



**WRDC** WESTERN RURAL  
DEVELOPMENT CENTER

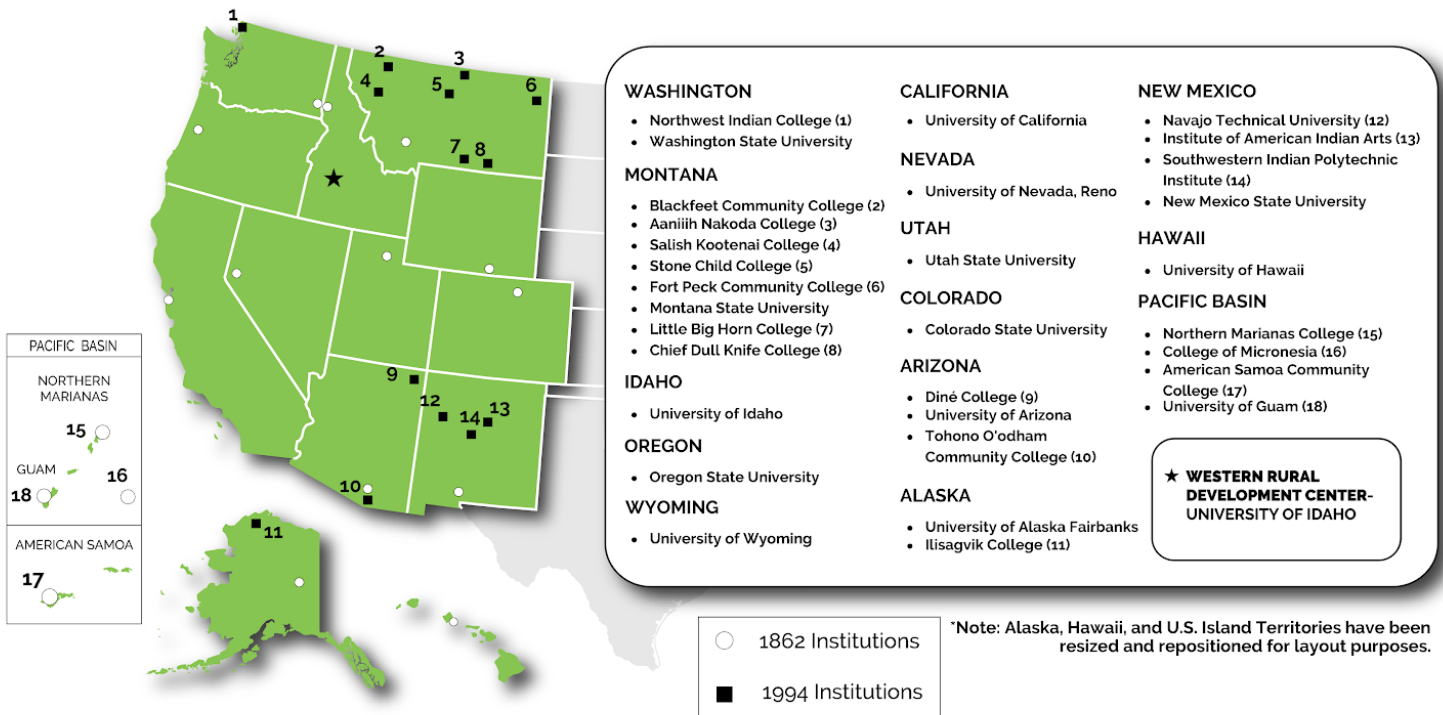
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# ANNUAL REPORT 2025

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# ABOUT THE WRDC



The Western Rural Development Center (WRDC) connects the research and educational outreach capacity of the West's 31 land-grant institutions with the needs of rural communities, local leaders, entrepreneurs, and agricultural producers to address the region's most pressing development challenges. Established under the Rural Development Act of 1972, the WRDC leads multi-state initiatives that foster collaboration, knowledge exchange, and workforce development. Serving as a vital hub, the Center translates research into practical strategies, offers technical assistance, and strengthens the capacity of research and Extension professionals, all while ensuring alignment with federal priorities. Through strategic partnerships and a focus on innovation, the WRDC advances rural prosperity, resilience, and long-term sustainability across the Western United States.

# LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR

The past year marked a turning point for rural communities across the West, and for the Western Rural Development Center.

Rural places are navigating overlapping pressures: rising housing costs, workforce shortages, climate-driven disruptions, and growing demands on already-stretched local institutions. At the same time, shifts in higher education and public funding are forcing Extension and research programs to do more with less, while still demonstrating clear, on-the-ground impact. Against this backdrop, 2025 called for focus, presence, and a renewed connection to our core mission: strengthening the economic vitality and livability of rural communities through research that works in practice.

That mission guided our work throughout the year.

In 2025, WRDC moved deliberately beyond activity toward impact. By engaging directly with communities and across land-grant institutions, we rebuilt relationships and translated research into tools partners could use. One example came from our renewed engagement with Tribal Colleges and rural Extension professionals. In-person visits surfaced a clear need for peer connection, directly shaping new networking efforts that now link practitioners across states—turning isolation into collaboration.

Across our research portfolio, the emphasis remained consistent: connect evidence to action. WRDC-supported projects examined how housing affordability shapes rural livability, how poverty and economic inequality affect community resilience, how outdoor recreation and agritourism can drive rural economies, and how producers and communities adapt to environmental and economic change. In each case, findings were intentionally designed for use—informing Extension programming, guiding local decision-making, and supporting communities as they plan for the future.



**Paul Lewin, Ph.D.**, *Executive Director*

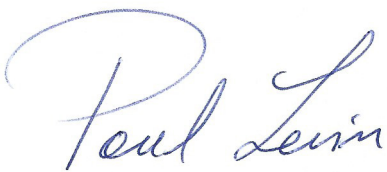
This work extended beyond publication, showing up in workshops, policy and research briefs, conversations, and partnerships.

None of this happened alone. Our progress reflects the creativity and persistence of WRDC staff, the leadership of researchers and Extension professionals across the West, and the trust of community partners who shared their time, experience, and insight. We are deeply grateful to the funders and collaborators who made this work possible. Community members shared their knowledge, priorities, and lived experience; researchers and Extension professionals translated evidence into practice; and funders entrusted WRDC with resources to support meaningful, place-based work. We approached this responsibility with careful stewardship, leveraging investments to strengthen regional collaboration and extend the reach of research beyond individual projects. The result is work that reflects local context while also producing decision-relevant insights that inform programs, policies, and investments across the West.

We also recognize that the year was not without challenges. Capacity constraints, geographic distance, and uncertainty across higher education required us to be intentional about where and how we invested our energy. These realities sharpened our focus and reinforced an important lesson: meaningful impact comes not from doing more, but from doing the right work, in partnership, and with care.

Looking ahead, we are building on that clarity. In the coming year, WRDC will continue strengthening regional networks, deepening engagement with rural and Tribal communities, and aligning research more closely with Extension and community development priorities. We see growing opportunities to scale what works, learn across states, and support rural communities as they navigate change on their own terms. This report tells the story of a year grounded in listening, learning, and reconnecting. We invite you to explore it and to stay engaged as we continue this work together.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Paul Lewin". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Paul" being larger and more prominent than the last name "Lewin".

