we're losing a great deal of grazing land in Arizona to subdivisions, and it's raising enormous water problems. But, whether or not it's an advisable policy or a recommended policy, I'm not convinced that I have a policy view on that. It's up to somebody else.

Mr. Meeker: Other responses to these or the jobs issues?

Mr. Jischke: First, quality of life, I think, for many people includes environmental issues, and I think it will be a competitive issue among locations, particularly for people who are in enterprises that are quite mobile. Second, as the level of income goes up, people are more interested in the environment and are prepared to spend more of their disposable income on improvements in the environment. And third, a major challenge for American agriculture is to try to think of ways of developing that are consistent with the environmental interests of others. And to think about doing that systematically and carefully.

Managing watersheds is an example in a way that's compatible both with agricultural needs and recreational needs. It's a big issue. It ebbs and flows politically in the Farm Belt, but it's not going to go away. I mean there are some basic conflicts there and they will have to be worked out. And there's the issue particularly of rural communities where agriculture is central and yet needs to be complemented by other economic activity in order to maintain a viable vibrant rural community. That must be resolved. My advice is look at it head on. Don't ignore the issue.

Mr. Fox: I'll touch on the question of jobs. Of course the point is right that information infrastructure particularly does open the opportunity for many jobs to be produced from anywhere. But of course, those jobs are likely to go where the people want to live. And so, the issue comes down not only to where does the business want to locate. I believe the roles of wages, for example, and where business will locate will both become increasingly smaller. What is going to matter more is where people want to be, and indeed where people are willing to accept lower wages to live in the right places. What's going to drive the firm decision is where it can find the kind of people that it wants. The problem on the information infrastructure side, though, as several people have mentioned, is that technology is likely to lag in rural places. And so to the extent that something high speed or broadband is required, which for the kinds of examples that were being used, is probably true, then rural places may not—at least many rural places—may not be as good of an option, at least not in the near term, until we get better strategies, better technologies in place.

Mr. Cornell: Just one other thing on the purchase of development rights. In parts of Montana where I've spent some time, one of the people who is working in this area says, “Well, the real problem up here is that most ranchers aren't even aware of the PDR option.” They're concerned about losing their ranches and being forced out of their business by various factors, but they're unaware that there is a purchase and development rights option. And, I think part of the job here is to make these kinds of choices more available to people who currently don't know about them.

And, in some cases, we talk about purchase of development rights and a lot of work is being done on it, but the information about it never gets to the people who actually need to be making the choices. So I think that's one of the challenges. It's a very effective strategy for some of these people, but one that they may not even know is available.

Mr. Meeker: Okay, let's turn to another set of questions.
Jerry Nagel, Northern Great Plains Rural Development Commission: In the past couple of months I’ve found myself, three different times, hearing people under the age of 30 describing situations where their opinions weren’t valued as they were trying to deal with policy. While I know everyone in this room is totally hip, if the demographic here is reflective of rural policymakers, are our rural policymakers really prepared to look at and examine and put in place policies that are sensitive to the issues that young people are concerned about in the places where they want to live?

Mr. Meeker: Good question. Another question?

David Darling, Kansas State University: I’d like to hear the panel comment about the role of extension in rural development—where they think it has come from and where they think it is going to—and if it’s being deemphasized or reemphasized?

Mr. Meeker: And one more question.

Lance Woodbury, Kennedy and Coe, LLC: As I reflect on rural human capital and leadership and my travels around rural communities and even reservations, it strikes me that attracting human capital must be even preceded by people that are there now, deciding to do that. And, I’d like to hear the panel’s response on policy, either implications or proposals, that get people working together.

Mr. Meeker: Okay, three good questions. One about the opinions of the young not being valued and policymakers being sensitive to this area. Second about the role of extension services in rural communities—should we do more or less of that? And finally this human capital issue. What about the folks in the community, how can they play an important role?

Mr. Isserman: I’ll address the young people. You know, here comes a statement that I wouldn’t like to have quoted, but they’re just going to have to wait their turn. And, it is now the turn of the people who are in this room and are in the White House and so on. And, this links very much to development rights and environmental policy and environmental concerns. Those were the campus issues when we were less than 30 years old. Development rights are what were taught in school. Environmental economics was a whole new field—the concept of externalities and so on. And, when we did a history of economic thought, those of us that did, we read John Maynard Keynes who said that government officials used the outmoded theories that they studied when they were kids 30 years ago on campus.

