

# Rural Proofing in Canada

An Examination of the Rural  
Secretariat and the Rural Lens

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# Executive Summary

This report focuses on the Canadian Rural Secretariat and its application of a “rural lens”, which was highlighted by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development and modeled in countries around the world. The Rural Secretariat existed in Canada from 1996-2013. During its existence, the Rural Secretariat coordinated the federal government’s focus on rural issues, delivered a series of programs and advocated for rural policy.

Canada does not have a single, official definition for rural. Instead there are multiple definitions including: census rural, Rural and Small Town Canada, non-metro, forward sortation areas, and predominantly rural regions. However, most definitions define rural communities based on their distance to larger urban centres and their lack of population density. Depending on the definition selected, the number of people living in rural community’s ranges from 6 million to 10.3 million. Throughout the existence of the Rural Secretariat they predominantly utilized the Rural and Small Town Canada definition of rural: communities of less than 10,000 in population.

A long series of national and sub-national rural policy initiatives paved the road for the creation of the Rural Secretariat and the Rural Lens. In 1996, the Rural Secretariat was tasked with bringing government departments together around rural issues and priorities and promoting dialogue between rural Canadians and the federal government. The Rural Secretariat was located within the Department of Agriculture and Agri-Food, a sectoral line department within the federal government. For almost 20 years it acted as the rural conscience of the federal government through a variety of initiatives including the Rural Lens.

The Rural Lens was created in 1998 as a policy tool to review federal policies and programs from the perspectives of people living in rural and remote regions. The rural lens was designed to be applied by any government department early in the development of a program or policy using a guide prepared by the Rural Secretariat. In reality, there is little evidence to suggest that many departments applied the rural lens in the early development of a program or policy. Instead the rural lens was often

applied to a policy or program after it reached the Memorandum to Cabinet stage. A Rural Lens unit was created with the responsibility of reviewing draft policies/programs and Memorandums. Upon completion of this review, they would submit a report to the sponsoring government department on how their policy or program could be improved to better reflect rural and remote realities. It is important to note that sponsoring government departments had no responsibility to report back to the Rural Lens Unit nor to the Rural Secretariat on how they implemented these comments.

Much of the success of the Rural Lens Unit and the Rural Secretariat occurred 'behind the scenes'. When the rural lens operated efficiently, policymakers in other departments understood the potential impacts of their policies/programs on rural communities and revised them to reflect these realities. That being said, the successful application of the Rural Lens did help lead to a number of new initiatives targeted for rural communities. This included funding dedicated for rural infrastructure, the creation of an Office of Rural Health, improved access to the federal government through increased Service Canada locations, additional investment and Community Futures Development Corporations, and facilitating the creation of Industry Canada's Broadband for Rural and Northern Development pilot program and the National Satellite Initiative.

Despite these successes, the partnerships, and engagement with rural Canada, both the Rural Secretariat and the Rural Lens encountered a number of challenges. First was the location of the Rural Secretariat and the Rural Lens in a sectoral line department focused on agriculture. Second, the Rural Secretariat, as a unit within a line department, had no authority to force horizontal coordination despite its mandate.

The experience of the Rural Secretariat and Rural Lens in Canada offers a number of important lessons that should be considered in other jurisdictions. (1) Where the rural development unit and rural lens is 'housed' matters; (2) Having a rural voice; (3) A rural lens without authority becomes a 'suggested practice'; (4) Seeing the rural lens 'in action'; (5) Partnership with a central statistical agency is imperative from the onset; and (6) It is important to ensure dialogue between different levels of government.

# Introduction

This report focuses on the Canadian Rural Secretariat and its application of a “rural lens”, which was highlighted by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development and modeled in countries around the world. The Rural Secretariat was a federal government institution,<sup>1</sup> located within the Department of Agriculture and Agri-Food, tasked with horizontal coordination and applying a rural lens to federal policies and programs. For almost 20 years it acted as the rural conscience of the federal government. This report provides background information on rural Canada including the definitions of rural, trends facing rural communities, and a brief history of rural development policy in Canada. This report only examines initiatives of the federal government of Canada. Sub-national governments throughout Canada have various initiatives related to rural proofing, however, these are not covered in this report. The role of the Rural Secretariat is discussed and the rural lens approach is outlined, highlighting key successes and challenges. The report concludes with a discussion of lessons learned.

