

WRDC

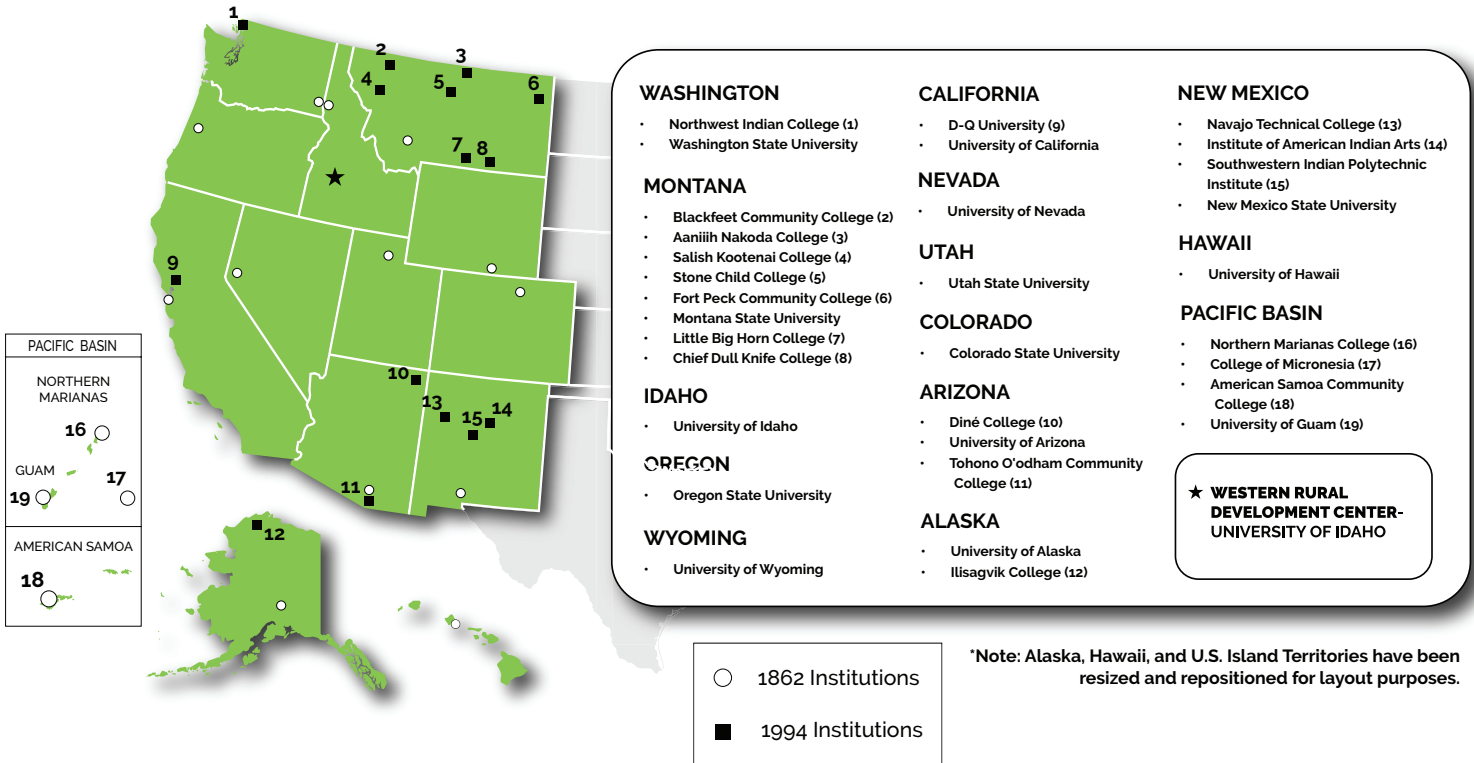
**ANNUAL REPORT
2024**

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ABOUT THE WRDC



The Western Rural Development Center (WRDC) connects the research and educational outreach capacity of the West's 32 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

It has been a year of transition and renewal for the Western Rural Development Center. The move from Utah State University to the University of Idaho brought both challenges and opportunities, and as we reflect on this past year, we recognize the resilience and dedication of our team in rebuilding our programs and reestablishing our presence.

