

## RURAL REGIONAL GOVERNANCE IN THE UNITED STATES: THE CASE OF THE RESOURCE CONSERVATION AND DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM\*

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**ABSTRACT.** Rural governance has drawn considerable attention from both local government officials and scholars in the United States since the early 1990s. It is touted as a way to mitigate the limitations of the traditional government unit-based approaches to problem solving and decision making and to foster partnerships across both jurisdictional boundaries and sectors (public, private, and nonprofit). Established in 1962, the Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) program of the U.S. Department of Agriculture provides a unique model of rural regional governance. Acting as a coalition of governments, private businesses, individuals, and interest groups, the RC&D program provides the flexibility needed to deal with issues at the appropriate spatial scale. It incorporates aspects of both grassroots and governmental organizations and can bring together local interests and expertise with governmental policy and support in service provision, problem solving, and economic development. The approach does not necessarily entail loss of power on the part of the state, but it does provide a mechanism for local people to exercise their agency, to tackle their problems, and to decide which elements of their lives they want to sustain.

*Keywords:* governance, Resource Conservation and Development program, rural development.

The word “governance” is slippery, for it has a number of different meanings. In this article it refers to a variety of horizontal, place-based, collaborative decision-making practices by a broad spectrum of people, private groups, and public organizations. It emphasizes citizen participation and is usually more responsive to national and regional diversity than the conventional sense of “government,” which usually involves the formal, hierarchical institutions of the state and the application of laws and regulations (Goodwin 1998; Stark 2006; Clark, Southern, and Beer 2007; Furmankiewicz, Thompson, and Zielinska 2010; Ruíz, Hes, and Schwartz 2011).

Since the mid-1990s, many rural-development scholars and practitioners have touted the benefits of governance, particularly regional partnerships that straddle traditional administrative boundaries, as an alternative to government in rural economic development and problem solving (Little 2001; Fluharty 2004; Stark 2006). Some scholars argue that governance is necessary if rural communities are to tackle effectively a multitude of challenges they face (Drabenstott, Novack, and Weiler 2004). It may also provide economically viable and socially acceptable ways to navigate a transition toward sustainability because it facilitates discussion and compromise (NRC 1999), and is therefore conducive to conflict resolution among different stakeholders about what to sustain. Although rural governance may take any one of a number of forms, scholars have generally viewed place-

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\* We would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers and Craig Colten for their thoughtful comments and suggestions for improving the manuscript.

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based partnerships or cooperatives as its main mode or expression. A growing body of literature has examined the circumstances under which a wide range of regional partnership organizations emerged in Australia, Britain, Colombia, the Netherlands, Poland, and the United States, as well as their structures, operations, and power relationships (Wiskerke and others 2003; Wilson 2004; Stanley, Marsden, and Milbourne 2005; Jonas and Pincetl 2006; Clark, Southern, and Beer 2007; Warner 2007; Hamin and Marcucci 2008; Derkzen 2010; Ruíz, Hes, and Schwartz 2011; Pemberton and Shaw 2012). Some authors have also examined the characteristics that make such organizations effective (Wiskerke and others 2003; Stark 2006; Furmankiewicz, Thompson, and Zielinska 2010).

Rarely mentioned in the literature is the fact that, although rural regional governance has received much recent attention, various governance practices have existed for quite some time (Jonas and Pincetl 2006). As more and more places recognize and experiment with different governance frameworks, it is imperative that we examine existing governance organizations. Such an exercise may provide valuable lessons to those places that have just started or have yet to adopt rural governance. This article represents such an attempt by studying a rural regional-governance organization that has existed for half a century: the Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) program of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). The U.S. Congress established the RC&D program in 1962 to address the twin concerns of rural resource conservation and development. It assists communities in meeting a variety of locally identified needs through a system of grassroots organizations called “councils” (Gadsby 2002). The RC&D program now serves all fifty states of the United States, American Samoa, Guam, and the Caribbean (Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands). It has provided “a way for people to plan and implement projects that will make their communities better places to live” (NRCS 2010). The USDA has considered the RC&D program “one of the most successful rural development programs of the Federal Government” (2002). Thus the RC&D experience may provide useful insights into the way rural governance functions and the unique roles it plays in rural development.

To that end, we conducted archival research on the RC&D program, including a detailed analysis of policy documents, Web sites, and reports and drew on John Jacobs’s experience working at an RC&D council in Alabama. To gain insights into how RC&D councils operate, particularly how they deal with local issues, we conducted a content analysis of the 2000 proceedings and the 2009 program of the annual National Association of Resource Conservation & Development Councils (NARC&DC) conferences (Cummings 2000; NARC&DC 2009). We also reviewed the project reports of the RC&D councils in the state of Kansas for the years 2001–2004 and interviewed the RC&D council presidents and coordinators in Kansas.

