

Stronger Economies Together

Strategies for Building New Economic Opportunities

Background Information

About the Stronger Economies Together (SET) Program:

In many counties – especially counties with smaller populations -- finding ways to create, attract, and retain jobs is a challenging process. Pursuing economic development as a single rural county in isolation from other nearby counties is oftentimes unproductive. In today’s global marketplace, economic development progress is more likely to be realized when rural and metro counties work together as a multi-county region to assess, design, and implement plans that build on their assets and comparative economic strengths. That’s what the *Stronger Economies Together* (SET) project is all about.

Purpose:

The purpose of SET is to strengthen the capacity of communities/counties in rural America to work together in developing and implementing an economic development blueprint for their multi-county region, one that strategically builds on the current and emerging economic strengths of that region.

Sponsors:

The *Stronger Economies Together* (SET) Program is sponsored by USDA Rural Development (USDA RD), in partnership with the nation’s four Regional Rural Development Centers and their land-grant university colleagues.

What Types of Regions Are the Most Likely to Benefit from SET?

On the basis of the pilot SET program launched in 2010 in 9 states and 23 regions, we have discovered that counties/parishes that have newly organized as a region in response to the SET program, or have been working as a regional team for one year or less and are struggling to get off the ground, are the most likely to benefit from the SET program.

At the same time, there are other attributes that make regions more receptive and responsive to the SET program. These include:

- Understanding that regional strategies represent a key part of the overall economic development blueprint for counties/parishes;
- Being open to new economic sectors that might emerge as important economic clusters;
- Recognizing that inputs and perspectives from a diversity of groups and people are needed to build strong regional goals and plans;
- Realizing that now is a good time to take a fresh look at where the region is, where it wants to go, and the best way to get there;
- Being willing to devote the time and energy to work through all elements of the SET process.

Training: The Key Component of the SET Program:

The SET program consists of nine (9) core modules that are delivered to each regional team on a face-to-face basis. State Training Teams, made up of representatives of your state's land-grant university-based Extension Service, state USDA Rural Development staff, and other key partners, will deliver the SET training and serve as resource persons to your team. Approximately 35 hours of training will be provided to each regional team over the course of several months. Selected regions are expected to actively participate in the entire training. More information about the content of the training is available at: http://srdc.msstate.edu/set/files/set_overview.pdf.

Limited Amount of Technical Assistance Available to Regional Teams:

Aside from being involved in the delivery of the SET training materials, the State Training Team will provide up to 40 hours of technical assistance to your regional team for a period of 12 months once your team has completed its SET training. What we mean by technical assistance is that Extension educators and USDA RD State staff will make every effort to assist your team in securing the type of information needed to guide your regional planning activities, including the seeking of help of university colleagues or USDA RD state staff members who may have the background/expertise needed by your team. In the event that such expertise is not available in your state, you may be encouraged to apply for a "special assistance grant" from the national SET coordinators as a way of securing the services of an expert in another university or organization located outside of your state. These funds can be requested during the SET training period or in the subsequent 12-month technical assistance phase of the program. Only a limited amount of funds is available for such activities, so access to these funds is likely to be very competitive.

Major Benefits to Successful Applicants:

Each selected region will receive a number of important benefits including:

- Valuable training on the core building blocks for developing and launching a regional economic development plan.
- In-depth data that are tailored to the region, information that helps delineate the critical drivers of your economy (including the presence or emergence of regional clusters).
- Tools that uncover local assets and resources that can be tapped to advance your region's economic strategies and actions.
- Coaching and a limited amount of technical assistance (up to 40 hours over a period of one year after completion of the SET training program) from Extension educators, USDA RD State staff, and the Regional Rural Development Centers to guide the implementation of your regional goals and strategies .
- Option to apply for a "special assistance grant" that can be used to support more advanced regional data analyses or the securing of services from individuals with specific expertise needed by your team to press forward with its regional goal(s).
- Opportunity to share information and gather ideas/insights from other regions across the nation involved in the SET program.