Relocating an institution is never easy. It requires reimagining operations, reconfiguring partnerships, and, most importantly, ensuring continuity in our mission. This transition meant rebuilding from the ground up—hiring staff, reestablishing key collaborations, and ensuring that our work remains impactful for the communities we serve. We are proud to share that despite these challenges, our team has worked tirelessly to adapt and strengthen our programs, ensuring that our research, outreach, and Extension efforts continue to support rural development.

Over the past year, we have focused on re-hiring critical personnel, developing new initiatives, and refining our strategic direction to align with emerging needs. The dedication of our staff and partners has been instrumental in this effort, and we are deeply grateful for their commitment.

In the midst of rebuilding, we have also launched and advanced several key initiatives. Through our collaboration with the Assessing Rural Education Assets and Strengths Consortium, we are investigating the factors that support the success of low-income rural students in higher education and their transitions into the workforce. The initiative includes a national student survey, a new consortium of rural colleges and universities, and the development of tools and reports to inform administrators and policymakers.



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

We are also strengthening our efforts in rural tourism in the West. Through a regional working group affiliated with the National Extension Tourism network, we are examining how outdoor recreation and agritourism can benefit farmers, small businesses, and rural communities while promoting environmental stewardship and community resilience. This includes exploring the role of Extension in helping communities adapt their tourism strategies to meet economic, ecological, and cultural challenges.

Our research on Family Health and the Monetary Success of Entrepreneurs sheds light on how the health of entrepreneurs, their spouses, and children impacts earnings, particularly for women and single parents. These findings underscore the importance of integrating health and workforce policies, with a particular focus on child benefits and caregiving support.

Finally, our work on women in agriculture examines disparities in wages and profitability across gender, sexual orientation, and union status. The findings highlight systemic barriers in farm labor and ownership, as well as the role that policy and equitable access to resources can play in addressing these challenges.

As we look ahead, we remain committed to expanding our impact, fostering innovation, and strengthening the networks that empower rural communities. This annual report highlights the progress we have made, the milestones we have achieved, and the vision that will guide us forward.

Thank you for your continued support as we embark on this next chapter.

Sincerely,

Paul

Paul Lewin
Executive Director

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COOPERATION TO EXPAND DIGITAL OPPORTUNITIES IN THE WEST

Technology advances rapidly, yet many people, businesses, and communities cannot fully participate in our increasingly digital society and economy. The importance of broadband internet access is becoming so instrumental that research and conversations are being held to consider it a social determinant of health, the non-medical factors influencing health outcomes.

As Extension professionals of the past supported the adoption of rural electrification, today's Extension professionals are helping individuals and communities gain digital skills, expand high-speed broadband connectivity, and confidently use technology to enhance education, agriculture, healthcare, and economic opportunities, ensuring no one is left behind in the modern world.

Examples Of Extension Efforts In The West Include:

- Oregon State University Extension facilitated the Oregon Broadband Equity Coalition (OBEC), a statewide group of organizations, Tribal Nations, Internet Service Providers, community members, and business and government representatives working together to promote access to broadband with the necessary tools and skills to be proficient and safe. OBEC is open to the public and hosts monthly meetings and webinars. It also shares resources on broadband affordability, internet accessibility, digital device availability, and digital literacy.
- University of California Extension works with communities, highlighting exemplary and innovative strategies. Including educating the public about community-owned internet service providers and examples of utilities co-ops branching to offer broadband to the communities they serve.
- University of Idaho Extension's Digital Economy Program offers online workforce development and



e-business courses, places AmeriCorps members as digital navigators in rural and tribal communities and gives Broadband Action Team support to reduce the digital divide and enable the benefits of digitalization to reach all Idahoans. Developing a digital navigator program has been a model for other states, and staff were invited to create and present a train-the-trainer workshop for other Extension professionals.

