



Rural Renewal Strategy IV – 2017-2019

FORWARD

Rural Action is a membership-based nonprofit organization working in southeast and central eastern counties of Appalachian Ohio since 1991. The organization is governed by a Board that oversees a CEO who manages a staff of 20 employees and 38 National Service members through the Corporation for National and Community Service. Rural Action's members are involved as volunteers, participants, decision makers, and project designers. Our vital member base guides our sustainable development work in Appalachian Ohio through personal and civic action.

Rural Action implemented its 2013 strategic plan, the Strategy for Rural Renewal, and completed many major priorities such as:

- Established a community-based participatory development and asset mapping process through the Entrepreneurial Communities approach of the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship;
- Expanded the physical infrastructure for sustainable development in agriculture, watershed restoration, and zero waste.
- Strengthened the entrepreneurial ecosystem with investments in social enterprise and partnerships to expand markets and small business development;
- Partnered with groups to promote solar training and development, an understanding of solar manufacturing, and what a Just Transition for our communities could be;
- Grew restoration work in forestry, watersheds, and the role of citizen scientists in understanding our environment;
- Expanded our national service program, Ohio Stream Restore Corps, from 16 to 35 members;
- Supported partners through joint funding and businesses with almost \$ 2million of investment out of \$ 8 million in revenue;
- Reached over 10,000 people annually with meaningful educational programs designed to advance sustainability and local development.

As we look to the next few years, we envision continued regional expansion of our work and membership. In the coming months and years, coal plants will close along the Ohio River, coal mining is likely to continue to decline, and communities must find ways to be hopeful and manage the continued social and economic shifts we face. With an aging population, an epidemic of opioid use, reduced public funds, and continued income inequality, it is important that we stay realistic. Change is a constant – it is messy and people's lives are being affected deeply. But Rural Action is here to stay. And through continued investment and our own entrepreneurial spirit, Rural Action's

community-led approach to local development will continue to inspire and motivate us to do more, more quickly, and with greater impact.

Background

Appalachian Ohio is still recovering from the effects of an over-reliance on natural resource extractive industries such as coal, timber and oil. Such industries inevitably decline, leaving environmental degradation, unemployment, population loss, weak economies and a pattern of disempowerment and disinvestment in their wake. The region has been in a transition away from coal for over 6 decades; today coal plant closures and the expansion of natural gas continue to elevate the need to diversify the economy and support workers and communities.

To counter these forces, Appalachian Ohio needs sustainable economic development that employs its labor force, creates investable wealth, strengthens local communities, fosters resilience, and restores the environment. It needs development from within that is consistent with its assets, especially its proud people and abundant natural resources.

Rural Action members have a goal of more equitable development and greater opportunities for the people of Appalachian Ohio. We believe achieving this goal requires the wide adoption of sustainable practices in the region. Toward this end, Rural Action has contributed decades of careful work increasing local control over the region's rich assets.

It will take all of us working together to achieve the preferred future described in this roadmap. If you are not already part of Rural Action, we hope that you will consider joining. Your membership represents a share of ownership in Rural Action's approach and the people and projects that are making a difference. Make meaningful change in your community and keep up with our work at [Facebook.com/ruralaction](https://www.facebook.com/ruralaction) or by visiting us at ruralaction.org.

FRAMEWORK FOR CHANGE

Our Mission

Our mission is to build a more just economy by developing the region's assets in environmentally, socially, and economically sustainable ways. Our core work centers on:

- Helping small communities do big things
- Growing local businesses and jobs
- Restoring our environment, and
- Cultivating the next generation of leaders

Our decades of experience have taught us some critical lessons and shaped an Appalachian approach to participatory development in Ohio. Our approach is rooted in the work of many partners across Central Appalachia and rural America who believe we have the power to write our preferred future story.

Empowering a region to shape its own narrative begins by *ENGAGING* communities and bringing people together to explore the issues they find important. By *LEARNING TOGETHER* about the root

causes of these issues and identifying locally designed solutions, communities better understand their options and can make informed decisions about their future.

Once engaged and informed, Rural Action supports communities to understand, map, and *CONTROL THEIR ASSETS*. The available assets in each community are influenced by regional economic, social and environmental forces. Catalyzing and unleashing the potential embedded in these local assets requires *BUILDING INFRASTRUCTURE* at the regional level, from purchasing shared use kitchen equipment to support food entrepreneurs to cultivating partnerships between agencies and schools to create career ladders for the region's youth.

Connecting local assets and regional infrastructure to *MARKETS* ensures that the process results in broadly felt prosperity. As more and more communities and people work the process, a tipping point is reached where ALL people are given EVERY opportunity to achieve their highest potential.