Paul Lewin  
Executive Director

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# **BUILDING RESILIENT WESTERN RURAL COMMUNITIES**

# HOUSING AT THE HEART OF RURAL LIVABILITY

In many rural communities, the signs are subtle but persistent: older residents struggling to remain in homes no longer built for aging bodies, young families priced out of limited rental stock, and workers commuting farther as housing options near town disappear. Housing isn't just a roof; it's the backbone of whether a place can hold onto its people.

New work supported by the WRDC is taking a closer look at how housing security underpins rural livability—and why communities struggling to solve housing challenges often find their economic, health, and workforce goals slipping out of reach.

## At a Glance:

- Housing security emerged as a top need in WRDC's 2025 regional survey
- Rural communities face rising cost burdens and limited housing supply
- Small towns consistently score lowest on housing availability in livability metrics
- WRDC is developing a Community Livability framework with housing at its core
- New research and partnerships aim to translate data into local action

## A Growing Challenge Across Rural America

Housing rarely shows up alone. When rents rise, workers commute farther. When homes aren't accessible, older residents are forced to move. When supply tightens, wages inflate, and small employers lose staff they can't replace.

WRDC's recent region-wide needs assessment confirmed what many Extension professionals already hear in the field: housing security is one of the most urgent challenges facing rural communities today. National data echo that concern. According to Harvard's Joint Center for Housing Studies, record numbers of Americans now spend more than 30 percent of their income on rent and utilities, leaving less for food, healthcare, and transportation.



In rural areas, these pressures intersect with demographic realities. Populations are aging and they increasingly require homes with basic visitability features: step-free entryways, accessible layouts, and designs that support aging in place. Yet much of the existing rural housing stock was never built with these needs in mind. At the same time, new construction remains scarce, and affordable options are even scarcer.

Small-town livability data tell a consistent story. An analysis of AARP Livability Index scores for more than 5,000 towns with fewer than 25,000 residents shows that housing availability and conditions routinely lag behind other factors such as transportation, health, and civic engagement. Research also points to strong links between housing insecurity and health outcomes, underscoring that livability challenges rarely exist in isolation.

## **How WRDC Is Responding**

Rather than treating housing as a standalone issue, the WRDC is approaching it as a core component of rural livability, one that intersects with health, economic opportunity, and community resilience.

To better define what “livability” means in rural contexts, the Center convened insights from national organizations like AARP, academic research, focus groups, and practitioners in the field. The result is a region-wide Community Livability framework currently undergoing content validation. Designed for Extension professionals and local leaders, the framework provides shared language and structure for assessing needs and building capacity at the community level.

Housing is also central to WRDC’s contribution to Rural Livability in the United States, a forthcoming national volume scheduled for release in 2026. The WRDC-authored chapter, *Whose Home on the Range: Housing in Rural America*, examines how financial markets, public policy, and rural realities interact to shape housing availability and affordability. Grounded in both research and on-the-ground experience, the chapter offers tools and perspectives communities can use to better align housing types and price points with local incomes and needs.

## **Why Housing Matters for Livability—and the Economy**

Housing diversity, homes that are affordable, accessible, and suited to different life stages, is a cornerstone of livable communities. AARP’s Livability Economy framework identifies housing diversity as one of four outcomes essential to strong local economies.

Research from Opportunity Insights further shows that communities with varied and

accessible housing options experience greater social mobility and economic opportunity. A stable housing supply supports workforce recruitment and retention, reduces extreme population swings, and helps moderate wage inflation. Over time, it can even lower the cost of delivering goods and services while strengthening property values.

In rural places, where margins are often thin and resources limited, these dynamics matter deeply.

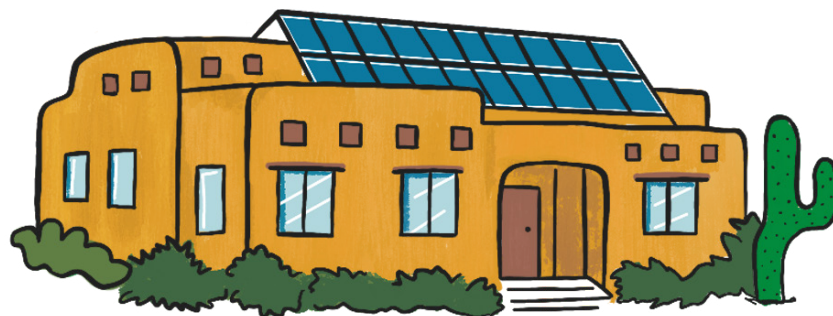
## What is Next

Once validated, the WRDC Community Livability framework, anchored by its housing component, will be supported by practical resources, case studies, and best practices. The Center's Baseline Needs Assessment highlights WRDC's role as a convener, particularly in building networks across Western states.

Future efforts may include regional learning sessions where communities share strategies for addressing housing shortages, infrastructure gaps, and transportation challenges. Stakeholders also recommended cross-state learning groups focused on shared issues, as well as closer alignment between WRDC research and Extension and community development priorities.

At the same time, WRDC sees a need for continued research grounded in lived experience. Understanding how housing insecurity shapes daily life—and how it interacts with other dimensions of livability—will be essential to developing solutions that are both effective and locally relevant.

Housing may be only one piece of rural livability, but without it, the rest becomes much harder to sustain.



# RIDING THE RANGE FOR RESILIENCE

On a summer morning in the West, a range rider heads out before the heat sets in. The work is quiet, physical, and deceptively complex, tracking cattle across rugged allotments, reading the landscape for signs of predators, watching animal behavior that can signal stress long before a loss is visible. For many livestock producers, range riding has become one of the few tools available to navigate a growing tension: sustaining working lands while living alongside expanding predator populations.

With support from the WRDC, PhD candidate Rae Nickerson and her advisor, Dr. Julie K. Young at Utah State University, are digging into what range riding actually does—and what it doesn't—to help rural food systems endure environmental, economic, and social pressure.

## At a Glance

- The project evaluates whether and how range riding supports resilient livestock systems
- This is the first large-scale, data-driven analysis linking range riding to livestock losses, stress, and reproduction
- Researchers are using field data, wildlife GPS tracking, producer surveys, interviews, and peer-led workshops
- The project can improve ranch viability, predator coexistence, and the future of working landscapes in the West

## Measuring What's Been Mostly Assumed

Range riding is often promoted as a way to reduce livestock-predator conflict, but until now, evidence has been largely anecdotal. This project set out to change that by systematically measuring both direct losses, such as depredations and injuries, and indirect losses tied to stress, including cattle behavior, return rates, and pregnancy outcomes.



Researchers collected detailed field data across diverse ranching operations, paired with game camera images, habitat conditions, and GPS-collar data from gray wolves and grizzly bears provided by state wildlife agencies. The goal wasn't just to count losses, but to understand what's happening biologically and behaviorally when predators and livestock share the same space.

## What the Early Data Suggest

Preliminary results tell a more nuanced story than expected.

Increased riding effort—longer durations and more night riding—was associated with higher detected conflict. But that doesn't necessarily mean more conflict is happening. Instead, researchers believe riders are simply finding losses and injuries that might otherwise go unnoticed. In other words, range riders may be improving detection rather than driving outcomes.

Some findings challenged initial assumptions. Longer ride durations and night hours were linked to lower cattle return and pregnancy rates, raising questions about whether time spent riding is the right measure of effectiveness. Riders may spend hours commuting to remote allotments or navigating difficult terrain without being near cattle. It's also possible that riders are deployed more heavily in areas already experiencing high conflict, making it harder to separate cause from response.