- Utah State University Extension's Rural Online Initiative empowers rural Utah with remote work education and training for success in a rapidly changing economy. They also launched an affiliate program and have partnered with multiple Extension programs across the U.S. to offer remote work training within their state without the cost of replicating the course and program.
- Washington State University Extension worked with its State Broadband Office to develop workbooks and community planning tools to support Broadband Action Teams statewide in engaging their communities in the planning and developing broadband infrastructure and digital adoption plans.

Recognizing the impact digital connectivity and access to information have on the vitality of rural communities, WRDC convened a Digital Opportunities Working group of Extension professionals across the West engaged in expanding individual and community digital resiliency.

The working group met quarterly in 2024 with regular engagement of professionals from seven land-grant institutions to share resources, information on grant opportunities, explore opportunities to collaborate on efforts and discuss the unique needs of the West.

Working Group Outcomes Included:

- Increased communication and collaboration between Extension professionals working on these topics.
- Sharing information and referrals helped Extension programs apply for state and federal grants, access new resources and tools, and make new connections.



TOURISM, STEWARDSHIP & RURAL VITALITY

**Expanding the Role of
Extension in the West**

In the vast, breathtaking landscapes of the American West, a new kind of rural economy is quietly blooming—one rooted in outdoor recreation, agritourism, and the resilient spirit of local communities.

In 2017, 10.8% of farms in the Western U.S. engaged in agritourism and direct-to-consumer sales, surpassing the national average of 7.5%. Nearly 5 million jobs across the West are tied to outdoor recreation, from national park gateways to trailside farm stands. These industries not only generate revenue but also promote environmental stewardship, cultural preservation, and community health.

Recognizing this potential, the WRDC has partnered with the National Extension Tourism (NET) network to support a dynamic regional working group. Spanning the Western continental states and the Pacific Islands, this initiative aims to strengthen the connection between research, education, and outreach to promote sustainable tourism across the region.

Building Bridges: Extension's Role in a Changing Landscape

The working group is focused on a big-picture goal: understanding how Extension is currently involved in outdoor recreation and how it can play a larger, more impactful role. By doing so, the group hopes to:

- Map the state-by-state impact of outdoor recreation on community economies
- Explore how Extension can strengthen local tourism infrastructure
- Identify challenges and opportunities as perceived by Extension leaders

With the WRDC's support, the group is laying the groundwork for future funding and collaboration opportunities to enhance this work across the West.

Local Roots, Regional Impact

Outdoor recreation and agritourism provide essential income diversification for farmers and small businesses, especially in communities transitioning away from extractive industries. In rural areas and on the Pacific Islands, where over-tourism and environmental fragility are real threats, regenerative tourism practices are being championed by local Extension specialists. Regenerative tourism isn't just about bringing people in; it's about reinvesting in the place and the people. It's about healing ecosystems, celebrating heritage, and creating lasting opportunities.

The working group has also called for stronger links between tourism and agriculture, advocating for farmers to directly benefit from outdoor recreation economies. Whether it's farm stays, farmers markets near trailheads, or local food systems integrated into tourism planning, there's growing recognition that rural vitality hinges on creative, place-based strategies.

Looking Ahead

As economic disruptions and shifting demographics continue to impact rural regions, outdoor recreation and tourism offer a path forward—one that strikes a balance between growth and sustainability.

The Western working group is committed to ensuring that Extension is at the heart of that journey: connecting stakeholders, informing policy, supporting entrepreneurs, and helping rural communities thrive.



