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Toward a Development Policy for Rural America: A Comment

Steven E. Hastings

Rural development policy in America, or the lack of it, has generated much discussion in recent years. Since the waning of the exuberance generated by the favorable but short lived rural renaissance of the late seventies, policy makers, researchers and practitioners have come to realize the development problems of rural America still exist.

Dr. Barkley provides an interesting historical perspective on American rural development policy. He provides an overview of past and current policy and then speculates briefly on alternatives for the future. The historical review serves to remind us that the development of rural areas is hardly a new issue; since colonial times, when policies regarding where crops could be planted and sold were established, it has been an important goal of a variety of government programs. This reminder implies we should be better at something we have been trying to do for 350 years.

Several dominant themes are treated in the paper. The first, as alluded to above, is that rural development policy has been evolving in the United States since the 17th century. Second, in the past, the policy goals seemed more specific, e.g., settling the West and providing electrical service, and

more uniform across all rural areas. Dr. Barkley continually emphasizes the diverse and heterogeneous nature of rural areas; some trying to accelerate development, some trying to control it; all concerned with a myriad of problems. A final theme is that with all the interest and rhetoric, we do not have a well-defined, consistent rural development policy at the national level.

Dr. Barkley provides an interesting characterization of rural development in the latter part of the paper. He argues that rural development is a problem with n dimensions, where n is an unknown. This is compounded by the fact that each n has m qualitative attributes. I would argue that m is not only also unknown, it frequently varies: rural development is not one problem but a tangle of interrelated problems that vary by region and over time. To compound the difficulty, these problems are perceived differently by different individuals and interest groups. The question of which problem to address first is never clear. Given this number of unknowns and uncertainties, the feasibility of a comprehensive national rural development policy is doubtful.

In summary, Dr. Barkley reminds us of the diversity, magnitude and complexity of the issues of rural development in America. They are issues not likely to be easily addressed or readily resolved. The challenge is to develop a set of rural development policies that are flexible enough to address these issues efficiently and effectively.

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