

Summary of Regional Stakeholder Meetings on the Development of a Frontier Definition

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Washington, DC, March 12, 2009

Albuquerque, NM, April 24, 2009

Seattle, WA, May 18, 2009

Omaha, NE, June 26, 2009

Note: A fifth meeting was held in Seattle (March 22, 2010) that emphasized the island aspect of a frontier definition. This meeting is summarized in the literature review.

BACKGROUND

The Office of Rural Health Policy (ORHP) and USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS) are collaborating to develop a frontier/remote definition. Although the term "frontier" is strongly linked in most people's minds to historic settlement of the West, it is widely applied to contemporary settings to denote geographic remoteness. However, both "frontier" and "remote" remain fuzzy concepts when it comes to drawing lines on a map, or identifying eligible populations for federal programs.

The ORHP/ERS research team will be addressing the following questions: What is the best way to define geographic remoteness and what are the best data and methods available to map levels of remoteness in the U.S.? In addition, a secondary project objective is to develop a remote island definition. The research will be informed by policy needs, but ultimately will be based on social science theory and practice and be independent of specific policy considerations. It will be up to researchers, policymakers, program managers, and advocates to make sure the definition is applied appropriately to specific contexts. It will be a flexible definition that recognizes the diversity of settlement patterns and conditions in the contemporary frontier.

ERS has developed a variety of county classification measures and the success of previous collaborations between ERS and ORHP is evident in the widespread use of the sub-county RUCA codes. ORHP and ERS are committed to implementing a completely transparent process, thoroughly documented with regards to data and procedures, so that stakeholders can follow the decision-making and continue to provide input on all aspects of the project.

The four regional stakeholder meetings were designed to gather input in advance from those potentially affected by the proposed definition, especially those who manage or work on federally-funded programs in remote places. The formulation of a robust and scientifically sound definition is critical to the effective implementation of such programs. The ORHP/ERS research team will be using the knowledge gained in developing, implementing and refining the definition, analyzing economic, demographic,

and other characteristics of the new categories, and conducting a separate analysis to determine how to deal with islands regarding their frontier/remote status.

The wide-ranging discussions that took place at all four meetings reflected a variety of perspectives and geographic circumstances, as well as the importance placed on this topic by regional and local stakeholders. Participants made it clear that how remoteness is measured will greatly affect the work they do and the well being of their communities. The knowledge gained is summarized under nine headings:

- 1) Why are we doing this?
- 2) General principles
- 3) Is “frontier” a useful term for this definition?
- 4) Too many definitions
- 5) How should we measure remoteness?
- 6) Data challenges
- 7) Uniqueness and flexibility
- 8) Frontier, land-use, and community value
- 9) The need for state and tribal input

WHY ARE WE DOING THIS?

Participants expressed concern about keeping underlying goals in mind. In the end, this project is meant to foster good economic development policy and encourage public and private investment. The purpose of the research should be to create a tool to assist in identifying people and places that should qualify for health service support and other types of economic resources. It can never be the only tool used, but a frontier definition needs to be able to assist in the process of pinpointing marginalized areas where it is most difficult to provide services. In the end, the real test is whether this definition appropriately helps frontier residents.

There is a basic understanding that geographic remoteness creates challenges to building vibrant economies and maintaining a high standard of well being for rural residents. Along with overall community size and population density, remoteness from large population centers or transportation hubs affects incomes, jobs, affordability, tax bases, education systems, access to health care delivery services, economies of scale, and infrastructure.

Rural areas are seen to be in competition with urban-based organizations, such as America 2050, that work to focus infrastructure investments on major urban regions. To the extent that rural definitions will be used to direct federal funds, they should be developed with an idea of “geographic democracy” in mind. Rural advocates will continue to use frontier definitions to highlight the need for federal and state rural investment funds.

GENERAL PRINCIPLES

During each of the four stakeholder meetings, there was a discussion of the general guiding principles for the development of the frontier and remote island definitions.

There was an overall agreement that the definition should be: 1) objective, reliable, practical, reproducible, and straightforward; 2) compatible with key data sources; 3) policy relevant but independent of specific program objectives; and 4) viewed as one among several possible definitions, rather than described as ‘the’ definition.

IS FRONTIER A USEFUL TERM FOR THIS DEFINITION?

