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Presentation

**Building Rural Communities: New Mexico Cooperative Extension Service's  
Stronger Economies Together Program**

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## **Building Rural Communities: New Mexico Cooperative Extension Service's Stronger Economies Together Program**

### ***Challenge***

Rural New Mexico, like much of rural America, is experiencing challenges driven by declining population. Between 2010-2019, 84.6% of New Mexico's non-metro counties (22 of 26) lost population and 53.8% (14 of 26) lost jobs. (See Table 1)

Declining populations and lower population density increase the cost of infrastructure and services, narrow the breadth and depth of the labor markets, reduce the size of markets (and sales), and shrink tax bases, putting local economies at a competitive disadvantage, and eventually in peril.

There is broad consensus among rural development professionals that creating, attracting and retaining jobs as a single rural county in isolation from other nearby counties is becoming increasingly ineffective. In today's marketplace, economic development progress is more likely to be realized when rural non-metropolitan and metropolitan counties work together to assess and implement plans that build on their assets and comparative economic strengths. Regional planning, collaborative investments, entrepreneurial networks, and projects across communities and counties hold the greatest promise for mobilizing scarce resources to achieve economic development in rural areas. (Goetz, 2009; Green, 2013)

### ***Response: Stronger Economies Together (SET) Initiative***

The Stronger Economies Together (SET) Initiative (2010 – 2018) was launched by USDA Rural Development (USDA RD), the nation's four Regional Rural Development Centers, and land-grant university partners. SET enables rural communities and counties to work together to develop and implement an economic development blueprint for a multi-county region that strategically builds on the current and emerging economic strengths of that region. A SET region is an area comprised of three or more contiguous rural counties. A county is classified rural by the U.S. Census Bureau if 51% or more of the county's population is rural or 75% of the county's land area is located in rural areas of that region. The SET Initiative is now in place in 94 regions across 32 states. The New Mexico Cooperative Extension Service (NM CES) has established the largest number of SET regions nationally. (See Map 1)

### **New Mexico SET Regions**

Between 2010 – 2017, NM CES Community Resource and Economic Development specialists, facilitated the establishment of nine SET multicounty SET regions that include 32 of the state's 33 counties including:

- 2010 - **Southwestern New Mexico Economic Development Partnership** (Catron, Grants, Hidalgo and Luna counties);
- 2013 - **Northeast Economic Development Organization** (Union, Colfax, Mora, Harding, Quay, Guadalupe and San Miguel counties);
- 2013 - **Trail of the Ancients Partnership** (San Juan, McKinley and Cibola counties and Navajo Nation Chapter Houses);

- 2015 - **Northern New Mexico Pueblos Partnership** (Tesuque, San Ildefonso and Picuris Pueblos);
- 2015 - **Middle Rio Grande Economic Development Organization** (Catron, Valencia, Socorro and Sierra counties);
- 2015 - **South Central Mountains Economic Development Organization** (Lincoln and Otero counties and the Mescalero Apache Tribe);
- 2016 - **East Central New Mexico Partnership** (Quay, Guadalupe, De Baca and Torrance counties);
- 2017 - **New Mexico Mid Central Rural Corridor Partnership** (Los Alamos, Sandoval and Bernalillo counties);
- 2017 - **Southeastern New Mexico Partnership** (Curry, Roosevelt, Chaves, Eddy and Lea counties).

#### New Mexico SET Region Goals

Based on assessments of their resources (natural, human, and built) and comparative economic advantages, NM's SET regions established community and economic development goals to achieve the revitalization and growth of local and regional economies including:

- Promoting regional tourism, agriculture, agribusiness value-added products, forest and wood products, and renewable energy;
- Increasing access to affordable housing, health care, social assistance, and public services;
- Improving transportation, telecommunications, and broadband infrastructure and access;
- Promoting regional economic development collaboration, planning and implementation;
- Promoting workforce development, business attraction and creation, and the retention and expansion of existing businesses;
- Building organizational and staff capacity to sustain long term planning and implementation of community and economic development programs and projects; and
- Securing sustained funding for community and economic development programs and projects.

