

A recent initiative from the U.S. Department of Agriculture will provide a new resource to help Mississippi's rural communities come together to bring jobs and economic development to those rural areas.

Stronger Economies Together (SET), a project launched by USDA Rural Development in collaboration with the nation's Rural Development Centers and their land-grant universities, seeks to help rural areas create regional economic development strategies that capitalize on the strengths of their communities to achieve sustainability. As a result of the recent economic downturn, many rural communities are faced with the challenge of seeking out new means and strategies to prosper. Regional collaboration is one new strategy to increase effectiveness and growth in a climate in which resources are limited.

"The SET project is another of the many resources provided by USDA Rural Development to our state's rural communities to help them prosper," noted Trina George, State Director of USDA Rural Development in Mississippi. "When we jettison state lines and pool our resources, we can move forward to address problems that we share with communities in our surrounding states."

Regional collaboration, or "regionalism", a pillar of rural economic prosperity and a policy goal of U.S. Agriculture Under Secretary for Rural Development Dallas Tonsagar, envisions thinking past state borders and boundaries in favor of a concentration on tackling problems that traditionally cross those lines. The SET project encourages regionalism by rewarding partnerships of states contiguous to each other with technical assistance, training, and grant funds. Mississippi is in a region that also includes Texas, Louisiana, and Alabama.

The Mississippi office of USDA Rural Development is currently seeking applications from rural regions of the state to work with the state's SET Team to implement this process in their communities. The deadline for completed applications is noon CST on May 13, 2011 and the completed application must be submitted electronically to setapp@ms.usda.gov by that date and time. More information may be obtained at this website: <http://srdc.msstate.edu/set/index.html>

Those who live in a rural area of the state and are interested in creating regional economic development strategies to promote growth through the SET program may contact Roger Roberson at USDA Rural Development in Mississippi at roger.roberson@ms.usda.gov or call 601-260-0216. For questions about the application process or more information on how to identify and define your region, please contact Mr. Roberson or Dr. Al Myles, Southern Rural Development Center, Mississippi State University at 662-325-3207.