#### THE IMPETUS FOR REGIONAL GOVERNANCE IN RURAL AMERICA

In the United States, the recently heightened interest in rural governance stems from the need to solve practical problems and to collaborate across sectoral and jurisdictional boundaries. Flaws in the conventional administrative system have

long prompted local governments to look for alternative governing practices. In the established system, governmental units, usually counties or cities, serve as the most common basis for service delivery and decision making. The usefulness of statutory regions has declined over the years, however, because changes in population and in communication and transportation technologies have reduced the historic rationale for county seats and boundaries. Many problems that rural places face, such as lack of jobs, need for public water-system improvements, soil and water conservation, and waste disposal, transcend county boundaries and city limits. Tackling them often requires resources that are not available to individual jurisdictions. Responses to such problems will be more effective if we acknowledge their regional nature and incorporate it into the solutions. The conventional political system does not provide ways for rural communities to coordinate and cooperate. In fact, most state and federal funding mechanisms “prohibit or discourage collaboration across sectors and jurisdictions” (Stark 2006). Not surprisingly, rural issues whose areal extent crosses legal boundaries are often left unaddressed, and those that occur along jurisdictional boundaries in particular may not gain attention because the affected population in either jurisdiction is too small to have the necessary political clout (Porter and Wallis 2002). In the meantime, ongoing socioeconomic and technological changes also create opportunities for rural communities to develop new economic sectors and to increase competitiveness, but taking advantage of such opportunities usually necessitates collaboration among various government units and stakeholders (Drabenstott, Novack, and Weiler 2004).

One potential means of alleviating the limitations of jurisdictional units is to reconfigure them through reorganization and consolidation, but political entities exhibit an inherent resistance to change, especially when it may result in the loss of power for existing interest groups. The existing county boundaries ensured that residents could reach their county seats within a day’s round-trip travel before the automobile era. They have changed little over the last 200 years despite the altered spatial reality imposed first by automobiles and telephones and, more recently, by computers and the Internet. There seems little support for change, as evidenced by persistent resistance to passing resolutions for merging county governments (Porter and Wallis 2002). This approach is therefore not politically feasible. Regional governance provides an alternative for interjurisdictional cooperation and collaborative problem solving.

An increasing awareness of the conventional system’s limitations and the coalescing of several factors prompted the recent push for rural governance in the United States (Fluharty 2004; Stark 2006). The first factor is the ongoing changes in rural America, particularly the emergence of a “new rural paradigm” (Ward and Brown 2009). “Rural” is not synonymous with “agricultural” anymore. Indeed, the economic fortunes of rural America have long depended on manufacturing and other nonfarm sectors instead of the primary sector. Rural policy making must consider this postproductivist nature of the countryside. On the other hand,

the fact that rural residents tend to be less educated, older, and poorer and to experience higher levels of unemployment disadvantages them in economic development (Quigley 2002). In addition to having a generally small and dispersed population, many places in Rural America have also been losing population since the early part of the twentieth century, with concomitant weakening and disappearance of functional organizations (Brown 2002; Norris-Baker 1999; Wuthnow 2005). This leaves residents with a lack of community cohesiveness and limits their ability to effect changes and control their destinies. The diseconomies of scale lead to higher costs, both for providing social services to rural residents and for running private business enterprises, and lack of a modern telecommunications network further reduces rural areas' ability to attract industry (Marshall 2001).

Compounding the issue is the enormous diversity that exists across the rural landscape. Every rural place has a unique, evolving identity with problems that are specific to it. Every place also possesses different strengths and needs, which determine its available options. The conventional approach in the United States relies on sectoral—usually agricultural—and generic policies and programs, particularly at the state and national levels. These policies attempt to address specific situations with prescribed solutions and are applied in a blanket manner throughout a governmental unit's purview. These one-size-fits-all policies ignore the uniqueness of rural places and therefore may not be very effective (MacLeod 2001; Pezzini 2001; Harrison 2006).

Another factor is that, even as rural areas experience the challenges of a declining and aging population, weakening social institutions, and shrinking resources, the federal government has been devolving roles and responsibilities down to state and local governments because of “the increasingly bipartisan conviction that in matters of domestic policy, government closest to the people governs best” and government cutbacks pushed relentlessly by Republican politicians (Eisinger 1998, 314–315). Rural governments increasingly have to compete with urban and suburban areas for federal block grants, but a lack of capacity for grant writing and data analysis puts them at a significant disadvantage (Fluharty 2004). In the meantime, rural areas also have markedly fewer philanthropic resources to tap into. All of these factors are likely to make it increasingly difficult to provide those who choose to remain in rural areas with a viable lifestyle.

Facing the stark reality in rural America, more and more local government officials, community leaders, and scholars are realizing that the existing structure of cities, towns, and counties no longer adequately reflects either the spatial identification of rural citizens or the problems that beset them. In order to deal with their challenges and take advantage of new opportunities, rural areas need to collaborate across public, private, and nonprofit sectors and to pool their resources, talents, and capacities. This realization is even bringing former rivals together (Stark 2006).

Since the 1990s many rural governance experiments have appeared in different parts of the United States (Fluharty 2004; Jonas and Pincetl 2006; Stark 2006;

Hamin and Marcucci 2008; Lu 2011). In contrast to proposals for government consolidation, these practices do not impose a new administrative level over existing governments. Their chief concern is to foster regional partnerships and to achieve the critical mass to solve practical regional problems (Porter and Wallis 2002). Their structures do not rely on governmental entities and are conducive to coalitions among existing legal jurisdictions. In other words, they create a new governance capacity that augments, rather than usurps, existing governmental institutions (Porter and Wallis 2002; Jonas and Pincetl 2006); hence they are politically feasible.