#### New Mexico SET Program Structure

The NM SET program includes planning and implementation phases. The planning phase (6-7 months) was delivered in five interactive group sessions, engaging community members in interpreting information and data on the region's assets and resources, current and emerging economic clusters, comparative advantages, and demographic and socio-economic trends used to develop their economic development plans. A total of 45 sessions were conducted, averaging 4-6 hours in length. Eight hundred and fifty-five (855) individuals participated in the sessions. During the implementation phase (6+ months), the regions have focused on developing a leadership structure and model for action and accountability, as well as identifying technical assistance and financial resources needed for achieving their economic development goals.

### Stakeholder Input and Partnerships

Across New Mexico's nine multicounty SET regions, leaders and community members, representing various sectors— business/industry, economic development, government, education, healthcare, faith-based, non-profit, and citizens, facilitated by NM CES Community Resource and Economic Development specialists using a nationally supported SET training curriculum, met monthly to develop regional economic development plans (see <https://aces.nmsu.edu/set/> for copies of the NM SET plans).

The SET program design encouraged and sought the collaboration of government, industry, and civic organizations across jurisdictions (towns, cities and counties) including chambers of commerce, MainStreet programs, economic development organizations, county and municipal government planning and economic development departments, universities and colleges, and formal and informal community leaders. Representatives from federal and state departments and agencies participated directly in the sessions and group discussions that shaped the regions' plans, including at the federal level- U.S. Department of Agriculture (RD, NRCS, FSA, RMA, FS), U.S. Small Business Administration, Department of Commerce (EDA) and Environmental Protection Agency, and at the state level- NM Economic Development Department; NM Small Business Development Center Network; NM Department of Tourism; and NM Council of Government and Economic Development Districts.

### ***Outcomes (To-Date)***

Eight of New Mexico's 9 SET regional economic development plans were designated by USDA RD as "high quality" and awarded \$5,000 in seed funds to use in the implementation of their plans. Many of the regions have leveraged the seed funds to secure additional funding from federal, state, and foundation programs, and in-kind professional services, to begin implementation of activities to achieve their planned goals.

NM CES has secured funding for two projects, the Northeast Economic Development Organization and East Central New Mexico Partnership SET regions, to (1) establish an agribusiness accelerator (demonstration and training) farm, a commercial kitchen, and a food hub to train next generation farmers and food processors to address local and regional food needs and capture related business and economic development opportunities, and (2) facilitate a multi-rural county collaborative effort to strengthen and grow retail and service sector businesses catering to a growing outdoor recreation and tourism industry in the regions. Lessons learned from these pilot projects will guide future efforts to establish similar efforts in other SET regions in the state.

### ***Concluding Comments***

The goal of the New Mexico SET program is to improve the quality of life of New Mexicans, particularly those living in rural communities. Most of New Mexico's non-metro counties are losing population and many are losing jobs. To stabilize and put these counties on a pathway to recovery and revitalization will require time (years, not just months) and focused strategic actions and investments in people and places. Changes in attitudes and behavior will also be

required, including cooperation across political and administrative boundaries. The NM CES' SET program is helping create that pathway.

**References**

Goetz, J. Stephan, Steven C. Deller and Thomas R. Harris, Eds. (2009) *Targeting Regional Economic Development*, London and New York: Routledge Studies in Global Competition

Green, Gary Paul, and John Aloysius Zinda (2013) "Rural Development Theory"  
*Handbook of Rural Development*, Northhampton, Massachusetts: Edward Elgar Publishing, Inc.