The takeaway so far: range riding is not a simple plug-and-play solution. How, when, and where riders operate matters—and those details are deeply context-specific.

## Learning from Producers, Not Just Data

A defining feature of the project is that producers weren't just subjects; they were collaborators.

Interviews revealed that most ranchers can't afford range riders without outside support. Even so, many still want them—not only for predator deterrence, but for the added benefits: faster detection of problems, better communication across neighboring ranches, and an extra set of skilled eyes on livestock health.

Producers were clear about what works. Effective range riders need cattle experience, not just wildlife training. They need local trust, strong communication skills, and time, often one to two full seasons, to truly learn a landscape and a herd. Workshops echoed this, emphasizing that good range riding leads to healthy cattle, strong pregnancy rates, sustainable forage, and better relationships among all involved.

Flexibility emerged as a theme again and again. What works on one allotment may fail on another.

## Why This Matters for Rural Communities

For rural communities, livestock operations aren't just businesses—they're anchors. When ranches struggle, the effects ripple outward, touching local economies, land stewardship, and cultural identity.

This research doesn't promise a silver bullet. What it offers instead is clarity: better information about what range riding can realistically achieve, what it requires to operate effectively, and where investments might make the greatest difference. It also underscores the value of producer-led knowledge sharing and the need for training, accreditation, and sustained funding if range riding is going to remain a viable tool.

## What is Next

The team is awaiting additional wildlife GPS data and physiological stress results, while continuing to analyze cattle behavior from camera images. Once complete, findings will be shared directly with producers and riders first, closing the loop between research and practice, before being translated into Extension materials and academic publications.

Out on the range, the work continues. And with better data in hand, rural communities may be better equipped to decide how range riding fits into a future where resilience depends as much on relationships and local knowledge as it does on science.



# FROM TRAILHEADS TO FARM GATES: RETHINKING OUTDOOR RECREATION AND AGRITOURISM IN THE WEST

On a summer weekend in the West, trailheads fill early, and farm gates stay open late. Visitors come for hiking, rafting, u-pick berries, corn mazes, tasting rooms, and wide-open landscapes that promise both escape and connection. Outdoor recreation and agritourism have become economic lifelines for many rural communities—but the systems supporting them are uneven, fragmented, and often harder to navigate than they need to be.

## At a Glance:

- Outdoor recreation is a major economic driver, but Extension's role varies widely across states
- A multi-state research team is mapping recreation metrics and perceptions of Extension across the West
- A second project is developing an AI-powered chatbot to support agritourism decision-making
- Both efforts focus on access to data, expertise, and practical support

## Defining Extension's Role Outdoors

Outdoor recreation touches nearly every corner of the Western region, shaping local economies, land-use decisions, and community identity. Yet Extension's involvement in recreation and tourism remains inconsistent, well established in some states, barely defined in others.

In 2025, the WRDC funded a mini-grant to a multi-state research team led by Dr. Jake Powell from Utah State University Extension to take a closer look. Their goal is straightforward but overdue: understand how outdoor recreation and tourism function across states, and how Extension fits—or doesn't—into that picture.



The team is assembling a comparative, state-by-state portrait of the outdoor recreation economy using publicly available data. At the same time, they are conducting interviews with recreation and tourism leaders and Extension directors across the region to explore attitudes, expectations, and perceived gaps.

Early conversations point to a common theme: outdoor recreation is widely recognized as essential to rural economies, but Extension's potential role as a connector, convener, or technical resource is not always clear. By surfacing these differences, the project aims to provide states with a shared framework to strengthen Extension's engagement where it matters most.

The findings will be released in 2026 through an interactive story map and report hosted on the WRDC website, designed to be as useful for practitioners as informative for policymakers.

## **Bringing Agritourism Expertise to the Screen**

If the outdoor recreation project focuses on clarifying roles, the second WRDC-funded effort focuses on removing barriers.

Agritourism operators often face highly specific questions: zoning rules, liability concerns, visitor management, and marketing strategies. Answers exist, but they are scattered across agencies, documents, and experts, making them difficult to access in real time. Dr. Xue Dong at Colorado State University is tackling that problem with an unexpected tool: artificial intelligence (AI).

Their project focuses on developing an AI-powered agritourism chatbot to serve as a decision-support tool for rural business owners and Extension professionals. Behind the scenes, the system uses advanced deep learning techniques to deliver context-aware, practical guidance tailored to agritourism needs.

While the technical work is still underway, the project has already drawn global attention. In late 2025, the team presented their work at the Conference on Neural Information Processing Systems (NeurIPS), one of the world's leading AI conferences. There, the project sparked conversations about how AI can expand Extension's reach, especially in rural areas where access to expertise is limited.

What stood out in those discussions wasn't the technology itself, but its purpose: translating complex information into usable guidance for people making real-world decisions.

## A Shared Thread: Access and Adaptation

At first glance, mapping outdoor recreation metrics and building an AI chatbot may seem worlds apart. In practice, they are deeply connected.

Both projects ask the same underlying question: How can Extension better support rural communities navigating rapidly changing recreation and tourism economies?

One project works at the systems level, clarifying roles, expectations, and opportunities across states. The other works at the point of need, putting timely, relevant information directly into the hands of business owners and practitioners.

Together, they reflect WRDC's broader commitment to innovation that is grounded in place, responsive to community needs, and focused on practical outcomes.

As outdoor recreation and agritourism continue to evolve, these efforts offer a glimpse of what's possible when data, technology, and Extension expertise are aligned—not just to keep up with change, but to help rural communities shape it.



# WHEN FIRE MOVES THE ECONOMY— AND WHEN IT DOESN'T

In the West, wildfire season is no longer a season. It's a constant backdrop, shaping landscapes, air quality, and increasingly, the decisions people and businesses make about where to stay and where to go.

But while flames and smoke travel freely across county and state lines, their economic effects don't. New research supported by the WRDC shows a more complicated story: wildfires do push businesses to relocate—but not everywhere, and not in the same way.

Together, two WRDC-supported studies reveal a critical divide in how wildfire pressure reshapes economies across the West, highlighting both the relative stability of rural places and the importance of community-driven approaches to building long-term resilience.

## At a Glance:

- Wildfires are reshaping economic decisions across the Western U.S., influencing whether businesses stay, move, or rebuild
- About 10% of business relocations following wildfires are directly tied to physical fire exposure — not smoke
- Relocation responses appear in urban and non-rural areas, while rural businesses largely stay put
- Many rural firms depend on land, natural resources, and local supply chains, making relocation costly or impractical
- Community-led wildfire knowledge and collaboration outperform top-down solutions in preparing rural communities strengthening resilience
- Effective wildfire policy must balance economic realities with locally grounded fire practices

## Tracking Business Movement in a Fire-Prone West

Using detailed firm-level data, PhD student Richard Acquah-Sarpong and his advisor, Dr. Yong Chen from Oregon State University, examined how businesses respond when a wildfire hits close to home. By linking establishment locations to measures of direct wildfire exposure and indirect smoke exposure, the study followed firms over time to see if, and how quickly, they moved.

The results were striking. In the year following direct wildfire exposure, business relocation out of affected areas rose significantly. About 10.4 percent of all observed business relocations could be attributed directly to wildfire exposure, not smoke conditions. Fires didn't just nudge firms to move—they accelerated relocation decisions already on the table.

