



Cooperative Services

The U.S. Department of Agriculture has long been the leading advocate for cooperatives in rural America. The goal of the Cooperative Programs of USDA Rural Development is to promote understanding and use of the cooperative form of business. This is accomplished through education (including a large library of co-op publications and a bimonthly co-op journal), research and statistics, and technical assistance. USDA Rural Development also administers programs that provide financial support to co-ops. While agricultural marketing and supply cooperatives remain a primary focus of USDA's efforts, Rural Development research and co-op educational products help all types of rural cooperatives.

What Is a Cooperative?

User-owned cooperatives process and market products, purchase production supplies or consumer goods, provide housing and credit, build and operate rural utilities, and provide other services needed by rural residents. By working together for their mutual benefit in cooperatives, farmers, ranchers, and other rural residents are often able to reduce costs, obtain services that might otherwise be unavailable, and achieve greater returns for their products.

Cooperatives, both rural and urban, have played an important role in the American economy for more than 100 years. A recent, USDA-sponsored study found that there are 29,000 U.S. cooperatives; nearly one-third of the population belongs to some type of cooperative. Application of the cooperative business structure in rural economies is virtually limitless.

Research

Cooperative Programs conducts research to provide a knowledge base to help cooperatives deal with changing markets and business trends. Studies include financial, structural, managerial, policy, member gover-

nance, legal, and social issues, as well as various other economic activities of cooperatives. Research is designed to have direct application to current and emerging requirements of cooperatives.

A major challenge is to analyze industry structure and cooperative operational practices to determine the changes required to maintain or achieve a producer-oriented marketing system. Research studies have focused on capitalization plans used by cooperatives, identification of new niche markets for cooperatives, and opportunities and obstacles cooperatives face when exporting goods overseas.

Education and Information

The Cooperative Marketing Act of 1926 mandates that USDA "...promote the knowledge of cooperative principles and practices and cooperate in promoting such knowledge with educational and marketing agencies, cooperative associations, and others." To meet this goal, USDA provides a wide range of cooperative education publications, materials, and programs.

Cooperative Programs maintains a storehouse of information about cooperatives which it makes available to the public through more than 150 research reports, educational publications, and videos covering all aspects of cooperative operations. A bimonthly magazine, *Rural Cooperatives*, reports significant achievements by cooperatives and highlights of Cooperative Programs research, technical assistance, and educational activities. To access USDA's co-op library, visit: http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/BCP_Coop_LibraryOfPubs.htm.

Co-op Statistics

Cooperative statistics are collected to detect growth trends and changes in structure and operations of the Nation's farmer-owned cooperatives. Data help identify

and support research and technical assistance activities. This information is used extensively by legislative and executive branches of government in formulating agricultural and cooperative-related policy.

Co-op Development and Technical Assistance

Cooperative Programs has limited staff at its national office and in some States that can provide help in the formation of new cooperatives and in providing other types of technical assistance to existing co-ops. It often makes referrals to other service providers in each State – including co-op development centers – that can offer this type of assistance.

Financial Programs

Cooperative Programs also administers a number of grant programs that can provide financial help to cooperatives. These include:

- Value-Added Producer Grants (VAPG). These grants may be used for planning activities and for working capital for marketing value-added agricultural products and for farm-based renewable energy. Eligible applicants are independent producers, farmer and rancher cooperatives, agricultural producer groups, and majority-controlled producer-based business ventures. For more information, visit: http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/BCP_VAPG.html.
- Rural Cooperative Development Grant Program (RCDG). Rural Cooperative Development Grants are made for establishing and operating centers for cooperative development for the primary purpose of improving the economic condition of rural areas through the development of new cooperatives and improving operations of existing cooperatives. For more information, visit: http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/BCP_RCDG.html.
- Small Socially-Disadvantaged Producer Grant (SSDPG). This program provides technical assistance to small, socially-disadvantaged agricultural producers through eligible cooperatives, co-op development centers, and associations of cooperatives. For more information, visit: http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/BCP_SSDPG.html.
- Rural Business Opportunity Grants (RBOG). Rural communities with acute needs can receive technical assistance aimed at promoting sustainable economic development through business development. Eligible applicants include cooperatives with members who are primarily rural residents. For more information, visit: http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/BCP_RBOG.html.

- Delta Health Care Services Grant Program. This program provides financial assistance to address the continued, unmet health needs in the Mississippi River Delta Region through cooperation among health care professionals, institutions of higher education, research institutions, and other entities in the Delta Region. For more information, visit: http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/BCP_DeltaHealthCare.html

For More Information

For further information or assistance for cooperatives, contact:

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