Our Strategies

This framework for increasing economic opportunity is implemented through sectors that hold promise for the Appalachian Ohio region. Rural Action spent its early years mapping the assets of the region, exploring ideas of social, economic, and environmental sustainability through member-led committees. VISTA volunteers staffed these member projects and raised funds, developing Rural Action's sector and community building expertise in the process. The following are the member-identified sectors and community-centered strategies that we will continue focusing on over the next three years.

- Environmental Education is a foundation for long term development and reaches children and parents through teacher training and classroom programs, citizen monitoring, ecotourism, and community engagement to expand outdoor learning as a teaching tool, build pride of place, and intensify the stewardship ethic.
- Sustainable Agriculture increases local food production as an economic driver by processing, aggregating, and distributing healthy local food; designing peer-to-peer and consumer education experiences; and providing marketing support.
- Forestry and Wood Products connects small and mid-sized mills to new markets. This program also works with landowners to create income streams from sustainably managed



native plant assets, such as ginseng and goldenseal by connecting to local, national, and international markets.

- Watershed Restoration uses outreach and education, monitoring, and project implementation to improve the quality of the region's significant water assets, the lack of which would constrict economic growth and affect community health.
- Zero Waste uses policy, citizen engagement, venture support, and education to reduce the amount of solid waste destined for landfills in southeast Ohio, turning waste into economic opportunity through aggregation, new services, reuse, and upcycling.
- Energy and Climate uses local engagement, partnerships, policy, and communications to expand understanding of solar power in Appalachian Ohio, and the potential for a Just Transition in coal plant and coal mine transition communities.

Strategies that Support the Whole

- National Service provides career-building opportunities to future leaders through AmeriCorps and other National Service assignments of one to three years. Members organize volunteers and events to achieve much in Rural Action sectors.
- Social Enterprise and Entrepreneurial Communities build livelihoods by engaging the spark inside local entrepreneurs, cultivating their ideas into civic, social and business ventures, and by organizing community support and linking entrepreneurs to needed resources.
- Advocacy and Policy that bring resources into the region and keep important resources in place, will be a growing area of work for Rural Action in the coming years.

Measuring our success

Rural Action collects a lot of metrics in each of our sectors; each funding source has its own metrics. But Rural Action's impact boils down to the simple idea of investment – helping people move up a ladder to become investors in themselves, their families, communities, and region. Everything we're doing is designed to move people into action – to make a small change or become an active leader – but to do something that reverses trends of disinvestment and grows local wealth and resilience. The following are the “rollup” metrics we're using across all sectors which work as a sort of ladder of engagement:

1. Number of people, organizations/businesses, and communities reached meaningfully – face to face contact (total # youth in programming or total # farmers trained)
2. Number of people, organizations/businesses, and communities involved (total #, for example, of peer mentors and junior counselors, etc.)
3. Number of people, organizations/businesses, and communities investing (total # of members/donors, new infrastructure, new business development or expansions)
4. Assets conserved/restored (total # of acres/stream miles under production or being managed for long term sustainability)
5. Wealth created (\$ sales/leveraged, careers launched)

The other important way to know we're making a difference is the stories we tell about the people behind these numbers. Rural Action will continue to tell the stories of individuals and communities who are doing things where they live to improve their quality of life and that of their neighbors.

GOALS & OBJECTIVES

Programmatic Goals

Theory of Change: Engage and Empower

Goal:

1. Twenty-five communities and over 1,000 members are involved in building community through development projects, service, and policy.

Objectives

- Expand Rural Action's presence in the region through growing membership in Athens, Hocking, Meigs, Vinton, Washington, Perry, Tuscarawas, and Carroll counties.
- Develop and manage Appalachian Ohio's Entrepreneurial Communities strategy in 7 communities in southeast Ohio. Expand as needed and as resources make possible;
- Engage labor unions, workers organizations, members, and community leaders in supporting coal plant closure communities along Appalachian Ohio;
- Engage 300 Rural Action members and partners in policy issues including: federal funding for coal plant communities; the Ohio Water Quality Trust; policies that reduce the burden of poverty; policies that relate to RA program and sector goals.
- Grow the Appalachian Ohio Watershed Council as a robust body of 30 stakeholders (currently 20) working on watershed restoration and water quality issues;
- Complete implementation of the Zero Waste Action Plan in the Athens Hocking Solid Waste District, reducing per person waste to 3.7lbs. (from current 4 lbs.) in year 3 and increasing recycling by 11% (20% - 31%);
- Train 100 new leaders by maintaining Rural Action's standard setting AmeriCorps program, Ohio Stream Restore Corps. Expand national service to include a VISTA program across 10 counties working on poverty reduction and economic resilience.