Distance mattered, too. Some businesses moved across county lines, while others relocated within the same county. Direct wildfire exposure increased out-of-county moves by roughly 11 percent and within-county moves by nearly 15 percent, showing that fire can disrupt both local and regional economic patterns.

*But there was an important exception.*

### A Rural Difference

Despite facing the same flames and smoke, rural counties showed no measurable increase in business relocation following wildfire exposure.

That stability may look surprising at first, but it makes sense on closer inspection. Many rural businesses are deeply tied to place, relying on land-based resources, local supply chains, and industries like agriculture, forestry, and mining. For these firms, relocation isn't just expensive—it's often impractical.

Urban and non-rural establishments, by contrast, tend to face lower fixed relocation costs and have access to denser alternative markets. When wildfire hits, they're better positioned to move quickly.

The takeaway isn't that rural communities are unaffected by wildfire. It's that their resilience operates differently, and often invisibly.



## Resilience Built from the Ground Up

A second WRDC-supported study helps explain why. Through interviews and fieldwork with rural fire practitioners, Indigenous fire crews, scientists, land managers, and community leaders, Dr. Emily Schlickman from the University of California, Davis, explored how rural communities understand and respond to fire.

What she found challenges one-size-fits-all solutions. Fire means different things in different places. Cultural burning, prescribed fire, conservation goals, and suppression strategies intersect in complex and deeply local ways.

Rather than relying solely on top-down policy responses, communities that co-create fire knowledge and practice are better positioned to adapt. Shared language, trust across sectors, and hands-on stewardship emerged as key ingredients for long-term resilience.

This work is now informing the development of an outreach toolkit designed for rural residents, Extension professionals, and fire practitioners—supporting collaboration before the next fire arrives.

## What This Means for the West

Taken together, the research paints a nuanced picture. Wildfires disrupt economic systems, but their impacts vary sharply across places and sectors. Rural economies may appear stable in relocation data, yet that stability often reflects deeper ties to land, culture, and community rather than insulation from risk.

For policymakers and practitioners, the implications are clear:

- Fire-resilient policy must remain flexible enough to reflect local economies and cultures
- Community-based approaches strengthen both ecological and economic resilience
- Rural stability in the face of wildfire depends as much on relationships and knowledge as it does on infrastructure

In a region where fire is an ever-present force, resilience isn't just about recovery. It's about understanding when and why some places hold fast while others move on.



# **DRIVING INNOVATION THROUGH RESEARCH & EXTENSION**

# POSTDOCTORAL RESEARCHERS

## Meet Two of the Faces Behind the Research

Investing in emerging scholars strengthens the WRDC's capacity to serve rural communities. This year, we were proud to welcome two postdoctoral researchers whose expertise, energy, and commitment expanded the Center's ability to generate timely, applied research. Their work not only deepened our understanding of rural challenges and opportunities, but also advanced new knowledge that partners across the West can immediately put into practice.



**Nastasya Winckel**  
WRDC Postdoctoral Researcher  
June 2024-June 2025



**Ahsanul Kibria**  
WRDC Postdoctoral Researcher  
July 2025-June 2026

*If you are interested in becoming a postdoctoral fellow at the WRDC, please contact us at [wrdc@uidaho.edu](mailto:wrdc@uidaho.edu).*

# 2025 WRDC GRANT-FUNDED PROJECTS

## **USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture**

*Ensuring Digital Access for Rural Residents and Underserved Populations.*

**\$649,994.00**

**Awarded: September 1, 2024.**

**Grant program funding terminated: May 14, 2025**

**Summary:** The expansion of broadband and the digitalization of the economy offer opportunities for rural and underserved communities to access distant resources. However, to fully leverage these opportunities, it is crucial that these communities are equipped with digital readiness skills. This project strengthens digital readiness in rural and underserved communities, enabling them to benefit from broadband-driven economic opportunities.

Research identifies the factors that enable successful broadband-based entrepreneurship and remote work. These insights support Extension programs in providing technical assistance, training, and support for e-commerce, remote work, and internet adoption among underserved groups, including older adults and people with disabilities. The overall goal is to build more inclusive, resilient, and economically sustainable rural communities.

## **USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture**

*Increasing Profitability of Women-Operated Farms And Ranches in The US & Idaho: Implications of Resource Access & Enterprise Diversification*

**\$649,997.00**

**Awarded: September 1, 2024.**

**Grant program funding terminated: July 21, 2025**

**Summary:** This project seeks to increase the prosperity of women farmers, their families, and rural communities through integrated research and extension activities. The research combines qualitative and quantitative methods to examine changes from 2017 to 2022 in women farm operators' access to key agricultural resources, profitability gaps by gender, race, and ethnicity, the influence of farming partners on access, diversification, and profitability, and the factors supporting financial success and succession planning among women meeting their financial goals.

Complementing this work, extension activities expand and strengthen University of Idaho Extension farm management programs by providing services that improve profitability and succession planning, delivering business planning and risk management education for beginning and small to medium-scale women farmers, enhancing service providers' understanding of women operators' needs, and sharing best practices, resources, and training tools to better support women in agriculture.

# WHAT IT REALLY TAKES TO LEAVE POVERTY

For families living on the economic edge, the advice is familiar: start a business, work more hours, rely on public assistance until you're back on your feet. Each strategy promises mobility. Each carries risk. And none, on its own, guarantees lasting stability.

To understand what actually helps families leave poverty and stay out, WRDC researchers examined decades of national household data, tracing how income, work, assets, and public supports shape economic mobility over time. The research looks not at one solution, but at how different pathways interact—and where they break down.

The central finding is deceptively simple: poverty is not just about income. It is about time, assets, and whether short-term gains can become long-term stability.

## At a Glance:

For policymakers and practitioners, the implications are clear:

- Short-term income gains rarely lead to lasting exits from poverty
- Entrepreneurship can work—but only over the long term and for a limited group
- Safety nets help families exit poverty, but many fall back without asset growth
- Persistent poverty is driven by structural and asset-based barriers, not effort alone

Income matters, but its source matters just as much. When WRDC researchers looked at entrepreneurship, they found that leaving wage work for self-employment often reduces earnings in the short term. For low-income workers, this dip is especially dangerous. Business failure entails not only financial losses but also psychological and social costs that families in poverty are least able to absorb.

Yet the data also show that entrepreneurship is not uniformly negative. Among wage-earning poor workers who remain self-employed for many years, incomes begin to recover. After roughly six years, some long-term entrepreneurs catch up to their salaried peers, suggesting that sustained self-employment can help overcome certain poverty-related disadvantages. The risk is high, the payoff slow—but for a small group with staying power, entrepreneurship can eventually work.

Public assistance follows a similar pattern of short-term help paired with long-term

uncertainty. Safety net programs make it more likely that families exit poverty in the moment. But many households that rely on benefits at the point of exit are more likely to return to poverty later. Benefit levels often fall short of building stability, and eligibility rules can discourage income growth before families are truly secure. The result is movement, but not momentum.

What connects these findings is the role of assets. When researchers shifted from income-based measures of poverty to an asset-based lens, a clearer divide emerged. Some households experience temporary poverty, triggered by job loss, illness, or economic shocks. These families often possess enough financial, educational, or social capital to recover. Others face persistent poverty, marked by chronic shortages of assets that limit their ability to convert income gains, whether from entrepreneurship or public assistance, into lasting security.