The Rural Requirement:

Each region must encompass three or more counties/parishes and the population and/or geographic area of the region must either be (1) at least 51% rural in nature OR (2) 75% of the region's land area must be located in rural areas of that region . (See definitions and resources in the "Additional Information" section of this document.) While a region may cross state boundaries (something we encourage if it makes sense for your region), the counties/parishes that make-up that multi-state region must meet the rural requirement as well.

The Poverty Requirement:

In AR regions that intend to apply, at least 50% of the counties in the region must be defined as persistent poverty counties located in AR. Persistent poverty counties in AR are listed below.

Arkansas, Bradley, Chicot, Clark, Columbia, Dallas, Desha, Drew, Hempstead, Howard, Jackson, Lafayette, Lawrence, Lee, Mississippi, Monroe, Nevada, Newton, Phillips, Ouachita, Randolph, Searcy, Sevier, St. Francis, Woodruff.

Deadline Date for Applications:

Applications are due electronically no later than September 15, 2011 (by 11:59 p.m. Central Time) to dtootle@uaex.edu. You will receive an acknowledgement of your application within two business days. We urge all applicants to contact us immediately if they have not received an acknowledgement within this time period.

All applications will be carefully studied by a state review team representing the state's USDA RD office, Cooperative Extension Service, and other key community/economic development organizations or agencies. The state review team may contact applicants in order to conduct site visits or to coordinate conference calls with representatives of your group. Once the state review team has completed its evaluation of all SET applicants, it will submit its recommendations to the national USDA RD office. Key representatives from USDA RD and the Regional Rural Development Centers may initiate conference calls with the pool of finalists. The national USDA RD Office will make the final decision regarding regions in each of the target states that will be invited to be part of the SET program. The list of selected regions is expected to be announced by October 17, 2011.

Questions?

If you have any questions about the application process, please contact any one of the following individuals:

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APPLICATION FORM

Stronger Economies Together Program

Deadline for Applications: **September 15, 2011; 11:59 p.m. Central Time**

Please Complete All Sections of the Application Form

Part A: Information about Your Regional Team

We would like to gather some information about your region team and the key contact person.

- a. Name of your Regional Team (if none has been decided yet, just provide a name that best describes the geographic area of your regional group).

NOTE: For purposes of this application, a region is defined as an area that encompasses three or more counties/parishes that are located contiguous to one another. It is possible for such counties/parishes to cross state boundaries.

- b. What counties/parishes are included in your region? _____

- c. Main contact person for your regional team: _____

- d. Email address for your main contact person: _____

- e. Telephone number(s) for your regional team or contact person:

- f. Team or contact person's mailing address (City/State/Zip):

- g. Please place an "X" by the ONE statement that best describes your regional team:

- A brand new regional group that has been organized for the purpose of applying for the SET program
- A regional organization that is one year old or less and that is still trying to get off the ground in developing a sound economic development plan for the region
- A regional organization that is one year old or less with a solid economic development plan taking shape (or in place) for the region
- A regional group that has been organized for more than one year, but is inactive and/or in need of help to get back on track
- An established regional group that has been in place for one year or more and has developed and is pursuing an effective regional economic development plan.

Part B: Brief Description of Your Region (400 word limit)

Present an overview of your region in terms of some of its key characteristics. Provide a concise picture of your region drawing on quantitative and qualitative information. Here are the types of information you might include in your description:

Economic region: Is this region an economic region? That is, do you have evidence from a university-based economic analysis unit or other independent reputable entity that the counties/parishes in your region, taken together, constitute an economic region (or an emerging economic region)? Please explain.

Key sectors that make-up your economy and the current health of these sectors: Are they stable, expanding, declining, etc.? In general, tell us about how the economy of your region is doing and why. Is the region experiencing economic distress or high rates of poverty?