Given the multitude of governance innovations, one key question to ask is, What makes for effective governance? Nancy Stark claims that the practice of effective governance possesses three traits: collaboration across sectors—both public and private—and political boundaries, sustained citizen engagement, and leveraging regional resources (2006). Although many place-specific factors may influence the outcome of any governance interventions (Clark, Southern, and Beer 2007), we believe there is value in examining the experience of existing governance practices. Any discussion of rural governance cannot avoid considering the legacy of older structures (Jonas and Pincetl 2006). Our study focuses on the RC&D program because it is a longtime, nationwide governance model, and many rural development practitioners consider it a success story.

#### THE RESOURCE CONSERVATION AND DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

First authorized by Section 102 of the Food and Agriculture Act of 1962, the RC&D program aims “to accelerate the conservation, development, and utilization of natural resources to improve the general level of economic activity and to enhance the environment and standard of living” in authorized RC&D areas (USDA 1989). In 1964 Orville Freeman, then U.S. Secretary of Agriculture, authorized ten widely dispersed pilot RC&D councils in distressed areas with declining populations and economies (Gadsby 2002). The program was reauthorized in each subsequent farm bill and received permanent authorization in the 2002 farm bill. But the program’s growth was uneven. By 1970 the number of councils had increased to 68, and 125 more were approved during the ensuing decade. Only ten councils were approved in the 1980s, due to the opposition from the Reagan administration, but the 1990s saw 126 councils receiving approval. In 2010 a total of 375 RC&D councils existed across the United States, which covered 85 percent of the U.S. counties and more than 80 percent of the U.S. population (NRCS 2010). Twenty-five applications are still awaiting USDA approval. Many states have a complete RC&D coverage; others are only partially served.

The RC&D program has a simple organizational structure, with grassroots councils being the only governance level mandated and approved by law. Local sponsors who want to work together to find solutions to local problems and to improve their quality of life initiate and sustain RC&D councils. Creation of an RC&D council is an expression of the human agency and existing social capital in a

region. Just about any officially recognized groups—for example, counties, towns, conservation districts, councils of government, regional planning bodies, municipalities, local nonprofit organizations, Native American tribal bodies, and other special districts—can be RC&D sponsors. To be authorized by the USDA, each council must develop and adopt an area plan, which should spell out in detail the characteristics of the council area, its needs, and the sponsors' long-term plan to meet those needs. Sponsors create the area plan with public participation to ensure that the resulting council goals and objectives reflect the priority concerns of the region (USDA 1989; NARC&DC 2002). The area plan becomes the basis for an annual work plan that sets out the projects or measures for the coming year. Each annual plan serves as a timely assessment of a council's progress. Membership in the RC&D council consists of representatives from each of its sponsors but may also include at-large members, such as private organizations and individuals, as councils deem appropriate. In other words, RC&D membership is not completely open to everyone.

Each council has a coordinator who acts as an administrator, manager, and general factotum for the council (USDA 1989). The coordinators are usually, though not always, employees of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) of the USDA, but they carry out the projects of their councils, which makes their position rather unique within the USDA. They refer to their position as being entrepreneurial, which reflects both the enthusiasm they bring to their job and the lack of guidance they receive from their superiors. Although the NRCS officially administered the RC&D program within the USDA until April 2011, when Congress eliminated federal funding for the program, RC&D councils operated at the local level. The NRCS's mandate was to provide support and assistance. Councils chose their projects with minimal program guidance from the NRCS and implemented them with the assistance of USDA agencies and various other public and private organizations.

Member counties, communities, or organizations within a council may propose measures or specific projects that meet their council's goals. They are often multifarious. The council approves and prioritizes them based on such things as need, cost, and order of proposal. Similar measures may be combined. The spatial extent of measures ranges from a single county to several counties or parts of counties and may sometimes involve multiple RC&D councils. The proposing individual or agency frequently is assigned the responsibility for a measure. The role of the council may include soliciting public opinion and support, finding financial resources, developing a stand-alone subcommittee or organization to oversee the measure, coordinating volunteer activities, and serving as the administrative and fiduciary agent. Council members and staff may assume these responsibilities.

RC&D councils function as organizations of organizations. Individuals participate in the RC&D program usually as representatives of other organizations, such as county commissions or soil and water conservation districts. The common

thread running through the RC&D program is cooperation among a variety of private organizations and individuals, as well as governments. The composition of collaborators may vary with the needs of each measure. The RC&D program is successful when it can pull together the necessary components in creating a solution to a local problem.

Consistent with the RC&D mission, councils provide a wide range of educational, technical, and financial assistance for the betterment of rural communities. Councils usually seek to develop partnerships with local and outside groups and organizations, both private and public, for completing various projects and achieving council goals. Such partnership has allowed the program to succeed in projects where governmental agencies have been limited by their political boundaries. By involving the separate governments the RC&D program avoids becoming a threat to these existing institutions. Its ability to identify regions and to avoid jurisdictional conflicts demonstrates its political practicality as a rural intervention strategy.