This distinction explains why so many poverty exits fail to stick. Without sufficient assets, such as savings, education, reliable health care, or access to opportunity, even successful strategies stall. Income rises, benefits taper off, or businesses falter, and families slide back to where they started.

Taken together, the research challenges the idea that any single pathway can solve poverty. Entrepreneurship without long-term support is fragile. Safety nets without asset-building are temporary. And income gains without structural change rarely last.

## What's Next

The findings point toward a more durable approach: policies that pair income support with asset-building, reduce the risks of long-term entrepreneurship, and recognize the difference between temporary hardship and structural poverty. For families to move forward and remain there, mobility must be built over time, not assumed when income rises.



# WHAT RURAL STUDENTS NEED TO SUCCEED— AND WHAT THE DATA NOW SHOWS

For many rural students, college begins with a long drive, sometimes hours away from home. It also begins with a set of quiet tradeoffs: working extra hours to cover costs, skipping internships that don't pay, navigating campuses far from family and familiar support. None of these choices looks dramatic on its own. Together, they shape who persists, who thrives, and who sees a future after graduation.

New research from the WRDC and the [AREAS \(Advancing Research on the Experiences of America's Students\)](#) project shows that rural students are not falling behind because of lower motivation or ability, but because they face higher costs, fewer career signals, and thinner support systems. The findings point to practical ways colleges and universities can redesign programs so rural students don't have to succeed by overcoming barriers alone.

## At a Glance:

- Rural students face higher opportunity and financial costs for career-building activities
- Lower confidence about employment reflects limited networks and employer exposure, not skill gaps
- Decisions to stay in or leave rural communities hinge on belonging, connection, and opportunity
- Rural students report higher loneliness and mental health challenges than non-rural peers
- Basic needs insecurity remains a major barrier to persistence and completion

## When Opportunity Comes at a Price

Career development is often framed as a matter of student initiative. The AREAS data tells a more complicated story. For many rural students, participating in internships, advising, or work-based learning means sacrificing paid work, family responsibilities, or time spent commuting long distances. These are not marginal sacrifices. They are rational calculations shaped by higher opportunity costs and fewer local options.

When students opt out, it is often read as disengagement. In reality, it reflects how institutions have structured opportunity, assuming flexibility, disposable income, and proximity that many rural students simply do not have.

## Confidence Is Built Through Connection

Career readiness is about more than résumés and skills. It is also about whether students believe their skills will translate into real opportunities.

Across institutions, rural students report lower confidence in their employability. The difference is not academic preparation. It is access: fewer professional networks, fewer chances to interact with employers, fewer signals that help students understand how their experiences are valued beyond campus.

When colleges invest in mentorship, embed career learning into coursework, and lower the cost of participation, those confidence gaps narrow. When they do not, uncertainty follows students into graduation.

## Staying, Leaving, and the Pull of Place

The same dynamics shape where students imagine their futures.

Decisions to stay in or return to rural communities are rarely driven by wages alone. Students who feel connected to people, to place, to purpose are more likely to see a future close to home. Those facing financial strain, limited exposure to career pathways, or weak institutional support are more likely to plan their exit.

Belonging, it turns out, is not sentimental. It is strategic.

## The Weight Beneath the Surface

The AREAS data also reveal pressures that are easier to overlook and harder to resolve. Rural students experience higher rates of loneliness, anxiety, and depression than their non-rural peers, shaped by geographic isolation, limited broadband, and fewer mental health resources. At the same time, many are navigating food insecurity, housing instability, caregiving responsibilities, and unpredictable work schedules.

These challenges don't sit outside the academic experience. They define it.

## From Evidence to Action

Over the past year, the AREAS project has moved beyond diagnosis to application, translating national data into policy briefs and fact sheets for campus leaders, practitioners, and policymakers. The goal is not simply to describe rural student experiences, but to change the systems that make those experiences so unequal.

# What is Next

As AREAS moves into its next phase, the focus remains steady: rigorous research, strong partnerships, and practical resources that help institutions build environments where rural students can thrive—academically, emotionally, and economically.



# STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS: PATHWAYS TO LEADERSHIP

Leadership doesn't only happen in the classroom. For many undergraduates, it takes shape in the clubs they join, the communities they build, and the organizations where they learn to collaborate, negotiate, and take initiative.

In 2025, Dr. Krista Soria at the University of Idaho and Dr. Ahsan Kribria at the WRDC set out to understand exactly how student organizations contribute to leadership development across a range of college environments. The researchers analyzed multi-institutional datasets, looking at participation in both recreational student groups and identity-based or multicultural organizations.

The findings were clear: involvement in student organizations strengthens leadership skills, motivation, and prosocial behaviors, regardless of students' backgrounds or institutional context.

## At a Glance:

- Participation in student organizations boosts leadership efficacy and motivation
- Students in clubs show stronger collaboration, dialogue, and commitment to social change
- Effects hold true across backgrounds, pre-college experiences, and different institutions
- Leadership learning happens in everyday student communities, not just formal programs

## How Leadership Emerges

Across both studies, students who were active in clubs or organizations scored higher on measures of leadership outcomes than their peers who were not. They reported greater confidence in their ability to lead, more engagement in collaborative projects, and stronger commitment to initiatives that benefit others.

Whether it was a recreational club fostering teamwork and self-confidence or a multicultural organization cultivating civic responsibility and belonging, participation gave students hands-on experience in leading, negotiating differences, and making an impact in their communities.

# Why It Matters

These findings underscore a core principle in higher education: leadership is cultivated where students feel connected. When students find community, they also find opportunities to lead. Formal programs and titles help, but some of the most meaningful leadership learning happens in everyday student experiences—through clubs, teams, and shared purpose.



# A NEW BASELINE FOR UNDERSTANDING WESTERN HOUSEHOLDS

What does life look like for households across the Western United States — from work and income to housing, health, and community engagement? In a sweeping effort to answer that question, researchers conducted the WR-Stat: Baseline Survey 2024, an open-source dataset that gives community leaders, planners, and policymakers their first comprehensive look at how people are faring across the region.

The survey was conducted from June to August 2025 through a collaboration between the WRDC, the North Central Regional Center for Rural Development, the Southern Rural Development Center, and Auburn University. It joins a family of open Baseline Survey datasets that together cover the full United States, providing a foundation for future research and decision-making.

By making this data publicly available, the goal is to help communities, land-grant partners, and local leaders understand trends and shape more effective development strategies based on real, household-level evidence.

## At a Glance:

- Open-access data: [The WR-Stat: Baseline Survey 2024](#) is publicly available
- What it covers: Demographics, income, workforce participation, entrepreneurship, caregiving, housing, broadband access, migration and staying behavior, civic engagement, community belonging, health, food security, well-being, and environmental concerns
- Why it matters: Enables evidence-based planning, research, and policy across the Western region
- Download the data: <https://purr.purdue.edu/publications/4973/1>

## A Data Resource Built for Insight

The WR-Stat survey joins a series of regional Baseline Survey datasets developed by the Regional Rural Development Centers to provide consistent, comparable household data across the country. In total, nearly 18,600 households responded across four surveys, including more than 4,500 in the Western Region alone, making this one of the most expansive efforts to date to document lived conditions at the household level.

