

Assistance for Florida's Rural Communities: The Rural Economic Development Initiative¹

Hank Cothran, David Mulkey, and Mary Helen Blakeslee²

Introduction

The Rural Economic Development Initiative (REDI) was established to better serve Florida's rural communities by providing a more focused and coordinated effort among state and regional agencies that provide programs and services for rural areas. REDI is housed in the Governor's Office of Tourism, Trade, and Economic Development (OTTED) where it coordinates the efforts of state and regional agencies working to assist qualified communities. This document specifies the criteria for eligibility for assistance, notes the participating agencies, describes the duties and responsibilities of REDI, and provides contact information.

Qualifying for REDI Assistance

Chapter 288.0656, Florida Statutes, describes the duties and responsibilities of REDI and authorizes the participation of a variety of state and regional agencies in the initiative. REDI's area of responsibility is limited to assisting economically

distressed rural communities. Communities, to receive assistance, must meet the definition of being both "rural" and "distressed" according to the criteria noted below.

To be "rural" within the context of REDI's responsibility means:

- *A county with a population of 75,000 or less.*
- *A county with a population of 100,000 or less that is contiguous to a county with a population of 75,000 or less.*
- *A municipality within a county described above.*
- *An unincorporated federal enterprise community or an incorporated rural city with a population of 25,000 or less and an employment base focused on traditional agriculture or resource-based industries located in a county not defined as rural, which has at least three or more of the economic distress factors identified in statute and verified by the Office of Tourism, Trade, and Economic Development.*

1. This is EDIS document FE426, a publication of the Department of Food and Resource Economics, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL. First published August 2003 and revised March 2008. Please visit the EDIS website at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.

Note: Material for this document was taken from Chapter 288.0656, Florida Statutes, and a PowerPoint presentation prepared by Mary Helen Blakeslee, Coordinator, Rural Economic Development Initiative, Office of Tourism, Trade, and Economic Development, Office of the Governor.

2. Hank Cothran, Associate In, and David Mulkey, Professor, Department of Food and Resource Economics, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL; and Mary Helen Blakeslee, Coordinator, Rural Economic Development Initiative, Governor's Office of Tourism, Trade and Economic Development, Tallahassee, FL.

The definition of economic distress focuses on economic measures and comparisons between a particular community and similar measures for the state as follows:

Economic distress means conditions affecting the fiscal and economic viability of a rural community, including such factors as low per capita income, low per capita taxable values, high unemployment, high underemployment, low weekly earned wages compared to the state average, low housing values compared to the state average, high percentages of the population receiving public assistance, high poverty levels compared to the state average, and a lack of year-round stable employment opportunities.

Agency Members of REDI

The following state and regional agencies and one federal agency participate in REDI activities:

- Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services
- Florida Department of Children and Families
- Florida Department of Community Affairs
- Florida Department of Corrections
- Florida Department of Juvenile Justice
- Florida Department of Education
- Florida Department of Environmental Protection
- Florida Department of Health
- Florida Department of State
- Florida Department of Transportation
- Florida Agency for Health Care Administration
- Florida Agency for Workforce Innovation
- Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission
- University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences

- Florida Regional Planning Councils
- Florida Commission on Tourism, or Visit Florida, Inc.
- Florida Water Management Districts (WMD)
- Workforce Florida, Inc.
- Florida Association of Counties
- Florida League of Cities
- United States Department of Agriculture -- Rural Development

Community Assistance by REDI

As noted, the general purpose of REDI is to provide a more focused and coordinated state and regional effort on behalf of Florida's rural communities. REDI can facilitate access to state resources and coordinates the efforts of state and regional agencies. Specifically, REDI:

- Responds to specific community needs and requests for assistance.
- Provides direct access and referrals to state agencies as well as county and city associations.
- Reviews and evaluates the impact of statutes and rules on rural communities and works to minimize adverse impacts.
- Works with communities to improve their rural economies, finding ways to balance environmental and growth management issues with local needs.
- Assists communities in improving access to housing, health care, and educational opportunities.
- Recommends Rural Areas of Critical Economic Concern for Governor's approval.
- Recommends waivers of provisions of economic development programs on a project-by-project basis.

- Conducts the Rural Community of the Year award program.
- Undertakes advocacy, outreach, and capacity-building to improve conditions in rural communities.

Additional Information about REDI

Additional information on assistance and resources available to rural communities through REDI may be obtained by contacting the REDI Coordinator:

Mary Helen Blakeslee

Chief Analyst-Economic Development Programs

Governor's Office of Tourism, Trade, and Economic
Development

The Capitol, Suite 2001

Tallahassee, Florida 32399-0001

(850) 922-8743 [Telephone]

(850) 487-3014 [Fax]

email: maryhelen.blakeslee@myflorida.com