Theory of Change: Learn Together

Goals:

1. Use Rural Action communication tools to reach 50,000 people annually about the positive, locally-directed work happening in the region.
2. Provide direct adult and youth education programming and peer-to-peer training through all Rural Action sectors to 15,000 people annually across the Appalachian Ohio region.

Objectives:

- Provide leadership development and training to 300 Rural Action staff, national service members, and community partners annually in participatory development over 3 years;
- Develop action-oriented toolkits for members and citizens interested in watershed restoration, energy alternatives, and waste and recycling;
- Provide policy information to Rural Action members;
- Promote social enterprise as a model for local economy building through the Appalachian Conference on Social Enterprise's toolkit, materials and presentations;
- Share ideas and models for solar manufacturing and installation as a strategy for Appalachian Ohio's transition;
- Profile 50 Rural Action members and what they are doing for local sustainable development through all Rural Action media;
- Scale the Appalachian Green Teachers Program by engaging 250 teachers and 5,000 students annually;
- Establish 30 annual Citizen Environmental Monitoring (CEM) opportunities for youth and adults;
- Provide landowner education to 300 woodland owners annually for more management, income generation, and forest based enterprises;
- Provide training to 600 farmers and 5,000 local food consumers annually to ensure an accessible and expanding food system;

Theory of Change: Understand and Control Assets

Goal:

1. Using a range of tools, map and catalog assets within each sector and community, using those assets to undertake locally-driven development efforts.

Objectives:

- Work with 25 communities of place and interest to map assets;
- Build a Sustainability Fund for both stable financial support and investment into local development projects;
- Participate in fundraising and capital formation activities to grow a variety of financial assets for investment in local communities.

Theory of Change: Access to Appropriate Infrastructure

Goals:

1. Invest in the physical infrastructure required to undertake sustainable development practices and reach new markets within Rural Action sectors;
2. Invest in restoration of watersheds, forests and soils as key to ensuring natural infrastructure for regional health.

Objectives

- Enhance the physical assets and value of the Chesterhill Produce Auction as shared use infrastructure for food and wood producers;
- Develop an implementation plan for establishment of outdoor experience and ecotourism infrastructure to reach 6,000 new ecotourism consumers by year 3;
- Promote Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFP) plantings and monitoring as a strategy for private and public lands management;
- Expand water quality improvements through an expanded toolkit for restoration and the building of water quality projects for reclamation;
- Ensure the ability of people to work together and collaborate by sharing and deploying facilitation processes and tools and hosting or managing advisory boards, working groups, members committees, and councils (like the Appalachian Ohio Watershed Council) to maintain partnerships and promote collective action throughout the region and all Rural Action programs.

Theory of Change: Expand Market Based Strategies

Goal:

1. Support 250 social enterprises within Rural Action value chains in partnership with businesses and entrepreneurs, business service organizations, local development districts, and state agencies.

Objectives

- Collaborate with 30 business services organizations to ensure delivery of technical support and capital to entrepreneurs within Rural Action sectors;
- Promote jobs in solar manufacturing and solar installation as a strategy for Appalachian Ohio's energy and economic transition;
- Provide business and restoration support to 200 landowners and agroforestry entrepreneurs annually to sustain and grow the NTFP and wood products sector in Appalachian Ohio;
- Support 50 forest entrepreneurs who are experimenting with new ideas and new business models for low impact forestry, use of marginal woods, and forest restoration strategies;
- Grow Zero Waste Event Productions and the Chesterhill Produce Auction as profitable revenue generators;
- Establish the Rural Action National Service Fellowship, a program that takes national service members and provides funding for 12 months to develop a social enterprise;
- Identify the workforce and job training opportunities within Rural Action key sectors and develop a placement strategy with regional institutions to align business and worker opportunities and training;
- Pilot and promote new business and ownership models including co-operative development in ecotourism, food, forestry, and zero waste, helping establish 10 new ventures.

Operational Goals

Board Development

Goals:

1. Train and Support an active, regional Board of Directors of 15 members, with internally-facing committees in:
 - a. Finance
 - b. Impact
 - c. Governance
 - d. Building and Grounds
 - e. Social Enterprise
2. Expand member participation in Rural Action's governance with volunteers;
3. Invest in the Impact Committee of the board to track metrics and update the board on program and project evaluation;
4. Train and support an externally-facing committee on Policy and Advocacy to expand Rural Action's role in advocacy, especially for national service and other federal funds needed for successful rural development.

Fundraising and Fund Development

Goals:

1. Increase Board support and oversight of the Donor Development Committee;
2. Expand and support Rural Action membership to 2,000 members within 3 years;
3. Build a Sustainability Fund for both stable financial support and investment into local development projects;
4. Finalize branding process for messaging and communications, and ensure expanding investment in communications annually, doubling the current investment from \$100,000 to at least \$200,000.