So, that’s why we’re now doing the kid dreams that we had, which included development rights…and no, it’s not a crazy idea. Now people who had to take exams on it can get to do it. And, hopefully, we’re not that out of touch with what young people are interested in. The other part is that young people today, this 30 generation, they’ve got more money than that generation had a long time ago, too. And, they can buy some of their own things too when they cash in some of their stock options and get a chance to lead as younger people. I think those things will happen, and, I hope we’re not that out of sync with young people, as least not those of us on campus.

In terms of the extension role and rural development, the thing that bothers me most is that extension is still trying to figure out its role in rural development. I’m on a committee for the University of Illinois’ new what’s-it-going-to-do in community and economic development. It’s the most frustrating committee that I’m on and I can’t figure out why we can’t get this thing straight. The horror thought is that we can’t get it straight because we’re a non-answer. The other is that we need more centers like this to help us figure out what our mission is. But, then we always go back to: the people in rural America want more and vote for more rural development community development practitioners. Somehow, I hope we can put it together because I think that’s...
happening throughout the country. And, if you’ve got some answers, any of you, let me know because our committee meets again next week.

Oh, and to get people working together...diversity does that real well and so does money. Why are there all these bike paths now? It’s because we passed that transportation act—the intermodal efficiency, the old iced-tea thing. And so now you have lots of community groups working together to make bicycle paths all over the country. I think it’s wonderful, but it takes one of two things—either money or terrible timing. If people aren’t working together, they are either too poor or not poor enough.

Mr. Jischke: I can’t remember a month where I’ve only had three people under 30 tell me that they don’t feel people like me value them. It’s a daily experience at the university.

A more serious response, I hope: I think that’s a broadly held feeling among young people today. Second, it is very much related to the question earlier today about leadership. Young people today accept less than I remember in my career at the university, the idea that they are anointed leaders or masters. They are inherently more sharing—that is my sense. And, they want to participate. I don’t think they necessarily believe they should make the decisions, but they believe they should be heard and participate.

And, I think that’s a style of leadership that’s going to emerge in more successful communities. It won’t be decided by the four people who drive the biggest cars in town. It won’t be a small group of men who happen to own businesses. It will be a broader leadership group—some from the private sector, some from the public sector, some from the not-for-profit sector. Some will be younger. It will be more inclusive, and part of the trick for success in the future is the capacity in the community to develop that kind of leadership. The young people think this way: That’s how they see the world. They are much more comfortable with diversity, in a way that my generation and most of yours wouldn’t have been. They’re different. And, if you want to get into the new economy, these are the ones that are generating it, so you’d better figure out how to accommodate them, frankly, if you want the dot coms and so on. Those are the people that are doing it.

Mr. Cornell: I’m going to add one thing to Andy’s diversity and money as a way to bring people together. I think there’s a third thing, and this is based entirely on experience in Indian communities; but very often, there’s a failure of the imagination about how different things could be. And success stories have a remarkable way of changing that. One of the most important things that has happened in the last ten years in Indian country is that the few successes that have occurred have been the subjects of extended conversations. People say, “If they can do it, why can’t we?” or “If there, why not here?”

And, suddenly you find people getting engaged in the problem, people who before simply assumed, “Well, all I hear about is that we’ve got these insurmountable problems, so I guess that’s what we’ve got and that’s the way things will keep going.” So, I think part of the challenge in generating economic development in rural America is to tell the success stories about the economic development that’s been generated and communicating that and giving people a sense of what they can emulate. There’s a lot of exemplary cases out there, and if we don’t tell them, then people just stick with the restricted imagination that keeps them from getting engaged.

Mr. Meeker: Good responses. Let’s take another set of questions.

D. Chongo Mundende, Langston University: Getting to hear the panel, I’m left with two questions: One, is rural policy or rural development as we know it a dying concept? And two, is rural vitality, as we have heard this afternoon and morning, a pipe dream
or reality? Are we saying that the rural areas are hopeless or we cannot help them? What are we saying?