#### SPATIAL IMAGINARIES OF RC&D COUNCILS

Spatial imaginaries refer to the demarcation of “a local economic space with an imagined community of economic interests” (Jessop 1997, 61). They affect the choice of partners, and more important, the governance capacity and effectiveness of a new institution (Harvey, Hawkins, and Thomas 2011). How a rural governance organization imagines and interprets the regional spaces in which it functions, especially whether it can go beyond sometimes-contested local political boundaries (Pemberton and Goodwin 2010), is therefore a critically important issue to discuss. Our analysis of the rationale behind RC&D council areas across the United States shows that the RC&D approach in forming regions may be best characterized as *ad hoc*. Council sponsors define a region based on common issues or conditions to be addressed. The perceived areal extent of the issues or conditions in hand determines, usually loosely, the regional boundaries. In many cases, the commonly understood natural—especially watershed—and cultural regions appear to shape their spatial imaginaries. As such, council areas do not necessarily follow established political boundaries.

The actual shape of council areas may have also been influenced by the general guidelines for council authorization, which require evidence that a proposed council area both possesses geographical cohesion and is spatially contiguous: “The size and configuration of an area must be based on the sponsors’ assessment of rural development needs, institutional arrangements, and the natural resources of the region. Boundaries of an RC&D area are established on a multijurisdictional basis to make the most efficient use of plans relating to land conservation, water management, community development, and environmental enhancement” (USDA 1989). The RC&D council areas range in size from one county to as many as seventeen counties, with an average of seven or eight counties. Member counties are usually included in their entirety in an RC&D council, but twenty-six divided counties exist. In some of these cases the RC&D council serves only part of a county,

leaving the rest unserved. Other counties are served by two different councils, and in one case three separate RC&D councils serve a single county (Hinsdale County, in Colorado), due to accessibility issues caused by rugged terrain. The RC&D councils not only can extend their spatial imaginary far beyond political boundaries but also have shown an ability to redefine and renegotiate a suitable economic space for manageable intervention. In other words, the RC&D council areas are not necessarily fixed and immutable.

#### SOCIOECONOMIC AND PHYSICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN RC&D COUNCIL AREAS

To illustrate how socioeconomic and physical considerations affected the choice of partners we examined how well the RC&D council areas in Kansas fit within the state's tourism and physiographic regions. Kansas has eleven RC&D councils (including two pending approval and one in the process of forming), which cover 93 of the state's 105 counties (Figure 1). These council areas show considerable regional coherence and tend to correspond to accepted regional delineations, although they do not map neatly onto either tourism or physiographic regions (Figure 2).

The sponsors appeared to have an awareness of their regions, however naive their concept of a region is. Each council area is responsive to its landscape in Carl Sauer's sense; that is, as the manifestation of culture acting on a natural environment. The councils, particularly the earlier ones, display considerable homogeneity in their makeup. Council names often reflect the residents' shared identity. For example, the Flint Hills Council takes up most of the southern portion of the Flint Hills region in the state, whence it derives its name. This is an area of rolling limestone and shale hills that offers great expanses of native grass for grazing. Few towns in the council area have a population of more than 10,000. Agriculture is the primary source of employment. According to the council president, "The decision to add or not add counties to our area has revolved around whether the counties have similar interests, problems, needs, etc. All of the counties in the Flint Hills RC&D area are heavily into cattle production and grazing issues" (Schmidt 2005).

The Western Prairie RC&D area, located in the highest part of the state (see Figure 1), is the sedimentary gift of the Rocky Mountains much farther to the west, with flat to gently rolling terrain. The council area occupies much of the northern lobe of the Ogallala Aquifer in Kansas. The vegetation there consists mostly of short grasses, hence the word "prairie" in the council's name. The population density is low, with widely scattered homesteads and few small towns. No town in the council area has a population of more than 10,000. Ranching is the primary agricultural activity in the region, but irrigated crops are also common. The council area was chosen "by surveying the counties on their common natural resources, economic resources, social resources, and their needs and concerns," according to the council's coordinator (Cheney 2005).





