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Agricultural Outlook Forum

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THE ROLE OF COUNTIES IN BUILDING A RURAL REGIONAL INNOVATION
SYSTEM

Colleen Landkamer
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The Role of Counties in Building a Rural Regional Innovation System

Blue Earth County (MN) Commissioner Colleen Landkamer

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Thank you Chuck. It is a pleasure for me to be with you all today. As Chuck mentioned, my name is Colleen Landkamer and I serve as a County Commissioner in Blue Earth County, Minnesota. The population of my county is approximately 60,000 people and the county seat is Mankato. It's funny because I always say that I wear three hats depending on what audience I am speaking with. On the national scene, my county is viewed as a rural county, my first hat. On the state level, many see Blue Earth and Mankato as a regional center, a second hat, and on the local level, I am the "urban" commissioner because my district is the city of Mankato, a third hat. I would say also that example is illustrative of the many different roles of county commissioners. We have to be flexible and fluid depending on the issue in our counties. Whether we're talking about land use, garbage, childcare, or any of the multitude of issues that counties deal with.

I am fortunate to serve as President Elect of the National Association of Counties or NACo. NACo is the only national organization that represents county governments in Washington, DC. It was established in 1935, when western county officials felt that their concerns were not being heard in Washington, DC. NACo is truly a grassroots organization that represents county governments before the Congress and administration. Of the 3,066 counties across the nation, just over two-thirds are members of NACo, which is roughly 85 percent of the population. In addition to lobbying, NACo has an extensive technical assistance arm that provides county elected officials with the latest information on the difficult issues of today-such as homeland security, land use planning and affordable housing.

One of the challenges that NACo has had to overcome is the vast diversity of county governments. Because county governments are creatures of their state, the shape, size and powers vary greatly across the nation. For example, NACo represents the two extremes of the population spectrum - Los Angeles County, California has 9.5 million people and Loving County, Texas has 67 people.

One of the ways that we represent all counties at NACo is through groups such as our Large Urban County Caucus and our Rural Action Caucus. The Large Urban County Caucus is made up of county elected officials from the 100 largest counties by population. Some of the issues consistently on their agenda have been health care, economic development, telecommunications and transportation. Similarly, the Rural Action Caucus is made up of county elected officials, but we do not put a population cap on who can join recognizing the diversity of rural America means that rural in one area, may not be the same in another region of the country.

I was the first Chair of the Rural Action Caucus and the issues that we have worked on since the beginning have health care, economic development, telecommunications and transportation. These are the same exact issues facing our urban counterparts. However, for way too long the issue of rural and urban has been divisive - an "us" versus "them" mentality. Only recently at NACo have we began to break down these silos and really begun to look for partnering opportunities with county officials regardless of the population limits.

As I mentioned earlier, NACo's primary mission is lobbying and one example of partnership came from a specific legislative issue that I believe illustrates the need for partnerships. Many of you probably know that our federal highway program was recently reauthorized. Since there was close to \$300 billion dollars up for grabs in this bill, all county officials wanted to participate. As is sometimes the case with our urban colleagues, many thought that they were set to receive the lion's share of the money. In fact, they did have a lot of support, especially in the House, but then again the beauty of our federal system is that the rural states have a good bit of power in the Senate to balance the equation. Our staff reviewed the makeup of the relevant committees and then stressed how the priorities for Senators from states like Iowa or Montana would not be urban congestion but rather rural road safety and other rural based initiatives. As the old saying goes, "all politics is local".

This required urban and rural county commissioners to come together and begin to understand that challenges and problems facing our communities are not different, they are the same. The solutions may be different because of the differences of scale and nature of the community but together, rural and urban must come together. I especially believe that this is important because rural America can not go it alone into the future or we will lose out. Urban areas cannot do it by themselves either. Where do the natural resources come from? Food energy, etc. Size does matter, but we're all in this together. Rural areas can compete in a global marketplace but they must do so as a region.

Another example of how partnerships have been formed at NACo has been on the issue of methamphetamine abuse. This drug has garnered the attention of county governments across the nation and NACo has been fortunate to raise the level of awareness and visibility of the issue through several surveys we have conducted. Meth is a cheap, easy drug to manufacture because unlike other drugs it can be manufactured nearly anywhere with household chemicals that can be found at any drugstore.