Kelly Haverkampf, Wisconsin Rural Partners, Inc.: My question relates kind of to Steve’s comments or his presentation. A bunch of us were going to stand up and shout, “Amen!” to a lot of what he said about partnerships and providing technical assistance. If we are to develop a national rural policy, what role, or what percentage, I guess, would be in technical assistance? Right now, with the stovepiping that Marcie was talking about, we see a lot of schizophrenia in the federal government where HUD has a community builders program, while at the same time, the USDA is pulling everybody out of the communities and consolidating their offices. So, what role would that have in the development of a national rural policy?

Mr. Meeker: Let’s take another question.

R. J. Baker, Cherokee Economic Development Corp.: I completely agree with the local control concept; however, in a lot of our state legislatures, we have a paradox in the legislation that’s passed. While they’re trying to help communities, they’re cutting other budgets that take away from communities. So, my question is, has there been any study that would reveal the legislative barriers to local control? And, as a follow-up, to maybe model legislation that would help all of these ideas come to fruition?

Mr. Fox: I’ll react first to the local control issue, the last of the questions. This is actually a worldwide problem. In Russia, for example, the biggest impediment to the development of cities and local governments is their regions or states. Because, there is this tendency for governments at every level to want to gain power and control. And, that’s exactly what’s happening in the regions. They actually control one of the Houses of Parliament, and nothing can pass through the Parliament because of the control of the governors of that House—nothing that can help local governments, that is. We do have a very serious challenge. I think in many states the local governments themselves are not very effective spokesmen in the state legislature. They’re not effective at countering the state control. They’re just simply different agents with different views. I’m, again, just sharing your concern. Given the fact that constitutionally the power is vested at the state level and not at the local level in the U.S., it’s obviously a difficult challenge, and I don’t know anywhere where it works very well.

Let me respond also to this issue about if there’s hope for rural places. I think Andy said it very well. When we look back 30 or 40 years—50 in his example—we’re going to find some rural places that did marvelously well. We probably won’t be very good predictors today of knowing where the next Las Vegas is going to be, but there will be one. So, I think there’s actually a great deal of hope. And the only thing we have to do is not screw it up. Because it will happen if we don’t set policies that discourage it or prevent it from occurring.

Mr. Meeker: Other responses to those questions? There was one other question about in rural policy how much should be directed to technical assistance and those kinds of things?

Mr. Isserman: In the part of my life or paycheck that’s not agricultural economics, it’s urban and regional planning. And, I’m really struck by the difference in the two cultures, in that urban and regional planning has a 100-year or more history of being concerned with the kinds of things that we call “community development” and “rural develop-
“extension” and they have professional agencies, professional employees. We don’t have any of that in the rural case, and yet we’re coping with many of the same land-use issues, environmental issues, housing issues, and so on. And, I’m not sure how these different paths occurred, but it seems that the rural areas are the poorer for the lack of that expertise, and that’s part of what extension is trying to do. And it’s probably high time that there is this expertise on issues that are so important to rural life. Their urban counterparts have much more expertise, whether it deals with rural health issues, education issues, all the rest. It sort of just happened in rural areas maybe, and was indeed technically assisted for decades in urban areas.

Mr. Cornell: On this question of the amount of technical assistance, I don’t have any idea of how much. But, it strikes me that there’s a crucial corollary question: What kind of technical assistance is it, and who is deciding that? A great deal of assistance is pitched toward problems as conceived by decision makers who are far removed from the problems. If in fact you had technical assistance that was really a resource to local control rather than a de facto shaping of local decision making, that would help. I think often we make decisions because there’s technical assistance available if we go this way, but not if we go this way. What we want is technical assistance available regardless of which way we go. And, then, it’s our information that’s shaping the use of technical assistance, rather than technical assistance shaping our decisions. I think that’s really the crucial question. Once you’re at local control, then you ought to invest substantially in technical assistance.

Mr. Meeker: Well, it’s time to wrap up. I would like to thank Martin, Bill, Steve, and Andy for their wonderful participation in this panel. To me, it’s been a very exciting discussion, and I do believe there are many new opportunities for rural America. And, they’re tied not only to the resources we have there, the infrastructure, the human capital, leadership, and institutions, but to a lot of what is happening today in the rest of the world, and with technology in particular. If there’s one theme that strikes me as running through all of this, it’s the theme of adaptability. And, Charles Darwin had something important to say about that when he said, “It’s not the strongest species that survives, or even the most intelligent, but rather, the most adaptable.”

I think perhaps that is an important theme this afternoon. Thank you all for your participation. You’ve contributed greatly and we appreciate it much.