The dataset captures a wide range of life experiences and conditions, from basic demographics to workforce participation and entrepreneurial activity, to how households engage with their communities or plan to stay or move. It also examines access to essential services, such as broadband and housing, as well as health and environmental concerns.

Because the survey uses consistent questions and methods across regions, it enables researchers and practitioners to examine both within-region trends and cross-regional comparisons, providing context for regional strengths, challenges, and opportunities.

## How You Can Use the Data

The WR-Stat: Baseline Survey 2024 dataset is fully de-identified, publicly available, and ready for analysis. Users can download the data from the Purdue University Research Repository and explore questions such as:

- Which communities are experiencing the greatest housing instability?
- How do workforce patterns differ by age, race, or income?
- What community and civic behaviors — like volunteering or engagement — correlate with well-being scores?

This dataset isn't just numbers on a page; it's a toolkit for people working to understand and improve community conditions across the West.

## Cite and Connect

If you use the data in research or reporting, the official citation is:

Bednarik, Z.; Green, J. J.; Marshall, M. I.; Russell, K. J.; Wiatt, R. D.; Wilcox Jr, M. D.; Kibria, A.; Winckel, N. (2025). Western Region Household Data. WR-Stat: Baseline Survey 2024. Purdue University Research Repository. doi:10.4231/X4SP-C423.

# PRESENTATIONS

FEBRUARY



**Western Regional Science Association Meeting. Feb. 12-15.**

N. Winckel and P. Lewin. *Self-employment and poverty: a complex interaction*

MARCH



**Rocky Mountain Land Use Institute Conference. March 5-7.**

E. Kingston, J. Maxand, and T. Trotter. *Rural Livability*.  
P. Lewin, E. Kingston, and L. Higgins. *Stronger Together: Rural Partners and Professional Development*.

APRIL



**Idaho Rural Success Summit. April 30-May 1.**

E. Kingston, D. Kostelec, and M. Leeper. *Creating Walkable and Accessible Communities*.

JUNE



**Association of Idaho Cities Conference. June 19.**

E. Kingston and P. Lewin. *WRDC: New Home and Partners in Idaho*  
E. Kingston, H. Zeitlin, D. Willis, and D. Gover. *Partners in Access, Commerce, and Engagement*

OCTOBER



**LEAP Idaho Workforce Housing Network. Oct. 8.**

E. Kingston. *Re-Thinking Housing Markets: Pursuing Independence, Prosperity, and Opportunity*.

NOVEMBER



**North American Meetings Regional Science Council Meeting. Nov. 12-15.**

Organized session on Poverty. Papers presented included:

N. Winckel and P. Lewin. *Leaving Scylla to meet Charybdis? Choosing entrepreneurship over salaried work when in poverty*.

P. Lewin and N. Weerasekara. *Trapped or Moving Up? The Dynamics of Poverty in the United States*.

N. Weerasekara and P. Lewin. *Do safety nets resolve poverty in the United States?*

R. Acquah-Sarpong, Y. Chen, and P. Lewin. *Evaluating the Impact of Wildfires on Firm Migration in the Western US*.



# PUBLICATIONS

**Soria, K. M., Weerasekara, N., Hallahan, K., & Moore, M. (2025).**

[The Effects of Participation in Recreational Student Groups, Clubs, or Organizations on Undergraduates' Leadership Motivation and Efficacy.](#)

*Recreational Sports Journal.*

**Mitchell, T. D., Johnson, M. R., Parker, E., Soria, K. M., Weerasekara, N., and Dann, L.**

[The power of multicultural and identity-based student organizations in college students' prosocial leadership development.](#)

*Journal of College and Character.*

A landscape photograph of a field with mountains in the background under a dark sky. The foreground is filled with tall, dry grasses. The middle ground shows a field of shorter grasses. In the background, there are mountains with some snow on their peaks. The sky is dark and cloudy. The text is overlaid on the image in a white, bold, sans-serif font.

# **STRENGTHENING LEADERSHIP & NETWORKS**

# BUILDING RURAL LEADERSHIP, ONE COHORT AT A TIME

Rural communities across the West face no shortage of challenges, from housing shortages to workforce development, but one need rises above the rest: strong, well-connected local leadership. In 2025, the WRDC made a targeted investment to address that gap by expanding leadership training opportunities for rural practitioners through the Northwest Community Development Institute (NWCDI).

The effort reflects WRDC's broader strategy to strengthen rural leadership capacity across the Western region by investing directly in people, partnerships, and place-based professional development.

As WRDC works to strengthen its regional role, it has focused on helping community leaders and land-grant professionals build advanced, practical skills. The goal is not abstract leadership development, but rather training rooted in real-world problem-solving, peer learning, and strategies that can be applied immediately in rural communities.

## At a Glance:

- Built leadership capacity for rural community and economic development professionals
- Expanded NWCDI access beyond the Pacific Northwest to the broader Western region and Pacific territories
- Strengthened land-grant engagement through teaching, content development, and presenter recruitment
- Reduced participation barriers by providing financial support for land-grant professionals
- Created new regional networks connecting rural leaders across states and institutions

## WRDC's Approach: Partnering with NWCDI

In 2025, WRDC deepened its collaboration with the NWCDI, a long-running leadership program known for its hands-on approach to community and economic development. Designed for planners, civic leaders, and development professionals, NWCDI offers a weeklong immersive training that anchors a three-year learning journey focused on civic engagement, informed policy, and peer-to-peer exchange.

By deepening its collaboration with NWCDI leaders at Idaho Commerce, WRDC helped expand the program’s reach well beyond the Pacific Northwest. For the first time, rural leaders from across the Western United States and the Pacific Basin, including Guam, American Samoa, and the Northern Mariana Islands, were invited to take part, and we had the honor to host two faculty members from Micronesia. WRDC staff contributed directly to the curriculum, delivering sessions and drawing on connections across the Western land-grant system to bring in additional presenters with region-specific expertise. These contributions helped ensure that the training reflected the diverse realities of rural communities and reached leaders in remote or historically underserved areas.

## The Impact

The result was greater access to high-quality professional development for leaders who are often geographically isolated or underserved. Through coordinated outreach and financial support, WRDC ensured that land-grant professionals and community practitioners across the West could participate in the 2025 NWCDI, boosting their capacity to lead local development initiatives and support institutional strategies for community vitality. The training highlighted systems-level thinking, cross-sector collaboration, and institutional approaches—skills participants can apply in their states, campuses, and communities. For many attendees, the experience also created lasting professional networks, connecting rural leaders who often work in isolation but face similar challenges across the region.

## What's Next

Looking ahead, WRDC plans to build on this momentum. The Center intends to deepen its involvement with NWCDI in the coming years, expand training opportunities to reach additional rural communities, and strengthen links between NWCDI alumni and WRDC programs. The goal is long-term: not just a single training experience, but a growing network of rural leaders equipped to shape the future of their communities, and connected to one another across the region.



# LINKING PEOPLE, IDEAS, AND SOLUTIONS: WRDC'S ROLE IN EXPANDING REGIONAL COLLABORATION

Extension professionals, researchers, and community leaders often work in isolation, even when they tackle similar challenges across states or territories. The WRDC aims to change that, creating networks where peers can share resources, collaborate on projects, and learn from one another. In 2025, WRDC supported several peer networks tackling urgent issues, from tourism economies to climate impacts, and building capacity at 1994 land-grant Tribal Colleges and Universities.

These networks aren't just meetings—they're tools for collaboration, innovation, and collective problem-solving across the Western region.