Several participants suggested dropping “frontier” in favor of something more neutral such as “remote.” Many noted the strong connection with the West and with controversial aspects of its settlement history. One meeting participant commented that the term is particularly disliked by Alaskan Native Americans because of a history of negative connotations. This link with the West weakens the usefulness of the term for a project such as this that needs to be national in scope.

Originally, the term described the boundary line between populated areas and wilderness; thus “frontier” communities were places located along this line. This fact generated discussion of land-use issues, especially the critical economic role of natural settings and wilderness resources in the communities in question. Suggestions for incorporating wilderness and other land-use measures in a frontier definition were discussed (see LAND-USE section below). Some meeting participants pointed out that frontier location was commonly associated with a dearth of economic resources, which may explain the term’s use in programs addressing these disadvantages. The term has evolved over time and its use as a synonym for geographic remoteness in contemporary U.S. settings is well established, especially in health care research and policy-making. But it will always be subject to criticism.

TOO MANY DEFINITIONS

A lot of time was spent discussing the frustrations that current definitions cause. Rural stakeholders are focused on strategies for directing federal funds to rural areas. Taking advantage of the rapid increase in “stimulus” funds can be difficult because it requires expanding existing grant-writing capacity. The division of different programs into sometimes non-overlapping rural categories hampers coordinated efforts at the community level to access federal funds.

Rural definitions are numerous and can be quite complex and often information is not available that explains underlying criteria. It seems to users that there are simply too many different definitions in use. Federal programs employ different definitions for targeting rural populations, so some communities are eligible for some programs and not others. This hampers efforts to devise a holistic approach to economic development and health care delivery. Many rural definitions were applied to federal programs haphazardly with little or no critical evaluation of the definitional details in relation to alternative criteria.

HOW SHOULD WE MEASURE REMOTENESS?

Initially, “remoteness” and “isolation” were both used to frame the meeting discussions, but participants pointed out that they are not the same. Isolation means the lack of

interaction. Remoteness means distance or the presence of barriers. Isolation can be both physical and social—poverty and age can isolate groups—while remoteness tends to be more strictly physical in nature. Social access is important—wealthy people in more remote areas can be less isolated than the urban poor. Thus, the question of whether socioeconomic status should play a role in a frontier definition was frequently debated. The consensus seemed to be that the definition itself should rely on strictly physical measures but should be designed to allow for use in combination with other measures as needed. For that reason, participants tended to prefer the term “remote” rather than “isolated.”

However, that still leaves many questions about how to measure remoteness. Should we just use measures of distance to urban centers, or also include access to transportation links, such as distance to interstate highways or regional airports? What about access to communication technologies, especially broadband? The latter proposal challenges the notion of defining a strictly *physical* type of remoteness—the ability to get from one place to another—and recognizes the growing importance of *virtual* connectedness.

Some definitions use commuting to distinguish rural from suburban areas, while others simply use population size, linear distance, road travel distance, or road travel time measures. The fact that a large proportion of a town or county’s population commutes to a large city for work is not necessarily indicative of suburban status. Instead, it may indicate the loss of rural jobs and the subsequent need to seek work elsewhere.

Stakeholders are well aware that distance is a relative concept—a major challenge to this type of geographic research. People’s perception of what constitutes remoteness varies across space and time. The automobile and other transportation advances certainly redefined the relationship between distance and remoteness, and today remoteness for an individual living in a rural area depends in large part on automobile access. In other instances, where road travel is not practical, degree of remoteness depends on the availability and affordability of ferries and air travel.

The meaning of distance varies dramatically among regions and depends to some degree on topography and climate. Remoteness can vary seasonally. Settlement patterns make a big difference. In very general terms, rural settlement in the West tends to be more concentrated in small towns, with vast stretches in between them. Large sections of the region, especially areas with large-scale ranching, public lands, or reservations, have only very small crossroads service centers. Settlement in the East tends to be higher density and more dispersed throughout the countryside, but generally more accessible to larger cities (exceptions include remote areas along the U.S.-Canada border). The frontier concept more likely describes the West’s pattern of settlement, but providing services to a dispersed population can be as much of a challenge.

DATA CHALLENGES

Any definition of remoteness must overcome data limitations. The replacement of the decennial census long-form with the American Community Survey means a major loss of

detailed socioeconomic data for local areas. Previous methods for building sub-county classifications—such as the RUCA codes—will have to be modified.