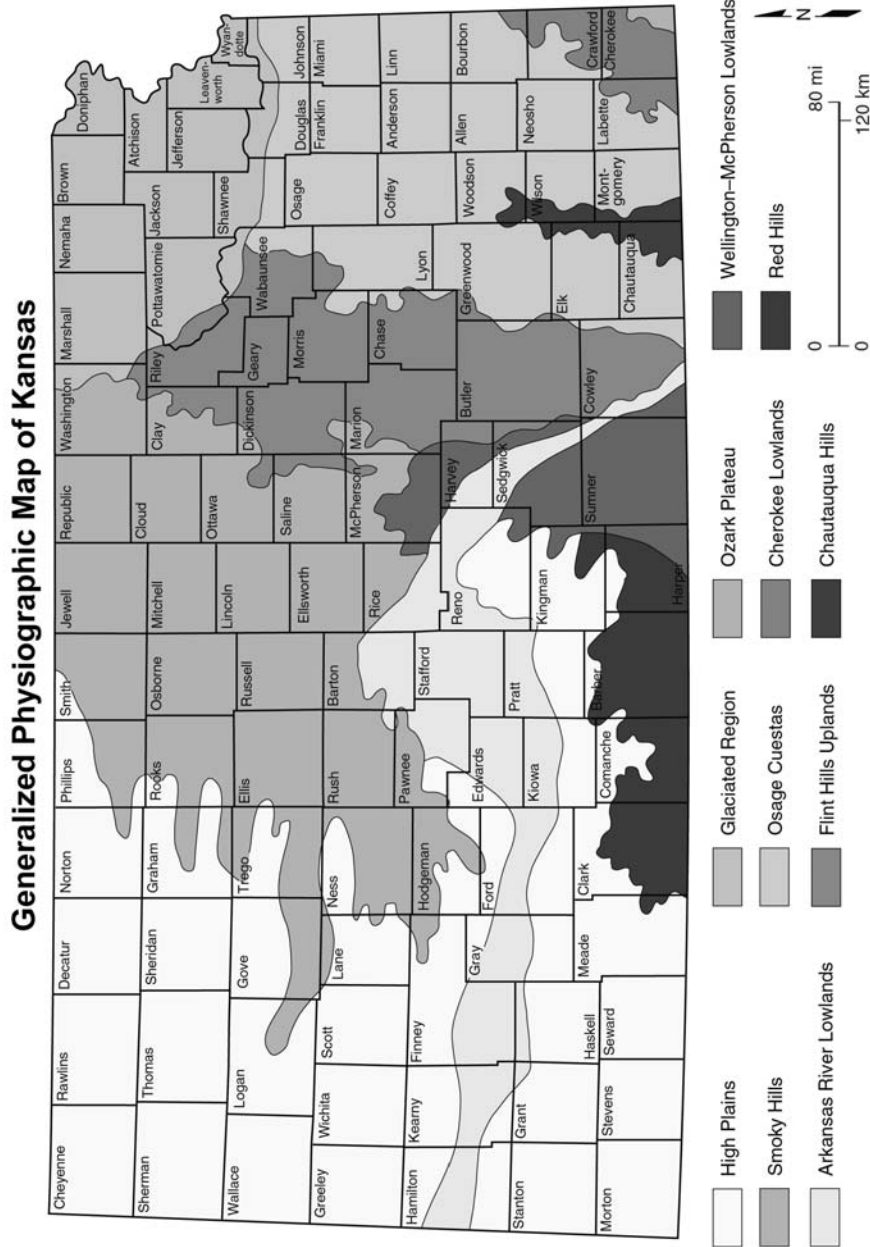


FIG. 2.—The generalized physiography of Kansas. *Source:* Modified from KSG 2007. (Cartography by Max Lu)

The Solomon Valley RC&D area is in the Smoky Hills physiographic region of Kansas. Its name comes from the Solomon River, whose north and south forks run through it. The unifying aspect of the council area is that it is the transition zone from tall grasses to short grasses as one travels westward across Kansas. Its coordinator explains the rationale behind the council area thus: "The six counties in the Solomon Valley RC&D were chosen due to their homogeneous nature. The physical features of the area are all very similar including soils, native plant species, hydrography, topography, and climate. All the counties are the same size and have very similar populations. Culturally, livestock and land management practices are very similar" (Juhl 2005).

Regional governance is most effective when the region in which it functions reflects a common identity and deals with common problems. This appears to be the case in Kansas RC&D councils. The RC&D practices in forming council regions echo Daryl Hobbs's belief that attachment to place can be a motivation for cooperation at the regional level and the efficacy of social organizations depends on the spatial extent of the problem addressed and the recognition of that spatiality (1995).

#### FLEXIBILITY IN RC&D COUNCIL REGIONS

Having the flexibility to adjust the extent of a region to include all of the areas with a common problem or a common identity is an important aspect of regional governance. The RC&D program has shown organizational flexibility in forming councils that are multistate or include divided counties in order to better reflect the regional identity of the areas they serve. Councils have also restructured or renegotiated their regions as needed: Rural issues often are transitory, and the regional organization formed to deal with them should adapt accordingly to recognize changed regional understandings. These practices demonstrate the regional fidelity of the program.

Perhaps the more extreme case of the RC&D program's adherence to a perceived region is found in the formation of councils that include areas in more than one state. Nationwide, seven RC&D councils fall into this category. For example, the Western Wyoming and High Country, Idaho RC&D councils, created in 1967 and 1979, respectively, are adjacent but share areas in two states because the rugged landscape there creates divisions not reflected by linear state borders. In the words of the coordinator for the Western Wyoming RC&D region:

I can tell you the boundaries are based on decisions made by the local people. The reasons for including parts of Bonneville and Caribou counties (the Freedom area residents) in Idaho is because they are in the Salt River watershed area and a large mountain range naturally separates the area from the rest of their counties. The people in that area are part of Star Valley and they interact socially in churches, go to school and do business with other Star Valley residents. They felt most of the issues, concerns and ultimately the solutions were associated with those of the Salt River Watershed and Star Valley. The same logic and reasons applied conversely for the people in the

area of Teton County (Alta and surrounding area of Wyoming) west of the Teton Mountain range. That area is part of the Teton River watershed the bulk of which is in Idaho. Again, many of the concerns and problems are best solved working with others in that river drainage. Hence they are part of the High Country (Idaho) RC&D. (Heaton 2003)

Similarly, the Bear River RC&D region, created in 1966, has three member counties (Rich, Cache, and Box Elder) in Utah and four counties (Bear Lake, Franklin, Caribou, and Oneida) in Idaho. Its unifying factor is the watershed of the Bear River, which drains the region. Its Web site provides a justification for the region: "The common threads that weave our society together in the Bear River Basin give us the ability and reasons to organize and mobilize region-wide resources, communities, and citizens to define, develop and direct projects that are important to the region as a whole" (Bear River RC&D 2003). Not surprisingly, the portion of Caribou County not drained by the Bear River participates in the Western Wyoming RC&D region.

