

Obama announces steps to boost rural economy

Written by

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WASHINGTON, DC – As part of the Obama Administration’s “We Can’t Wait” efforts to strengthen the economy, create jobs and support business growth, Administration officials announced three significant actions to expand the government’s purchase of biobased products, promote regional rural job creation efforts, and develop a rural healthcare workforce, all of which build on the historic investments the Administration has made in rural America over the past three years. Today’s announcements are the latest in a series of executive actions the Obama Administration is taking to strengthen the economy and move the country forward because we can’t wait for Congress to act.

“My Administration is committed to using every tool available to promote economic growth and create good jobs in rural America,” said **President Obama**. “Today’s announcements reflect our continued focus on expanding opportunity for rural Americans and all Americans, including supporting new and innovative businesses, and improving rural health care and education. And the actions we’re taking today are possible thanks to the feedback and ideas I’ve received from hardworking Americans across rural America, including the participants at the White House Rural Economic Forum.”

“President Obama understands that a strong American economy is tied to a healthy, vibrant rural economy,” said **Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack**, who chairs the White House Rural Council. “The actions we are taking will bring new economic investments to our rural communities, to ensure the people who live in these towns have a better, brighter future.”

The three announcements were recommended by federal agencies participating in the White House Rural Council, and leverage existing programs and funding, but the new actions will expedite job creation in rural parts of the country.

“This Administration will not be satisfied until everyone who wants a job, has a job – both in rural and urban communities,” said **Commerce Secretary John Bryson**. “Today’s announcements are just the latest example of federal partners aligning all of their efforts and resources to help businesses grow, create jobs, and ensure that our economy is built to last.”

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“Health information technology has the potential to improve the quality, access, and efficiency of health care delivery, especially in our nation's rural areas. To achieve this aim, it is essential that we have a skilled health IT workforce,” said **Mary Wakefield**, PhD., R.N., Administrator of the Health Resources and Services Administration. “This memorandum of understanding with our colleagues at the Department of Labor will build on existing collaborations to help ease the challenges of geographic isolation and staff shortages faced by rural communities and help move us toward our mutual goal of Health IT workforce development.”

“There is a real need to expand the rural health IT workforce and our MOU with the Department of Health and Human Services will help ensure that job training programs are quickly and effectively addressing this need,” said Assistant Secretary for Employment and Training Administration **Jane Oates**.

New initiatives being announced today include:

- **Promoting A Bioeconomy:** President Obama issued a Presidential Memorandum today directing the Federal Government to take decisive steps to dramatically increase the purchase of biobased products over the next two years, which will create jobs and drive innovation where biobased products are grown and manufactured. The Memorandum will also result in a 50 percent increase in the number of new products that are designated as biobased. Biobased products include items like paints, soaps and detergents and are developed from farm grown plants, rather than chemicals or petroleum bases. The biobased products sector marries the two most important economic engines for rural America: agriculture and manufacturing.
- **Rural Jobs Accelerator:** The Rural Jobs Accelerator is a national competition that will provide about \$15 million for projects that promote innovation-fueled regional job creation. The competition will combine funding from the USDA, the Economic Development Administration (EDA), Delta Regional Authority and the Appalachian Regional Commission. Additionally, this approach will require multiple agencies to coordinate technical assistance and grant / loan programs so that potential rural customers have a single access point within the Federal government to mobilize the resources of the government to help a region of the country. USDA will utilize the Rural Community Development Initiative (RCDI) program to support this effort and provide technical assistance and training funds to qualified intermediary organizations to develop their capacity to undertake housing, community facilities, and community and economic development projects in rural areas. The Federal Funding Opportunity will be released in the next few weeks.
- **Rural Health IT Workforce:** The Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Labor signed a memorandum of understanding to connect community colleges and technical colleges that support rural communities with the materials and resources they need to support the training of Health Information Technology (HIT) professionals that work in rural hospitals and clinics. The Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that the needed HIT workforce will increase by 20 percent by 2016.

Over the last month, the Obama Administration has made several additional announcements resulting from the White House Rural Council's efforts, including an initiative to help rural

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homeowners refinance their mortgages at lower interest rates and a new forest restoration framework to drive economic growth and job creation through timber restoration and harvest. The new plan would place federal agencies on a path toward increasing federal timber harvests to 3 billion board feet.

Since August 2011, the White House Rural Council has supported a broad spectrum of rural initiatives including a \$350 million commitment in SBA funding to rural small businesses over the next 5 years, launching a series of conferences to connect investors with rural start-ups, creating capital marketing teams to pitch federal funding opportunities to private investors interested in making rural investments, making job search information available at 2,800 local USDA offices nationwide, making HHS loans available to help more than 1,300 Critical Access Hospitals recruit additional staff, and helping rural hospitals purchase software and hardware to implement health IT. USDA and Navy also announced a partnership to advance the use of next generation biofuels in Navy operations.