## At a Glance:

- **Outdoor Recreation & Tourism Network:** Brings together Extension and research professionals to collaborate on workforce, stewardship, and infrastructure challenges. Learn more at <https://wrdc.uidaho.edu/programs/outdoor-recreation/>
- **Western Working Group for Climate & Rural Resilience:** A new network addressing climate-related economic and social challenges through cross-state collaboration
- **Community Catalyst Conversations:** A virtual peer group for 1994 land-grant institutions, focused on resource sharing, idea exchange, and collaborative planning. Watch WRDC's news webpage for future Catalyst Calls at <https://wrdc.uidaho.edu/all-events/>

## Outdoor Recreation & Tourism: Connecting the Specialists

Tourism and outdoor recreation drive many rural economies, but the professionals who work in these sectors often operate alone, with limited recognition or support. WRDC partnered with the Western Extension Tourism & Outdoor Recreation Network to provide multi-institution grant funding to bring specialists together.

At the first convening, participants set three goals:

- Share models and on-the-ground solutions to strengthen local economies
- Collaborate on research projects across states
- Raise the visibility of Extension's role in recreation economies

Quarterly meetings and engagement with the National Extension Tourism Network are

helping these professionals reduce isolation and shape sustainable strategies for rural recreation economies.

## Tackling Climate Challenges Collectively

Climate disruptions—wildfires, droughts, and more—pose mounting economic and social challenges. Yet professionals working on climate-economy issues often remain siloed within their institutions. To address this, WRDC is launching the Western Working Group on Climate and Rural Resilience to bring researchers and Extension staff together across Western land-grant institutions.

The group's objectives include:

- Sharing challenges and solutions for climate-related impacts on rural economies
- Building cross-state and interdisciplinary partnerships
- Pursuing multi-state funding opportunities, such as Hatch projects
- Strengthening regional capacity to support national climate and rural development initiatives

The group is planned to launch in Fall 2026, with WRDC currently recruiting members and leadership.

## Connecting 1994 Land-Grant Institutions

WRDC's Community Catalyst Conversations grew out of visits to 1994 land-grant tribal colleges in Eastern Montana, where faculty and Extension staff expressed a desire for more peer connections. This virtual networking group, launching in January 2026, will focus on resource sharing, idea exchange, and collaborative planning around community development research and Extension efforts.

## Looking Ahead

WRDC plans to expand these networks in the coming year by:

- Promoting work groups to increase participation among Western land-grant professionals
- Encouraging cross-institution projects and resource sharing
- Using these networks to strengthen leadership, foster collaboration, and help communities tackle complex challenges

By connecting specialists across states and institutions, WRDC is helping ensure that knowledge, resources, and solutions flow where they're needed most.

### What is a 1994 land-grant institution?

1994 land-grant institutions are Tribal Colleges and Universities added to the U.S. land-grant system by the Equity in Educational Land-Grant Status Act of 1994. They receive federal funding (rather than land) to support research, education, and Extension programs, serving primarily Native students.

# STRENGTHENING CONNECTIONS ACROSS THE WEST

You can learn a lot about a region from a map. But to understand what's really happening on the ground, you have to show up.

That's the approach the WRDC took in 2025, packing bags, logging miles, and sitting down face-to-face with Extension professionals, researchers, and community leaders across the West. From Tribal Colleges in Montana to land-grant universities in the Southwest, the goal was simple: rebuild relationships and listen.

After relocating to the University of Idaho, WRDC set out to reconnect with its partners, making sure the Center's work reflects the priorities, challenges, and ideas shaping community development across the region.

## At a Glance:

- Why the visits mattered: Many partners were unfamiliar with WRDC's updated programs and team
- Where WRDC went in 2025: Arizona, New Mexico, and Montana
- Who they met with: 1862 and 1994 land-grant institutions, Extension professionals, and Tribal Colleges
- What changed: Stronger relationships, higher engagement, and new collaboration opportunities

## The Challenge: Distance and Disconnect

WRDC's relocation created opportunity, but also distance. While the Center was updating programs, staffing, and services, many Extension partners and land-grant institutions across the West weren't yet aware of those changes. At the same time, new WRDC staff needed firsthand exposure to the wide range of community development work already underway across the region.

Geography didn't help. With institutions spread across thousands of miles, rebuilding trust and shared understanding required more than emails or virtual meetings. It called for intentional outreach and time spent together.

## Showing Up: In States, Tribal Nations, and Regional Gatherings

In response, WRDC launched an active engagement strategy built around one idea: visit every land-grant institution in the Western region.

In September, WRDC staff traveled more than 500 miles across Montana, meeting with four land-grant institutions. The conversations surfaced common priorities and shared challenges, including a strong interest in deeper peer-to-peer connections, especially among 1994 Tribal Colleges and Universities.

In November, the team headed southwest, visiting institutions in Arizona and New Mexico. There, they met with community development faculty, Extension professionals, and Tribal College partners to better understand local work and explore opportunities for collaboration. Beyond campus visits, WRDC also connected with partners at regional gatherings, including the First American Land-Grant Consortium (FALCON) Conference and Indian Country Extension Day, spaces where listening, relationship-building, and shared learning take center stage.

At the heart of every stop was the same philosophy: strong partnerships begin by showing up in person.

### Early Results, Real Momentum

Those conversations are already paying off. Partners have expressed appreciation for WRDC's renewed commitment to understanding their communities and working alongside them. The Center has also seen increased participation in WRDC grant programs, events, and collaborative initiatives—an early signal that awareness and trust are growing.

Just as important, the visits generated new ideas. One clear takeaway was the desire for stronger peer networks among 1994 land-grant institutions. WRDC is responding with Community Catalyst Conversations, a new virtual networking series designed to create space for sharing, problem-solving, and collaboration among Tribal Colleges and Universities.

# What's Next

WRDC plans to build on this momentum in 2026 with additional visits across the West, deeper engagement with Tribal Extension partners, and expanded opportunities for collaboration across institutions and states.

By continuing to meet partners where they are—literally—the Center aims to strengthen regional connections, support shared learning, and ensure its programs reflect the priorities shaping community and economic development throughout the Western United States.



# BUILDING RURAL CAPACITY, TOGETHER

In rural communities, capacity doesn't come from a single workshop or a one-time grant. It grows through relationships-leaders learning from one another, sharing tools, and tackling hard problems side by side. That's the idea behind WRDC's partnership with the Western Community Assessment Network (WeCAN), a multi-state collaboration focused on strengthening rural leadership and community problem-solving across Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming.

Since its launch, WeCAN has worked with rural communities to assess local needs, build leadership skills, and turn plans into action-creating a model that blends practical tools with peer learning.

At its core, the partnership is about helping rural communities build the capacity they need to shape their own futures.

## At a Glance:

- What is WeCAN? A six-year, USDA-funded collaboration supporting rural community and economic development
- What it delivers: Community reviews, leadership tools, peer learning networks, and solutions-focused roundtables
- Why it matters: Builds local leadership and practical problem-solving capacity
- Learn more: [www.westerncan.org](http://www.westerncan.org)

## From Assessment to Action

WeCAN's work starts with community reviews-a structured process that helps communities assess strengths and challenges, build leadership capacity, and develop action plans designed for implementation. Along the way, communities gain access to user-friendly leadership development tools, monthly peer learning calls, and virtual Solutions Roundtables focused on issues many rural places share.