Widespread use of meth started in the West but has been pervasive in my home state of Minnesota and other Midwestern rural states for the last several years. This is unique because most drug problems go from the urban core to the suburban and rural areas. However, meth is different and one of the main reasons is that a main ingredient in the production of meth is anhydrous ammonia, which is a fertilizer that many farmers use. Also, rural areas have isolated areas where meth can be produced and fewer law enforcement personnel to patrol these areas.

With that as background, NACo became involved in the fight against meth because of the staggering costs to counties associated with this epidemic. County jails are overwhelmed with meth addicted individuals, counties in many states provide child welfare services and have had to take children out of their homes because of their parents meth addiction.

When we started to work on this issue, we realized that the perception that meth was only a rural problem was wrong. Rural counties were not the only ones being affected. Urban counties like Honolulu, Hawaii, Maricopa County, Arizona and Multnomah County, Oregon, were seeing large increases in the meth busts. Therefore, commissioners from all counties needed to work together to ensure that we stemmed the rapid increases in meth abuse. I'm happy to report that we have seen accomplishments already from this partnership and there is great promise in what we can achieve together.

I mentioned earlier NACo's Rural Action Caucus, and I just wanted to give you a little history to put into perspective how much growth we've had at the National Association of Counties in terms of thinking "rural". The impetus for our Rural Action Caucus was the belief that rural is not synonymous with agriculture. Agriculture is of course a major driver of the rural economy but issues such as health, telecommunications and economic development are set apart from agriculture as well. County officials on our Agriculture and Rural Affairs Steering Committee believed that ~~~and wanted a way to unite for all issues facing rural counties. Consequently, a Rural Renaissance Taskforce was appointed in 1997, chaired by Judge Dale White of Oregon and myself.

We made several recommendations. One of them was to form our Rural Action Caucus, to be the voice of rural county government and provide leadership on these difficult and challenging issues. Today, as we approach the meth issue as a national concern, counties of all sizes unite in an effort to reduce meth production and use through national and state policy as well as education and prevention.

In my travels as NACo's president elect, I met and work with many county officials. Many have told me how important NACo is to them. NACo represents us well in Washington, but we must work at home to become leaders within our counties and regions. I have worked diligently to promote leadership development for our county officials by modeling effective leadership myself. As a woman, I am sensitive to the leadership challenges in rural America. For our membership, I represent a rural county commissioner who has effectively given leadership on behalf of my constituents. As president of NACo next year, I will focus on helping county officials, find a stronger leadership voice. Among our new partners will be the National Foundation of Women Legislators. NACo and the Foundation are working on similar issues confronting youth, families, and senior citizens.

Lastly, I am so honored to be on this panel with the National League of Cities, the National Association of Development Organizations, the National Rural Health Assn. and the most passionate person I now regarding rural issues, Chuck Fluharty from the Rural Policy Institute. Several years ago, Karen Miller, was president of NACo. Karen is a commissioner from Boone County, Missouri a strong leader for rural America. Karen was and still is a believer in breaking down barriers between jurisdictions and organizations and finding common ground to benefit her citizens and rural America. As President of NACo, she was committed to bring together the Large Urban County Caucus and the Rural Action Caucus in 2002 and 2003 for several summits to discuss how we could all work together and provide a collective voice for rural America. Under the strong leadership of Jane Halliburton, Storey County IA Supervisor,

chair of RAC - Don Staplely, Maricopa County Supervisor, chair of LUCC, that work has continued, with the assistance of RUPRI and Chuck Fluharty, who is a tireless leader in the rural cause, and I PLEDGE to do my part to ensure that it continues in the future.

I started with hats, so I'll end with hats...There are times when a "hat" isn't appropriate, but we must always be fluid, flexible, ready to grab every opportunity for rural America to move forward, as leaders sometimes we may have to wear a "cap".

Again, thank you for the opportunity to speak before you today and for all you do to help agriculture and rural communities prosper and I look forward to any questions that you may have. Thank you.