Space and Physical Infrastructure

Goals:

1. Maintain all Rural Action properties and offices to a standard of safety, comfort, and functionality;
2. Explore new options for a regional Rural Action center with satellite sites across Appalachian Ohio;
3. Purchase space for storage of equipment and vehicles.

MANAGING GROWTH FOR THE LONG HAUL

Rural Action, in order to sustain and expand the scope and depth of its work, must ensure that its core – the staff, members, volunteers, National Service team, and partnerships – are healthy and thriving, even as we expend ourselves in the grand task of building a flourishing, sustainable, and

people-centered regional economy. The following are some of the most important parts of doing that, and we want to highlight them in closing.

Cultivating an active and flourishing network of members and volunteers.

Members are the people who join Rural Action by paying dues or volunteering for a certain number of hours. They are committed to the basic ideas of local community development and social and environmental health. Growing our membership and activating them as leaders in their communities is the most fundamental part of our work. Members help design our programs, engage others, and serve across all of our programs – they are businesses, households, and partners. They hold us accountable while participating in the vision of a flourishing and prosperous region. The growth of our membership, from historic ranges of 500 to 1,000 to a goal in the next three years of 2000, will help us show leaders across Ohio and Central Appalachia that there is a permanent movement for growing our region in sustainable ways.

Ensuring organizational vitality by investing in our staff and national service members.

Rural Action has achieved a deep, expansive and truly significant body of work across the region for decades. If our members and volunteers are the vessels carrying vitality into their communities, our staff is the heartbeat that catalyzes and supports the participatory development process. We are proud of our staff and national service members. Time and again, they have proven themselves to be hard workers, innovative systems thinkers and are often seen as thought leaders in their field of expertise.

Understanding this, Rural Action will continue to (1) recruit high caliber, dedicated staff and committed national service members, (2) provide opportunities for professional development, learning, and visibility, (3) provide space for collective decision-making and brainstorming to design the most effective solutions our communities and partners want, (4) support research and best practices, and (5) ensure competitive pay and benefits for staff.

Building partner capacity and deepening networks.

Rural Action supports and participates in an extensive list of partnerships because it is the way to achieve results. By joining together with other organizations around shared goals and values, we are able to leverage our resources and achieve more. Networks are the dynamic, powerful result of years of collaboration, and the most powerful network we have is our membership. A great deal of energy goes into extending our networks and supporting our partnerships. Rural Action plays the role of community development incubator, facilitator, honest broker, fiscal agent, technical assistance provider, and leader on emerging projects.

Going forward, Rural Action intends to strengthen our ability to play a capacity building role in the region. Some examples include expanding our fiscal management capacity, offering graphic design help, providing training, and formally incubating new ideas. In some cases, our board will need to consider new organizational forms for different nonprofit, for profit, and hybrid models that support greater capacity in community development.

Developing a thoughtful policy and advocacy framework.

For most of its history, Rural Action has worked to demonstrate possibilities and meet needs in communities. However, legislative and administrative policies play crucial roles in the allocation of resources and the rules by which rural communities survive or thrive. For instance, Rural Action met with legislators in 2015 to advocate that shale severance tax dollars should be used for watershed restoration and mitigation, local government impacts, and a regional investment trust for long-term economic and social development. While unsuccessful, that effort led us to write a concept paper around an Ohio water quality trust and to advocate for federal coal reclamation resources. The Appalachian region of our state has too few dedicated advocates. Rural Action will work to resource a policy and advocacy arm that provides information about policy issues affecting our region and activates its members to provide policy education to leaders.

Telling our stories.

To paraphrase Thomas Berry, we are all in trouble because we need a new story. This new story is a story of human relationship with the Earth, not over it, and not absent from it. It is a story of hope and possibility for Central Appalachia and those who call it home today and in the future. Rural Action will continue telling this new story, but also adding deeper analyses of context and issues in the coming three years. Rural Action will continue to share a new narrative, and explain our work, by telling the stories of its members who are taking responsibility for the big outcomes of health, restoration, and economy.

Conclusion

Rural Action grows from its edges. Each new member creates the possibility of action and the extension of our values. With the financial resources to support staff, national service members, members and volunteers, we are optimistic about what our brand of community development – rooted in social and environmental health – has and can achieve. We believe that a just transition is possible for the region, with the right long-term investments, patience, and innovation, working at the grassroots with big ideas. Appalachian Ohio and all of Central Appalachia represent a significant asset for America's future, with its forests, streams and rivers, pastures, cultural heritage and committed people. As a place currently with limited financial capital, we rely on the abundance of social and human capital, our creativity, and our coming generations to move us forward.