UNEARTHING INEQUITIES: A DEEPER LOOK AT GENDER, POWER & PROFIT IN U.S. AGRICULTURE

In the furrowed fields of American agriculture, a quiet transformation is underway—one that centers the voices of women, elevates overlooked stories, and challenges the structural forces that have long shaped who profits from the land.

The Women in Agriculture Project, funded by the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) through the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI) Foundation program, is part research, part action plan. At its heart lies a bold mission: to increase the prosperity of women farmers, their families, and the rural communities they sustain.

Why the focus on women? According to the USDA definition, women are considered socially disadvantaged farmers, and the statistics support this. Women-led farms are typically smaller in acreage and lower in sales, and women face chronic barriers to land access, credit, and representation in agricultural leadership.

Digging into the Data: How Inequities Take Root

Using data from the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) and the Census of Agriculture, the research team explores how gender, sexual orientation, and union membership shape economic outcomes for both farmworkers and farm operators. The findings are both sobering and galvanizing.

Women farmworkers earn 5–6% less per hour than their male counterparts. They're also less likely to receive employer-provided benefits such as health insurance or bonuses. And while some of these differences can be explained by hours worked or job titles, a significant portion of the gap remains unexplained, strongly pointing to systemic discrimination.

The divide deepens in farm ownership. Male operators bring in 151% more net farm income than female operators, thanks in large part to unequal access to land, equipment, and labor. Women are also more likely to farm in lower-margin sectors, such as horticulture and specialty crops, while men tend to dominate high-profit commodity operations.



Sexual orientation intersects with these dynamics, too. Farms led by male same-sex couples tend to outperform those run by female-led or heterosexual partnerships, suggesting persistent gender-based advantages regardless of family structure.

A Closer Look: What's Changing—and What Still Needs to

The project's research component goes far beyond numbers. By weaving together qualitative and quantitative methods, the team is tackling a series of critical questions:

- How has women's access to land, capital, and labor changed between 2017 and 2022?
- How does the gender profitability gap vary by race and ethnicity?
- What role do farming partners play in access to resources and diversification?
- What are successful women farmers doing differently—and how are they planning for the future?

These questions don't just illuminate disparities—they also uncover strategies for resilience, innovation, and legacy-building among women producers.

Extension in Action: From Insight to Impact

What sets this project apart is its deep integration of Extension activities designed to translate research into real-world results. The team is working directly with women farmers—especially those who are beginning, small-scale, or transitioning—to build skills, expand their networks, and increase profitability.

This includes:

- Offering one-on-one and group services in Idaho to support farm profitability and succession planning
- Delivering business planning and risk management education tailored to women's unique needs
- Training agricultural service providers to better serve women operators
- Sharing best practices, resources, curricula, and tools through national networks

A Harvest of Possibilities

The Women in Agriculture Project is a powerful reminder that behind every data point is a lived reality—and that rural prosperity depends on tapping into the full talent and potential of all agricultural producers.

By identifying the roots of gender- and resource-based inequality and building tools for long-term change, this initiative is cultivating more than just crops. It's cultivating opportunity, agency, and equity across the rural landscape.



CAPITAL, HEALTH, AND RESILIENCE: RESEARCH ILLUMINATES CHALLENGES FACING ENTREPRENEURS AND MINORITY-OWNED BUSINESSES

Entrepreneurship has long been hailed as a pathway to upward mobility, especially in rural and underserved communities. Yet, beneath the optimism lies a complex network of factors that influence whether a business thrives or fails. Through a series of studies funded by the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA), researchers at the WRDC are unraveling how financial, human, and social capital shape the outcomes of entrepreneurs, revealing nuanced relationships between family health, financial risk, and business survival.