Similar economic challenges may also bring counties in neighboring states into the same council. The Ore-Cal RC&D region includes Klamath and Lake counties in Oregon and Siskiyou and the northwestern part of Modoc County and the western part of Shasta County in California. The council area encompasses 15.5 million acres and serves 265,000 people. The council was formed in response to a shared socioeconomic situation. Organized in 1993, the council initially dealt with the depressed economy resulting from environmental laws that limited harvesting in the region and therefore severely reduced the number of lumbering jobs. Situated between the Pacific Coastal Range, the southern end of the Cascade Range, and the northern range of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, the council area encompasses the region north of Mount Shasta.

In these cases, the RC&D councils must involve two separate NRCS state organizational structures. This requires considerable administrative effort and an ongoing commitment to maintaining communication with each of the states involved. But the councils see the necessity of doing that for the purpose of council efficacy.

Sometimes new councils are derived from preexisting councils in recognition of their unique regional identities, which demonstrates another aspect of the flexibility of council regions. Not only is the creation of these councils a matter of added efficiency, it may also be seen as recognition of the importance of the subregional identity or coherence. For example, the Navajo RC&D region separated from the Little Colorado River RC&D region in 1997. It incorporated lands within the Western Agency of the Navajo Nation. The council's area includes five Navajo Nation soil and water conservation districts and comprises 13 million acres. It covers parts of Coconino, Navajo, and Apache counties in Arizona, McKinley and San Juan counties in New Mexico, and San Juan County in Utah, which makes it the only RC&D region that involves three states. The Hub RC&D region, formed in 1990, serves the land in the region that is not part of the Navajo RC&D Council and the Eastern Agency of the Navajo Nation. Two counties in New Mexico are

divided between the two councils. Both of these councils operate under the burden of mixed jurisdictions in a “checkerboard” pattern, where several federal agencies and a variety of Native American nations control separate portions of the council areas.

In 2001, five counties (George, Hancock, Harrison, Jackson, and Stone) in the Southeast Mississippi RC&D Council joined the southern county (Pearl River) in the Southwest Mississippi RC&D Council to form the Mississippi Coastal Plains RC&D region. Its area constitutes the part of Mississippi that is adjacent to the Gulf Coast and supports a culture and economy distinct from that of the rest of the state.

The ability shown by the RC&D program to adjust to spatial realities both in the formation and reconfiguration of council areas demonstrates an awareness of the importance of an appropriate space as the structural element required for the organization’s success. This responsiveness is an essential component of regional governance, which develops structures that empower local communities by facilitating the creation of organizations and associations whose spatial purview matches the geographical extent of the problems they face (Pemberton & Goodwin 2010; Harvey, Hawkins, and Thomas 2011).

#### THE HYBRID NATURE OF RESOURCE CONSERVATION AND DEVELOPMENT

The shift toward a governance approach in rural areas is often linked to a changing role of the state in rural development from a provider of support and a sole policy maker to a coordinator and manager of various participants through facilitation and negotiation (Marsden 1998; Cloke, Milbourne, and Widdowfield 2000; Little 2001; Wilson 2004). The governmentality critique of the “deceptively benign notion of inclusive community participation” (Edwards, Goodwin, and Woods 2003, 192), especially of partnerships, which have become central to contemporary rural governance, has problematized this discourse. Bob Jessop, for example, argued that governance often operates in the shadow of government (1999, 2002). A state may withdraw direct intervention and instead exercise its power “at a distance” (Murdoch and Ward 1997). Furthermore, the rural governance discourse does not recognize conflict or power differences among partners and is overly optimistic about the role of dialogue in hammering out issues and reaching a community consensus. What may happen in this process is that “the striving for consensus on policy agendas laid down by central government effectively restricts political debate and reaffirms the power of existing state agencies” (Clark, Southern, and Beer 2007, 256).

In many governance cases, financial aid from government is considered critical to program success, and some authors have called this “budgetary shackles” (for example, Wilson 2004). The RC&D program’s dependence on state funding has changed over time. During its early years it received an annual allocation of funds from the then Soil Conservation Service (renamed “Natural Resources Conservation Service” in 1994). These funds were frequently used for water and soil

conservation projects that fulfilled the NRCS's missions. The annual allotment was often distributed within the councils by rotating the county that benefited each year. The 1980 farm bill ended this lump-sum funding, but the federal government still supported each RC&D council financially and the NRCS provided a coordinator, office space, and various other assistance. Congress's decision to eliminate federal funding for the RC&D program in April 2011 as part of its efforts to reduce the budget deficit officially ended the long partnership between RC&D councils and the NRCS. This happened just as RC&D councils across the country were preparing to celebrate their fiftieth anniversary.