Southern Rural Development Center *Stronger Economies Together (SET) Program*  
(<http://srdc.msstate.edu/set/home>)

TABLE 1

## New Mexico Non-Metro Counties: Population and Employment, 2010-2019

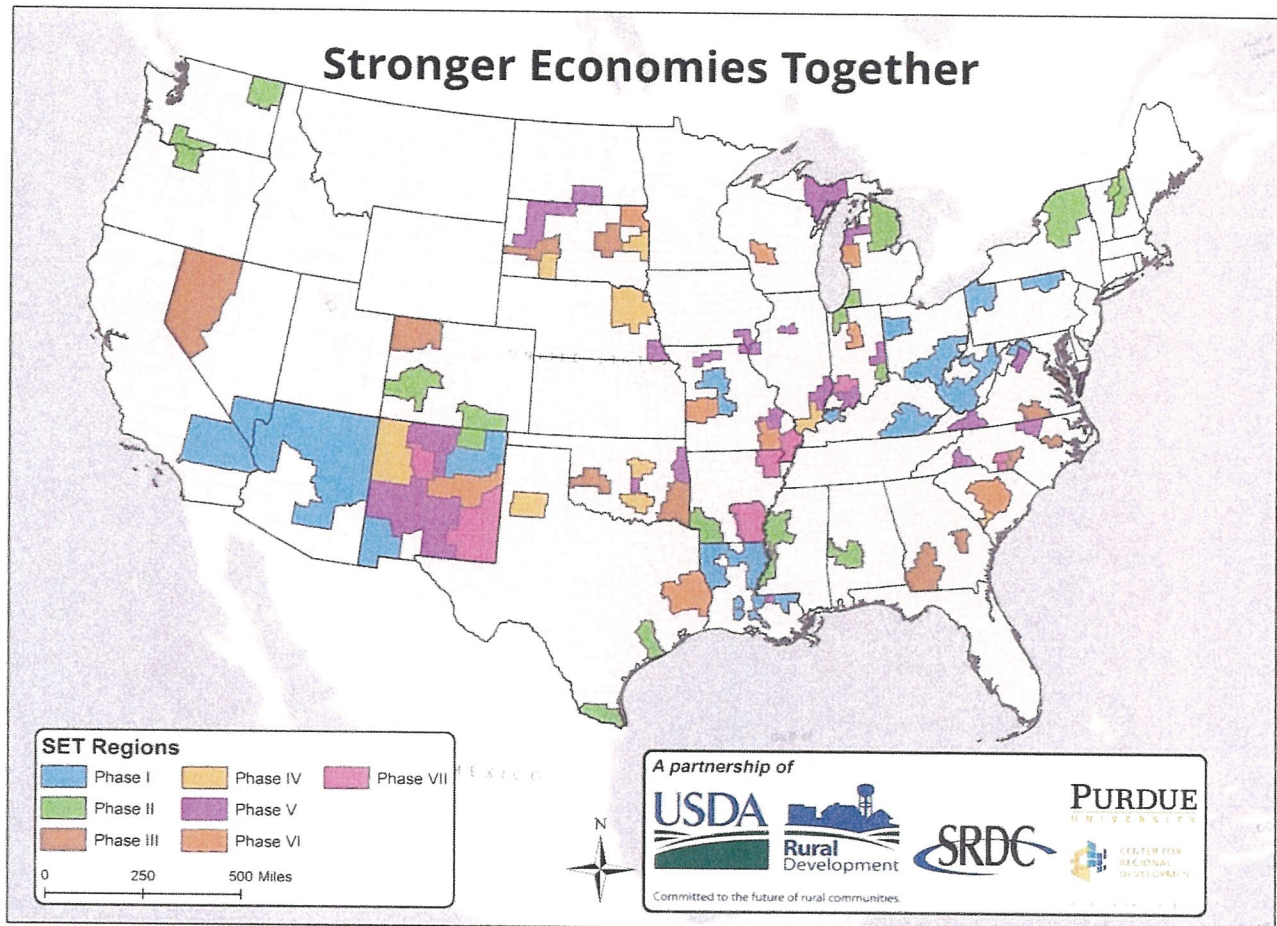
	Population 2010	Population 2019	Percent Change	Absolute Change	Employment 2010	Employment 2019	Percent Change	Absolute Change
<b>Non-Metro Counties</b>								
<b>Adjacent to Metro County</b>								
Cibola	27,179	26,675	-1.9%	-504	9,982	10,150	1.7%	168
Los Alamos	17,994	19,369	7.6%	1,375	19,752	20,420	3.4%	668
McKinley	71,673	71,367	-0.4%	-306	31,042	29,264	-5.7%	-1,778
Otero	64,403	67,490	4.8%	3,087	28,787	28,959	0.6%	172
Rio Arriba	40,286	38,921	-3.4%	-1,365	16,068	15,394	-4.2%	-674
San Miguel	29,393	27,277	-7.2%	-2,116	12,022	11,736	-2.4%	-286
Socorro	17,791	16,637	-6.5%	-1,154	8,179	7,793	-4.7%	-386
<b>Sub- Total</b>	<b>268,719</b>	<b>267,736</b>	<b>-0.4%</b>	<b>-983</b>	<b>125,832</b>	<b>123,716</b>	<b>-1.7%</b>	<b>-2,116</b>
<b>Non-Adjacent to Metro County</b>								
Catron	3,748	3,527	-5.9%	-221	1,658	1,662	0.2%	4
Chaves	65,720	64,615	-1.7%	-1,105	28,881	28,961	0.3%	80
Colfax	13,725	11,941	-13.0%	-1,784	7,107	6,501	-8.5%	-606
Curry	48,971	48,954	0.0%	-17	24,881	26,451	6.3%	1,570
De Baca	2,031	1,748	-13.9%	-283	964	915	-5.1%	-49