Family Health and Entrepreneurial Earnings: A Hidden Variable

A groundbreaking study, utilizing National Health Interview Survey data from 2010 to 2018, provides a fresh perspective on the interplay between family health and the financial outcomes of entrepreneurs. Health, as a key component of human capital, determines one's ability to work, but its impact extends beyond the individual to the family unit. The study reveals striking gender and family-structure disparities:

- Entrepreneurs' own poor health uniformly reduces earnings across all groups.
- A spouse's poor health significantly lowers earnings for male entrepreneurs, but not for female entrepreneurs.
- Poor child health adversely affects earnings for married mothers and single fathers, highlighting caregiving's dual burden

These findings underscore that entrepreneurship does not occur in a vacuum. For many, especially women and single parents, the caregiving load is tightly linked to income potential. The researchers advocate for integrated workforce-health policies that take into account family responsibilities. Specifically, they recommend expanding child health benefits to support working women and single parents. By focusing not only on individuals but also on the health of social networks and families, policy interventions can better support the sustainability of entrepreneurial activity.



Financial Risk and Minority Business Survival During COVID-19

The second study examines the COVID-19 pandemic, which served as a stress test for American businesses. Using the National Establishment Time-Series database (2020–2022), researchers analyzed the impact of financial risk, particularly PAYDEX credit scores, on business survival. Employing a Cox proportional hazard model, the study sheds light on how minority-owned businesses fared under economic duress. Key findings include:

- Higher financial risk significantly increased the likelihood of business closure.
- Minority-owned firms were more vulnerable due to longstanding inequities in access to credit.
- Firms engaged in international trade faced higher exit rates, likely due to global supply chain disruptions.
- Urban businesses were more resilient, benefiting from digital infrastructure and stronger financial ecosystems.

These results illuminate systemic barriers that persist for minority entrepreneurs, particularly in accessing capital and navigating disruptions. To address these challenges, the study calls for:

- Reforms in lending practices to counteract bias.
- Expansion of alternative financing (e.g., crowdfunding, Community Development Financial Institutions).
- Investment in digital transformation, particularly in non-metropolitan areas.

Bridging Research and Policy

Together, these studies make a compelling case for targeted interventions. For entrepreneurs balancing health and caregiving, as well as for minority business owners navigating unequal financial landscapes, policy must extend beyond general support and address structural vulnerabilities. Expanding child benefits, addressing financial exclusion, and enhancing digital and social capital are crucial steps toward achieving equitable and resilient entrepreneurship.

As the post-pandemic economy continues to evolve, these insights provide a data-driven roadmap for policymakers, lenders, and workforce advocates striving to create a more inclusive and supportive entrepreneurial ecosystem.



MAPPING SUCCESS

**How the AREAS Consortium
Is Advancing Rural College
Student Outcomes**

For many low-income rural college students, the journey through higher education is fraught with unique challenges—financial constraints, limited access to resources, and geographic isolation. Recognizing these hurdles, the WRDC has partnered with the Assessing Rural Education Assets and Strengths (AREAS) Consortium, based at the University of Idaho, to explore in-depth the experiences of these students and improve them. This initiative is generously funded by the Ascendium Education Group in collaboration with the American Institutes for Research.

A Comprehensive Approach to Understanding Rural Student Experiences

We are undertaking a nationwide study, collecting and analyzing data from low-income students in both rural and non-rural settings, enrolled in two-year and four-year institutions. This research aims to shed light on the multifaceted experiences of rural students, focusing on academic outcomes, psychosocial well-being, and career readiness. Key areas of investigation include:

- **Academic Outcomes:** Exploring metrics such as retention rates, GPA, and degree completion to understand academic success among rural students.
- **Psychosocial Well-being:** Assessing factors like sense of belonging, psychological health, and perceptions of campus climate.
- **Career Readiness:** Evaluating the impact of institutional programs on students' preparedness for the workforce.

A pivotal component of this research is the formation of a consortium of rural colleges and universities participating in comprehensive student surveys. These surveys are meticulously designed to capture demographic details, academic experiences, and career-related outcomes, providing a robust dataset for analysis.