The elimination of federal money may prove to be the greatest challenge yet facing the program. To their credit, many RC&D councils over the years have sought outside support for their projects. They became nonprofit organizations, as required by the U.S. tax law in order to accept and manage grants. The federal and state governments, however, were major sources of such grants, and their influence on the operation of RC&D councils cannot be downplayed. Although some RC&D councils are able to generate enough funds to be self-sufficient, many are not and urgently need to secure new sources of funding and new partnerships. Whether they can survive what NARC&DC President Olga Walter characterizes as an "RC&D recession" and how this will change them are yet to be seen (2012).

The RC&D program differs considerably from other USDA programs because of its focus on local directions and control. Whereas most USDA rural programs, such as the Soil and Water Conservation districts and the Cooperative Extension offices, are situated and function within political units or physiographic regions—for example, water management districts—RC&D councils function in, but are not limited to, self-defined and self-chosen regions. A council comes into being when local sponsors come together to request recognition of that region as a council area.

Gene Summers's discussion of the modes of social intervention is useful in understanding the nature of the RC&D program (1986). He distinguished three modes of social intervention to categorize organizational methods—authoritative, client-centered, and radical reform. The first two modes are particularly relevant here. The authoritative mode involves an outside agent that "introduces a change in the belief that the project will improve the community and that it is in line with the self-interest of the community" (p. 362). Three conditions in the relationship between the provider and the recipient are implicit. First, someone other than the recipient usually decides that a problem exists and determines the best way to solve it. Second, the provider's knowledge is presumed, often by both parties, to be superior to the recipient's. Finally, "there exists a social and political climate in which a provider-recipient relationship can be established" (p. 362). Many USDA programs fit this model. Although partnered with a local advisory board, the NRCS, the Cooperative Extension Service (CES) and the Farm Service Agency (FSA) all administer programs that are developed at the federal or state—in the case of the CES—levels. These agencies meet all three authoritative intervention condi-

tions that Summers described. Practices, programs, and projects devolve from a higher, outside level. They are determined with minimal local input, based on the presumption that the provider has greater knowledge. Moreover, these agencies occupy an accepted position as benefactors in the sociopolitical world of rural America.

Client-centered intervention “places great emphasis on political equality and popular sovereignty as the means by which citizens control their own lives” (Summers 1986, 363). This implies that the intervening agent relies on local people to make the choices concerning what is best for them. The second condition of authoritative intervention is not necessarily violated, but the presumption here is that the local community should be a partner in identifying and choosing remedies for their problems. The RC&D program fits the client-centered model. It avoids the problem of experts expropriating the prerogative of local peoples by requiring a bottom-up process of adopting council measures. The RC&D coordinator—usually an employee of the NRCS—may provide information on projects to the council, but the decision to adopt a project is the council’s. The state’s role changes from a “provider of support to one of co-ordinator and manager of various participants in the process of governance,” as Jo Little (2001, 98) pointed out in her discussion of rural governance. In that sense, RC&D councils are like “quangos”—quasi-autonomous nongovernmental organizations—in Britain (Johnson 1979), which combine aspects of government and public organizations, but RC&D councils may be more flexible both in space and purview.

It is, *ipso facto*, difficult for governmentally sponsored organizations to be radical reformers, and certainly neither the USDA nor the RC&D program is such. But we noticed that in some councils the soil conservation board representatives harbor the fear that if membership in the councils becomes too broad, “environmentalists” and other perceived “radicals” will hijack the agenda. This may be a response to the tendency of environmental groups to consider modern, large-scale farming as damaging to nature, which has alienated farmers. But it also has to do with the inherent conservatism of the rural board members. This mind-set inevitably limits the diversity of membership and the breadth of the councils’ impact.

Inevitably, tension exists between the RC&D program and its sponsor—the NRCS—due to their different natures. Being a well-established bureaucracy, the NRCS has a rigid command structure. The RC&D program, on the other hand, functions at only a single level: the council. The RC&D coordinators must report to the NRCS and satisfy an annual planning requirement, but councils made their own decisions. The NRCS culture is one of specific, measurable projects, which mostly address soil and water conservation. Its accomplishments are easily measured by how many feet of terrace were built, how many conservation plans were written, and so on. But RC&D measures, such as forming a shiitake mushroom-growers’ cooperative, developing a local museum, offering a leadership seminar, or coordinating multicounty waste-management programs, are not so easily quan-

tifiable within the NRCS culture and in fact fall well beyond the ken of the NRCS overseers.

The hybrid nature of the RC&D program gives it both advantages and disadvantages. As a service delivery effort, the RC&D program does not suffer from the constraining nature of the USDA's bureaucratic structure. Nor does it face the two problems that William Browne and Louise Swanson identified as affecting other USDA agencies: "First, agencies are guided by program goals rather than by the actual needs of rural communities. Second, rural communities must bend their development priorities to the goals and requirements of specific categorical grants, an accommodation that diverts their scarce development efforts away from more pressing needs" (1995, 489). On the other hand, the RC&D program has not had its own constituency within the USDA bureaucracy. This forced the continuing involvement of RC&D volunteers in lobbying for renewal legislation and budgeting matters in each agricultural budgeting cycle until its permanent authorization in 2002. The RC&D program relies on the cooperation of the major agencies of the USDA as well as other federal, state and private agencies to provide expertise and assistance for their projects.