Rural resource needs are difficult to quantify in areas with seasonal fluctuations in population. Current data collection limits the ability to determine the off-season or minimum population for such places, which may be the more relevant determinant of need. New strategies for measuring seasonal change were discussed but not resolved, including using HUD address vacancies data.

Geographic units create big problems. County-level definitions, such as the Office of Management and Budget's metro-nonmetro classification, are generally viewed as unhelpful in measuring remoteness, especially out West. There may need to be a county-level version of "frontier" devised in the end, as one alternative, but there was near universal agreement that the core definition should use sub-county geography. Advantages and disadvantages associated with ZIP code units and census tracts were discussed.

UNIQUENESS AND FLEXIBILITY

In designing program eligibility criteria, allowances need to be made for areas that are "frontier" in character but that have unique circumstances that place them outside the defined areas. Much discussion centered on the need to document unique factors and circumstances that cause such areas to fall outside the "standard" criteria; this will help ease the frustration of explaining why certain areas don't qualify. Hawaii and Alaska are especially affected by unique factors; this fact has been recognized by Western Governor's Association in their adopted rural definitions.

A general consensus emerged that any definition requires multiple categories, because any dichotomy will not be able to fill all programmatic needs. There was a general consensus that the final product needs to balance simplicity and flexibility. The advice seems to be to focus on a few key factors (population, density, travel time, distance) and allow for overlays when needed. Within the key factors, allowance needs to be made for different cut points so the frontier definition can be used for varying purposes. It is possible to start with a single definition, but programs need to be able to calibrate the definition to fit their requirements. Flexibility needs to be built in and easy to manage. Programs could use a dichotomy or a ranking system.

The idea of complementary "screens" or "layers" came up repeatedly in relation to socioeconomic characteristics that are typically employed to measure community well being. Several participants expressed the opinion that users should be able to overlay socioeconomic and land-use "screens" as needed for research, policy planning, or program implementation. For example, a frontier definition could be usefully integrated with models that are used to measure the impact of rural development efforts, such as the USDA's SEBAS model. Any definition will need to be combined with measures such as poverty to determine eligibility for federal and state health care programs.

FRONTIER, LAND-USE, AND COMMUNITY VALUE

Though not a major theme, some participants stressed the importance of land-use issues, especially the growing demand for ecosystem services and the increasing attention to ecosystem valuation. Recent publications from the National Academies include studies of ecosystem service research and development and public participation in environmental assessment. USDA announced intentions to establish an Office of Ecosystem Services. Ecosystem regions cut across frontier definitions, but are necessary in explaining why particular areas have low population densities.

The USGS [National Map](#) is a good source for land-use measurement. It includes demographic data but it is not always well integrated with land-use information. The ORHP/ERS frontier project is more people-oriented and focuses on identifying distressed or underserved areas. The intersection may come from making the connections between land use and community value. Also, land use concepts help to make rural and frontier areas “come alive” by filling in “white spaces” to include the diversity of physical characteristics. Population-based definitions tend to define rural according to what is missing.

If land-use measures do not become part of the base set of frontier criteria, they should be viewed as one of many complementary “screens” to be overlaid on the base definition and used to explain geographic patterns of settlement and identify areas of concern. Some argued that valuing land-use roles might be less important in defining frontiers than in making the case for the importance of frontier areas. Rural or frontier has always been defined by what’s not there (people) instead of by what is there: wheat, farms, forests, minerals, watersheds, and livestock. We could change the view from what’s not there to what is there.

THE NEED FOR STATE AND TRIBAL INPUT

State policies influence program outcomes, because states differ in terms of how federal funds are handled. Though we do not want to design separate definitions, we need to be aware of this state-level “effect” in potentially creating challenges for any given universal definition. Input from federally-recognized tribes and state offices would help identify problems and verify outcomes of any definitional choices. Benefits will accrue from reporting research results by state and noting any obvious state-level variations of unique situations. Many participants expressed the view that state-level comparisons could improve research outcomes, as well as be valuable to state policymakers.

OTHER STAKEHOLDER INPUT

In addition to the five stakeholder meetings summarized above, the project gathered input from other professional meetings (e.g., meetings of the ORHP Frontier Partners Meetings). The study team also received input from the Project’s Technical Advisory Committee and Stakeholder Advisory Committee.