Translating Data into Actionable Insights

Beyond data collection, the AREAS Consortium is committed to transforming insights into tangible resources for stakeholders. The initiative plans to produce:

- **Institutional Reports:** Tailored analyses for participating colleges to inform policy and practice.
- **Policy Briefs:** Concise documents aimed at guiding decision-makers in creating supportive environments for rural students.

- Fact Sheets: Accessible summaries highlighting key findings and recommendations.
- Public Dashboards: Interactive platforms, such as Tableau dashboards, to visualize data trends and facilitate broader engagement.

These resources are designed to empower administrators, faculty, staff, researchers, and policymakers with the knowledge needed to develop programs and policies that effectively support rural students.

Looking Ahead

Preliminary findings highlight the pressing issue of insecurity in meeting basic needs among rural students. Approximately 20% of students at four-year public or private rural institutions experience low or very low food security. Additionally, these students often report higher rates of recent homelessness and express concerns about their ability to cover emergency expenses. Such challenges can significantly impede academic performance and overall well-being.



The AREAS Consortium emphasizes the importance of institutions recognizing and addressing these fundamental needs. By implementing comprehensive support systems, colleges can create environments where rural students are more likely to thrive academically and personally.

Building a Collaborative Network for Rural Student Success

Central to the AREAS initiative is fostering collaboration among rural-serving institutions. By sharing data, best practices, and resources, these colleges and universities can collectively enhance the educational experiences of rural students. This network aims to:

- Promote Knowledge Sharing: Facilitating the exchange of successful strategies and programs.
- Advocate for Policy Changes: Using collective insights to influence policies that better support rural students.
- Enhance Institutional Practices: Encouraging the adoption of evidence-based approaches to student support.

Through this collaborative framework, the AREAS Consortium seeks to create a more equitable and supportive higher education landscape for rural students.



PRESENTATIONS

Weerasekara, N.; Lewin, P. 2024.

"Economic resilience of minority businesses to uncertain shock." North American Regional Science Council Annual Conference. New Orleans, LA, Nov. 13 – 16.

Weerasekara, N.; Lewin, P.; and Fisher, M. 2024.

"Family health on the monetary success of the entrepreneur: entrepreneur-spouse-child interdependence (Findings from a sensitivity analysis)." Western Regional Science Association annual conference. Monterrey, CA, February 11 – 14.

Weerasekara, N.; and Lewin, P. 2024.

"Marginalization of the labor force with poor family health: insights from the US labor force." Southern Regional Science Association annual conference. Washington, D.C., April 4 – 6.

Lewin, P. 2024.

"The Western Rural Development Center." Conference on USDA NIFA Land Grant Programs for USAPI & FAS Colleges. Palau, Micronesia, April 29 – May 3.

Weerasekara, N. 2024.

"The Western Rural Development Center." Idaho Rural Success Summit. Fort Hall, ID, May 1 – 2.

Lewin, P. 2024.

"The Western Rural Development Center." Western Extension Directors Association (WEDA) and Western Association of Agricultural Experiment Station Directors (WAAESD) Spring Meeting. Portland, OR, March 25 – 28.



PACIFIC LAND-GRANT INSTITUTIONS CHART A SHARED COURSE IN PALAU

When a small armada of scientists, Extension agents, community leaders, and an unusually large contingent from the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) arrived in Koror, Palau, last spring, it marked a quiet but significant milestone.

For the first time ever, every U.S.-affiliated Pacific Islands (USAPI) and Freely Associated State (FAS) land-grant institution gathered in one place to share ideas, data, and island-grown solutions. Hosted by Palau Community College (PCC) from April 27 to May 3, 2024, the landmark event showcased the power of collective vision in one of the most geographically dispersed regions in the world.

Among the key participants was Dr. Paul Lewin, director of the Western Rural Development Center (WRDC), who contributed to strategic discussions on strengthening Pacific land-grant institutions through multi-state coordination and rural-focused research and Extension support.