Important population/demographic characteristics of the region. Is its population growing or declining and why? Is the composition of the population changing (such as getting older or younger, shifting racial or ethnic make-up, and the migration flow of population into or out of the region)?

Current attributes of the workforce. Are workers involved in lower/higher quality jobs? Is the educational status of your workforce an issue?

In sum, include information that will provide a snapshot of the current state of your region's economy and some of the important social and demographic challenges/opportunities that exist in the region.

Part C: Benefits/Challenges of Pursuing a Regional Economic Development Plan (400 word limit)

1. What do you believe are the major benefits of building an economic development plan that encompasses the counties/parishes that have been selected to be part of your region?
2. What do you anticipate will be some of the key challenges that your team will face as it seeks to develop and launch a regional economic development plan?

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for the respondent to write their answers to the two questions listed above. The box occupies the majority of the page's vertical space below the questions.

Part D: Involvement in the SET Initiative (400 word limit)

1. Explain why your regional team would like to be part of the SET program. That is, indicate why you believe your team is serious about using the SET process as a springboard for thinking and acting strategically in building a stronger regional economy.
2. Are there specific topics associated with the SET program that your team is likely to find most helpful/valuable? If so, which topics and explain why these are likely to be important to your team? (See the list of topics at: http://srdc.msstate.edu/set/files/set_overview.pdf).

Part E: Current Members of Your Regional Team and Commitment Letters

Please provide the names of the individuals that have agreed to be part of your regional team. Please indicate the primary organizational/agency affiliation of these individuals, if relevant. For example, please note if the person is the county economic development coordinator, the superintendent of schools, CEO of a local firm, board member of a nonprofit health clinic, head of a housing organization, etc. It has been shown that the more effective regional teams are those that include representation from many sectors. Applications with good representation will score higher. ALSO, a signed commitment letter from each person on your team that states that he/she has agreed to be an active participant in the 35 hours of SET training must be included with this application.

Name of Regional Team Member	Primary Organization/Agency the Person Represents	Have Commitment Letter from this Individual?*
		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No

* **IMPORTANT:** A “Yes” answer means that if your team is selected to be part of the SET program, the team members acknowledge and agree that they will attend and be actively involved in the 35 hours of SET training.

NOTE: If you need more space to list the regional team’s membership, please attach a separate sheet with the names of these individuals, their organizational/agency affiliation, and the status of their commitment letter to be part of the SET program.

Additional Information for Applicants

Definition of Rural

For purposes of this application, rural refers to counties that are classified as nonmetropolitan areas by the Office of Management and Budget. Nonmetropolitan areas can be either micropolitan or noncore counties. This information can be downloaded from the following SRDC web site:

<http://srdc.msstate.edu/set/definitionrural.html>

Budgeting for SET Meeting Expenses

SET funds are not available to support meeting room rentals or refreshments. As such, regional teams are encouraged to seek local sponsors to pay the cost of meeting room rentals or for meals, snacks, and/or drinks that the team may wish to make available during the SET training sessions.

How Proposals Will Be Scored

All proposals will be scored on a **200 points basis**. The following details the maximum amount of points associated with each component of the SET application. Please note that in addition to the scores associated with each SET application, USDA RD will be looking for other key elements in the selection process, such as regions with: (a) varying levels of ruralness; (b) different economic characteristics; (c) crossing state lines; (d) varying levels of social and demographic features (i.e., high poverty, population migration patterns, and racial/ethnic changes). These additional elements are intended to ensure that a good mix of regions is part of the SET program.

	<u>Maximum Points Possible</u>
Type of regional team (Part A, Item g)	25
Description provided of your region (Part B)	35
Discussion of benefits & challenges of pursuing a regional plan (Part C)	40
Discussion of why the team wants to be involved in the SET initiative (Part D)	45
Diversity of people/organizations that have committed to be on your SET team (Part E)	35
Overall quality and completeness of the proposal	<u>20</u>
TOTAL POINTS	200