These roundtables are designed to move beyond theory. They bring together practitioners, community leaders, and subject-matter experts to explore real challenges and practical responses-creating space for exchange, adaptation, and collaboration.

## Designing Communities That Work for Everyone

One of those conversations took center stage in November, when WRDC and WeCAN hosted the Accessible Rural Communities Solutions Roundtable. The focus: how rural communities can become more livable for people of all ages and abilities.

Accessibility touches nearly every aspect of rural life, from housing and transportation to outdoor recreation and civic participation. The roundtable explored how communities across the West are addressing these challenges, particularly for people with physical disabilities, older adults aging in place, neurodiverse residents, and others who benefit from inclusive design.

Keynote speaker Jeremy Maxand, a disability advocate, former mayor of Wrangell, Alaska, and director of the Living Independence Network Corporation, grounded the discussion in lived experience. As a wheelchair user and longtime community leader, Maxand spoke candidly about the barriers rural communities face, and the opportunity they have to lead in inclusive design and policy.

Alongside the keynote, participants heard solution stories from six rural communities and joined interactive breakout sessions to exchange ideas and explore approaches they could adapt at home. Many left with new connections, practical strategies, and a renewed sense that accessibility is achievable, even with limited resources.

***“We build accessible communities with people, not for them.”***  
***— Jeremy Maxand***

A recording of the roundtable, presenter slides, and a Resource Guide for Expanding Access in Rural Communities are available at [www.westerncan.org/accessible-communities-solutions](http://www.westerncan.org/accessible-communities-solutions).

### What's Next

As WeCAN's initial USDA funding concludes, WRDC is preparing to bring the network under its umbrella in 2026. This transition will ensure that WeCAN's tools, peer networks, and community-centered approaches continue—and expand—across the Western region.

By integrating WeCAN into WRDC's broader scope of work, the Center will be able to strategically scale programming, connect communities across states, and support rural leaders as they tackle complex challenges together.



# 2025 WRDC GRANTS & FELLOWSHIP AWARDEES

## Graduate Assistance Program

Funding overview:

Supports full-time Ph.D. students at accredited land-grant universities in the Western region. Students must have passed their qualifying or preliminary exam by the time of proposal submission. Awardees work with their advisor and WRDC staff on research and outreach projects that directly benefit rural communities in the Western region. Each award provided \$18,000 for project-related expenses such as salary, benefits, and travel. Funds may not be used for tuition or student fees.



### **Rae Nickerson**

Research Assistant  
Department of Wildland Resources  
Utah State University

Project Title: *Evaluating the Effectiveness of Range Riding at Reducing Carnivore-Livestock Conflict in the American West*



### **Richard Acquah-Sarpong**

Research Assistant  
Department of Applied Economics  
Oregon State University

Project Title: *Evaluating the impact of wildfires on firm migration in rural western US*

## Fellow Projects

Funding overview:

Supports faculty at Western land-grant institutions with awards of up to \$15,000 for research, Extension, or integrated projects. Proposals must address local research and educational outreach needs, with an emphasis on underserved communities, understudied regions, or emerging topics. The program aims to build local capacity to address critical issues facing rural communities in the Western region.



### **Xue Dong**

Extension Regional Specialist  
Vibrant Communities  
Colorado State University

Project Title: *Enhancing AI-Powered Agritourism Chatbot through Deep Learning: Advancing Knowledge Dissemination, Decision-Making, and Extension Education*



### **Emily Schlickman**

Associate Professor  
Department of Human Ecology  
University of California, Davis

Project Title: *Co-Creating Fire Literacy for Rural Resilience*



## Multi-Institution Project

Funding overview:

Supports collaborative projects that address critical priorities facing the Western region. Funded projects, up to \$30,000, bring together two or more Western land-grant institutions to integrate research and Extension activities and build momentum toward competitive external funding.

Project Title: *Investigating Extension's Scope and Role in Outdoor Recreation in the West: Attitudes, Challenges, and Opportunities*

Project Team:



**Jake Powell**

Principal Investigator  
Associate Professor and Landscape Architecture Extension  
Specialist  
Utah State University Extension



**Shannon Arnold**

Professor  
Extension and Nonformal Education  
Montana State University Extension



**Aaron Wilcher**

Area Community and Economic Development Advisor  
University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources



**Alec Dompka**

Rural Community and Economic Development Advisor  
University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources



**Hailey Sorg**

Outdoor Recreation, Tourism, and Hospitality  
Extension Specialist  
Jay Kemmerer WORTH Institute, University of Wyoming

Project Collaborators:



**Geraline Rodgers**

Cooperative Research, Extension, and Education Services  
Northern Marianas College



**Guinevere Nelson**

Extension Director, Douglas County  
Colorado State University Extension



**Keith Mandabach**

Professor  
School of Hotel, Restaurant, and Tourism Management  
New Mexico State University



**Patty Coleman**

Interim Dean  
Cooperative Research, Extension, and Education Services,  
Northern Marianas College

# Leadership Skill Development Mini-Grant Program

Funding overview:

Supports projects to strengthen leadership skills among Western land-grant faculty, staff, and the communities they serve to advance rural development in the Western United States. Funding of up to \$2,000 per applicant is available to support eligible project activities.



## **Krista M. Soria**

Associate Professor, Leadership and Counseling  
College of Education, Health, and Human Sciences  
University of Idaho

Funding supported Gallup-Certified Clifton Strengths Coach training, which enhances individual awareness of personal strengths and enablesthe recipient to integrate strengths-based practices into professional development courses, undergraduate and graduate curricula, and community-based programming.



## **Christina Wilson**

Program Specialist, Senior Coordinator, New Mexico  
Agricultural Leadership Program  
New Mexico State University

Funding supported certification training to deliver Crucial Conversations for Mastering Dialogue, which equips agricultural leaders to navigate challenging conversations with program participants and strengthens effective communication skills. Upon certification, the training is delivered through the New Mexico Agricultural Leadership Program and within the New Mexico State University College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences.



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS & ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

## Funding Disclosure

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The WRDC is one of four Regional Rural Development Centers (RRDCs) established by the Rural Development Act of 1972 to serve as engines of rural prosperity and resilience. Jointly administered by the USDA and a host land-grant university, each RRDC supports Extension and agricultural research programs tailored to the needs of its region. For the WRDC, this means connecting a vast network of 31 colleges and universities, including both 1862 and 1994 land-grant institutions, across, including both 1862 and 1994 institutions, across 13 western states and four Pacific territories.

## Special Thanks

We extend our sincere appreciation to the University of Idaho, which serves as the host institution for the Western Rural Development Center. Their continued support, leadership, and partnership make our work possible and strengthen our connection to communities throughout the West.

The University of Idaho has a policy of nondiscrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, sex, age, sexual orientation, gender identity/expression, disability, genetic information, or protected veteran or military status.

## Contact Us

To learn more about the Western Rural Development Center's research, partnerships, and regional programs, we welcome you to connect with us:

*Western Rural Development Center*  
322 E Front St, Suite 222  
Boise, ID 83702

*Email: [wrdc@uidaho.edu](mailto:wrdc@uidaho.edu)*  
*Website: [wrdc.uidaho.edu](http://wrdc.uidaho.edu)*  
*Phone: 208-364-4605*

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**Let's work together to build a more vibrant and resilient rural West.**

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