# Stronger Economies Together Application

## 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 becoming increasingly ineffective. In today's global market place, 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:

SET strengthens 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 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.

### Eligible States/Regions:

Regions located in the following states are invited to take part in Phase III of the SET program:
 *Georgia, Nevada, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, and Virginia.*

**PLEASE NOTE** that counties that make up your region must be contiguous to one another.

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

Regions have entered the SET program from a variety of starting points. Some regional groups are newly formed while others have been in place for an extended period of time. While SET is particularly appropriate for newly forming regions, it can also be helpful for more established regions interested in exploring new opportunities or revisiting/refining existing plans (e.g., such as the region's CEDS).

Regardless of your recent history in working on a regional basis, we have found that the success of SET depends, in large part, on the commitment of all regional team members to the following:

- Recognition that regional strategies represent a key part of the overall economic development blueprint for the region's small communities, cities, and counties;
- Openness to exploring economic activities that focus on strengthening existing or emerging economic clusters in the region;
- Commitment to gathering inputs and insights from a diversity of institutions and people when determining the region's goals and plans;
- Willingness to take a fresh look at where the region is, where it wants to go and the best way to get there;
- Commitment to devoting the time and energy needed to actively participate and work through all SET training materials as a regional team.

## Training: The Key Component of the SET Program:

The SET program consists of nine core modules 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. By technical assistance we mean that Extension educators and USDA RD state staff will seek to assist your team in securing the type of information needed to guide your regional planning activities. This includes securing the 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 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 secure 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, and the population and/or geographic area of the region must either be (1) at least 51% rural in population 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 that make up that multi-state region must meet the rural requirement as well.

## Deadline Date for Applications:

Applications are due electronically no later than May 4, 2012 (by 11:59 p.m. Local Time Zone). Please submit your application to: Ryan McMullen at ryan.mcmullen@ok.usda.gov . 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 participate in the SET program. This announcement is expected to take place by June 30, 2012.

## Questions?

If you have any questions, please contact:
Ryan McMullen      (405) 742-1000      ryan.mcmullen@ok.usda.gov    OR
Brian Whitacre      (405) 744-9825      brian.whitacre@okstate.edu

**APPLICATION FORM**
## *Stronger Economies Together Program*
**Deadline for Applications: May 4, 2012; 11:59 p.m. Local Time Zone**
Please Complete All Sections of the Application Form

## Part A:  Information about Your Regional Team

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 that are located contiguous to one another.  It is acceptable for your region to cross state boundaries.

b.  What counties are included in your region?_____

_____

c.  Main contact person for your regional team:_____

*Please indicate whether:*

d.  Email address:_____    ☐ Business OR ☐ Personal

e.  Telephone number: _____    ☐ Business OR ☐ Personal

f.  Mailing address:                                      ☐ Business OR ☐ Personal

_____

g.  Please place an "X" by the ONE statement that best describes your regional team in terms of its recent regional work history:

☐  A brand new regional group that has been organized for the purpose of applying for the SET program OR 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

☐  A regional organization that is less than one year old and that is still trying to get off the ground in developing a sound regional economic development plan OR a regional organization that is less than one year old with a solid economic development plan taking shape (or in place) for the region

☐  An established regional group that has been in place for one year or more and has developed OR is pursuing an effective regional economic development plan

**Part B:  Brief Economic Description of Your Region (250 word limit)**

Present an overview of why the proposed area is an economic region and the sectors that represent key drivers of your economy. Types of information you might include in your description:

- *Economic region:* Is this region an economic region? For instance, do you have evidence from a university-based economic analysis unit or other independent reputable entity that the counties 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 your key sectors stable, expanding, declining, or mixed in terms of their performance? In general, tell us about how the economy of your region is doing and why.

## Part C:  Brief Demographic Description of Your Region (250 word limit)

Include information that will provide a snapshot of the current state of your region's population and the important social and demographic challenges/opportunities existing in your region.

- *Important population/demographic characteristics of the region*: Is the population of the region growing or declining, and why? Is the composition of the population changing (such as getting older or younger, shifting in terms of racial or ethnic makeup, and the migration flow of population into or out of the region)? Is the region experiencing economic distress or high rates of poverty?

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

**Part D:  Challenges of Pursuing a Regional Economic Development Plan (250 word limit)**

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?

## Part E:  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, list these topics and explain why they are likely to be important to your team? (See the list of topics at: http://srdc.msstate.edu/set/files/set_overview.pdf).

## Part F:  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.  Indicate the primary organizational/agency affiliation of these individuals. More effective regional teams are those that include representation from many sectors. Applications with broad representation will score higher. ALSO, a signed commitment letter from each person on your team stating that he/she has agreed to be an active participant in the 35+ hours of SET training must be included with this application.  Attach a separate sheet if more space is needed to list the individuals, their organizational/agency affiliation, and the status of their commitment letter to be part of the SET program.

| Name of Regional Team Member | Primary Organization/Agency the Person Represents | Have Commitment Letter from this Person?* |
|---|---|---|
| | | ☐ Yes <br> ☐ No |
| | | ☐ Yes <br> ☐ No |
| | | ☐ Yes <br> ☐ No |
| | | ☐ Yes <br> ☐ No |
| | | ☐ Yes <br> ☐ No |
| | | ☐ Yes <br> ☐ No |
| | | ☐ Yes <br> ☐ No |
| | | ☐ Yes <br> ☐ No |
| | | ☐ Yes <br> ☐ No |
| | | ☐ Yes <br> ☐ 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.

**Commitments:**  Success of SET depends, in large part, on the commitment of all regional team members to the following:

- Recognition  that regional strategies represent a key part of the overall economic development blueprint for the region's small communities, cities, and counties;
- Openness  to exploring economic activities  focused on strengthening existing or emerging  economic clusters in the region;
- Commitment to gathering  inputs and insights from a diversity of institutions and people when determining the region's goals and plans;
- Willingness to take a fresh look at where the region is, where it wants to go  and the best way to get there;
- Commitment to devoting the time and energy needed to actively participate and work through all SET training materials as a regional team.

> **Our regional team members listed above (and attached sheets) agree to these commitments.**
> ___YES                                    ___NO

# 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 website: 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 look for other key elements in the selection process, such as regions with: (a) a different mix of recent regional work history; (b) varying levels of rural compositions; (c) different economic characteristics; (d) crossing state lines; (e) 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.

|  | *Maximum Points Possible* |
|---|---|
| Description provided of your economic region (Part B) | 30 |
| Description provided of the socio-demographics of the region (Part C) | 25 |
| Discussion of challenges of pursuing a regional plan (Part D) | 25 |
| Discussion of why the team wants to be involved in the SET initiative (Part E) | 50 |
| Diversity of people/organizations that have committed to be on your SET team (Part F) | 50 |
| Overall quality and completeness of the proposal | 20 |
| **TOTAL POINTS** | **200** |