Eddy	53,909	58,460	8.4%	4,551	30,405	42,425	39.5%	12,020
Grant	29,383	26,998	-8.1%	-2,385	13,255	12,906	-2.6%	-349
Guadalupe	4,695	4,300	-8.4%	-395	1,962	2,184	11.3%	222
Harding	690	625	-9.4%	-65	483	443	-8.3%	-40
Hidalgo	4,864	4,198	-13.7%	-666	2,283	2,153	-5.7%	-130
Lea	64,598	71,070	10.0%	6,472	34,225	42,996	25.6%	8,771
Lincoln	20,450	19,572	-4.3%	-878	10,807	10,792	-0.1%	-15
Luna	25,081	23,709	-5.5%	-1,372	9,829	9,631	-2.0%	-198
Mora	4,893	4,521	-7.6%	-372	1,790	1,792	0.1%	2
Quay	9,045	8,253	-8.8%	-792	4,277	4,090	-4.4%	-187
Roosevelt	20,016	18,500	-7.6%	-1,516	9,024	8,196	-9.2%	-828
Sierra	12,041	10,791	-10.4%	-1,250	5,009	4,980	-0.6%	-29
Taos	32,895	32,723	-0.5%	-172	17,220	18,109	5.2%	889
Union	4,511	4,059	-10.0%	-452	2,202	2,285	3.8%	83
<b>Sub-Total</b>	<b>421,266</b>	<b>418,564</b>	<b>-0.6%</b>	<b>-2,702</b>	<b>206,262</b>	<b>227,472</b>	<b>10.3%</b>	<b>21,210</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>689,985</b>	<b>686,300</b>	<b>-0.5%</b>	<b>-3,685</b>	<b>332,094</b>	<b>351,188</b>	<b>5.7%</b>	<b>19,094</b>

Source:

U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis



## MAP 1



Phase I: 2010-11

Phase II: 2011-12

Phase III: 2012-13

Phase IV: 2013-14

Phase V: 2014-15

Phase VI: 2015-16

Phase VII: 2016-17