One problem that the RC&D program sometimes faces is "turf wars" within the USDA and state agencies. These conflicts stem from the culture of the USDA, where the various agencies feel they have to compete for a share of departmental funding. These conflicts may also arise at the local level when local agency offices perceive the RC&D program to be encroaching on their areas of expertise. The RC&D program has been able to avoid many potential conflicts by co-opting these agencies; that is, including their personnel and expertise in the council as members and as partners in the projects. The impact of such turf battles is further reduced by the fact that RC&D councils take on many projects that other organizations consider too small, too broad, or inappropriate. The RC&D program's tendency to deemphasize politics and conflict, particularly to shun active political organizing for change, is typical of regional governance practices in the United States, including more recent initiatives (Jonas and Pincetl 2006).

In their study of housing development, Jonathan Murdoch and Simone Abram stated that governance is compromised by existing state policies and practices and by established power groups (1998). They make the valid and necessary point that the interest of the state often overrides local desires. This is also true in the activities of the RC&D program, where national policies concerning environmental protection and socioeconomic development determine many of the councils' projects. However, the concept of governance as we use it in this article assumes a partnership among state, local, and private interests and does not specify which element will have the greatest influence. The utility in regional governance as shown in the RC&D program is that it provides a mechanism through which local communities can satisfy the dictates of national and state policy while maintaining their autonomy. The RC&D program offers a means of circumventing these conflicts by developing organizational structures that deal with problems spatially by pre-



senting an ostensibly apolitical method for handling them. The constituent governments may accept the regional model developed to solve the problem without loss of prerogative.

#### TOWARD MORE EFFECTIVE RURAL GOVERNANCE

Rural governance has received much recent attention in the United State as an alternative to the traditional, administrative unit-based approach to rural problem solving and decision making. This form of governing rural areas is conducive to interjurisdictional cooperation and partnership building, features that are increasingly important, because many issues facing rural places transcend arbitrarily set and obsolescent political—particularly county—boundaries, and dealing with them effectively requires rural communities to pool their talents and resources. The changing political reality, whereby the federal government is asking local governments to take on more and more responsibilities even as the resources at their disposal shrink, makes the transition to governance more urgent. By engaging a wide range of stakeholders in the decision-making process, the new governance approach can help alleviate the inefficiencies and problems of welfarist state policies, which are prevalent in the traditional system and which suppress individual endeavor (Higgins and Lockie 2002; Higgins and Lawrence 2005). It also promises to be more responsive to the substantial socioeconomic and environmental diversity across the rural landscape.

A number of different governance models have emerged across rural America in the last two decades or so, with partnerships of various kinds being dominant. One key issue that concerns rural policy makers and community leaders is how to make sure that the institutional innovations help achieve rural development objectives. Examining the experience of existing regional governance organizations may offer valuable lessons in how effective rural governance functions. The RC&D program of the USDA provides a unique example of public-private partnership. Though administered through the USDA, the RC&D program is driven by voluntary, grassroots initiatives on the part of interested stakeholders who seek collaborative measures rather than regulatory solutions to regional challenges. Its only organizational structure is the council, which functions in a region defined by the local people who initiated it. Councils choose the projects they undertake within the loose guidelines laid down in their charter. The role of the governments involved is to provide guidance and assistance in accomplishing the councils' projects.

Effectively combining state support and community initiative may be a key to the success of the RC&D program. Indeed, the lack of government support is considered to have contributed to the failure of an earlier effort that was similar to the RC&D program. In the 1950s the USDA established the Rural Area Development Committees program, whose objectives were essentially the same as those of the RC&D program. The initiative for forming committees to oversee rural development was entirely local, too, but it failed in the 1960s. The reasons for its failure

probably include its entirely voluntary nature and the lack of funding and support from within the USDA (Browne and Swanson 1995). The RC&D program, though still voluntary, has enjoyed support from all USDA agencies through a memorandum of understanding. The memorandum's signatories, including the Agricultural Research Service, the Cooperative State Research, the Education and Extension Service, the Economic Research Service, the Natural Resource Conservation Service, and the Rural Development and Rural Utilities Service form a policy advisory board that coordinates cooperation with the RC&D program.

The RC&D councils' ability to identify appropriate regions in which to function and to tap into the council members' shared sense of region contributes to the cohesiveness of the council membership and ultimately to its effectiveness. Although places without RC&D coverage may have other means of carrying out similar projects, the RC&D program exemplifies a way in which jurisdictional units can cooperate and respond to the amorphous and transitory needs of communities at the appropriate spatial scale without creating a contender for political power within a region. The steady growth of the RC&D program since its inception without aggressive support from the NRCS and in the face of opposition from the Reagan administration in the 1980s indicates a recognition of the value of this type of regional governance. Whether the program continues to grow now that federal funding is gone will be interesting to see. Regardless, one lesson from the RC&D experience is that regional governance can be an effective means of both delivering services to specific areas and reducing the waste and frustration brought on by the sectoral application of one-size-fits-all solutions to problems that are spatially unique.

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