Why This Gathering Mattered

A seat at the federal table. A seven-member NIFA delegation made the 8,000-mile journey to Palau—not to lecture, but to listen. Their presence sent a clear signal: Washington is ready to engage with Pacific communities as equal partners, shaping federal programs to align with local priorities.

One region, many voices. Delegates spanned six time zones and countless islands—from the College of Micronesia-FSM and Northern Marianas College to American Samoa Community College and the University of Guam. They were joined by the University of Hawaii at Mānoa and key partners from the Western Extension Directors Association (WEDA), agInnovation-West, and the WRDC. Together, they formed a chorus of perspectives on shared regional challenges.

WRDC's take-home message

Dr. Paul Lewin, WRDC director, the Palau summit underscored a core truth: meaningful progress in rural and island communities starts with listening. His presence at the gathering highlighted WRDC's commitment to working directly with partners across the

region, not to offer quick fixes, but to build lasting, reciprocal relationships. From rural prosperity to youth opportunities, Paul emphasized the need to strengthen connections between islands and mainland land-grant partners to address the challenges faced by Pacific land-grant institutions. This approach is not just beneficial; it's essential to a truly inclusive and responsive land-grant system.

Why This Work Matters Far Beyond Oceania

Remote, resource-constrained, and often overlooked, Pacific land-grant institutions are nonetheless at the forefront of some of the world's most pressing issues: ocean acidification, invasive species, climate migration, and food system fragility. The Palau summit demonstrated what is possible when these institutions are given the platform and support to lead—solutions emerge that are not only locally grounded but also globally relevant.

By treating Pacific institutions as peers, not peripheries, federal agencies and mainland partners are helping unlock knowledge that benefits the entire land-grant system. The vision emerging from Palau is bold, rooted in culture, and, above all, shared—and that makes all the difference.





PALAU PHOTOS

PUBLICATIONS

Fisher, M.; Reimer, J.; and Lewin, P. (2024).

Is Union Membership Associated with Higher Wages of U.S. Farmworkers? An Empirical Analysis Using the National Agricultural Workers Survey.

Applied Economic Perspectives and Policy.

<http://doi.org/10.1002/aep.13440>

Fisher, M.; Lewin, P.; and Wornell, E. (2024).

Self-Employment Among the Poor: Does It Pay Off?.

Journal of Poverty.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10875549.2023.2301614>





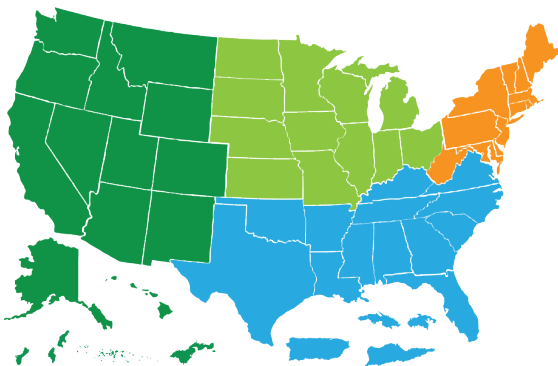
WRDC HISTORY

**Celebrating 50 Years of
Impact and a New Chapter**

Spring is a season of renewal, and this year, it brings a sense of new beginnings for the Western Rural Development Center (WRDC) as it transitions to its new home at the University of Idaho. Following the celebration of its 50th anniversary in 2023, the Center enters this next chapter with fresh energy and a continued commitment to strengthening rural communities across the West.

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 30 universities, including both 1862 and 1994 institutions, across 13 western states and four Pacific territories.

From its beginnings at Oregon State University, to 25 years at Utah State University, and now in its new home at the University of Idaho, the WRDC continues to evolve while staying true to its mission. With 50 years of impact behind us and a powerful network ahead, the future of rural development in the West is bright—and we're just getting started.



President Richard Nixon signing the Rural Development Act on August 30, 1972.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS & ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

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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:

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