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<sup>1</sup> Canada is a constitutional monarchy, often referred to as a federal system. The *Constitution Act of 1982* divides authority between the national government (referred to in Canada as the federal government) and sub-national governments (referred to in Canada as the provincial or territorial governments). The *Constitution Act* clearly identifies responsibilities of the federal government, such as trade, taxation, military; while the Act identifies the provincial/territorial governments responsibility for public lands, health systems, education, and property. The *Constitution Act* also identifies areas of ‘shared jurisdiction’, whereby the federal and provincial/territorial governments must cooperate. Areas of shared jurisdiction include agriculture, economic development, fishing, and transportation (Savoie, 1992). This report only examines initiatives of the federal government of Canada. Some sub-national governments have various initiatives related to rural proofing.

# Rural Canada: Background Information

## Definitions of Rural in the Canadian Context

Canada does not have a single, official definition for rural. Instead there are multiple definitions including: census rural, Rural and Small Town Canada, non-metro, forward sortation areas, and predominantly rural regions. However, as Bollman and Reimer (2010) emphasize, definitions of rural in Canada focus on two key elements: distance and density. Rural communities are often defined based on their distance to larger urban centres and their lack of population density. The census rural, Rural and Small Town Canada, and non-metro definitions are presented below.

- Census rural was introduced in the 1961 national census of population. Census rural areas are characterized as areas of low population density outside of urban areas (Statistics Canada, 1999). The formal definition of census rural is communities with a population under 1,000 people or communities with a density less than 400 or more people per square kilometre (DuPlesis et al., 2002, p. 8).
- Statistics Canada created the Rural and Small Town Canada definition. It is based on population size, population density, and labour market characteristics. The Rural and Small Town definition refers to the population living outside the commuting zones of larger urban centres - specifically, outside Census Metropolitan Areas (communities with populations greater than 100,000) and Census Agglomerations (communities with populations between 10,000 and 99,999) (Mendelson and Bollman, 1998).
- Statistics Canada defines a Census Metropolitan Areas as having a population exceeding 100,000 people and all neighbouring communities where 50% of the workforce commutes to the Census Metropolitan Areas. The non-metro definition is the inverse of this definition - areas having a population under 100,000 people.

Depending on the definition selected, the number of people living in rural communities ranges from 6 million to 10.3 million (see Table 1). The total number of Canadians living in rural communities, regardless of definition, has continued to increase since 1931 when the urban population exceeded the rural population for the first time. However,

the rate of growth has been lower than the rate of growth in urban communities. In addition, there is an uneven pattern of rural population growth emerging where rural communities closest to urban areas are growing faster than rural communities with the highest distances to urban areas (Markey et al, 2015).

Table 1. Rural Populations by Definitions, 2011 Census

Rural Definition	Number of People	% of National Population
Census Rural	6,329,414	18%
Rural and Small Town	6,041,723	18%
Non-Metro	10,353,247	31%

(Statistics Canada, 2012)

## Trends in Rural Canada

The vast geography of rural Canada translates into multiple ‘rural realities’ based on location, the economy, history, culture, and inter-relationships with other stakeholders. However, there are two key trends impacting rural communities: economic and demographic. The historic and contemporary economy of rural Canada continues to be focused on the extraction of natural resources, such as timber, minerals, fish, and agriculture leading to boom-bust cycles of economic growth. Many rural communities are struggling with youth out-migration and aging populations leading to population decline. These demographic challenges have been exacerbated by boom-bust cycles in the economy and limited opportunities for post-secondary education and employment.

A robust understanding of rural Canada can be found in the recent *The State of Rural Canada 2015* publication produced by the Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation ([www.sorc.crrf.ca](http://www.sorc.crrf.ca)).

## A Brief History of Rural Development Policy in Canada

A long series of national and sub-national rural policy initiatives paved the road for the creation of the Rural Secretariat in 1996 and the Rural Lens in 1998. They can be generalized into five phases, which are briefly discussed. A full discussion of federal rural policies can be found in Douglas (1994, 2009) and Fairbairn (1998). It is worth noting, that throughout Canada’s history, the federal government has maintained a role in rural development policy. The degree to which they are engaged, however, has waxed and waned over time. Rural policy has been championed by a number of

departments of the federal government, however, it has predominantly resided with the Department of Agriculture. Similarly, rural policy has survived through multiple changes in government administrations. Some government administrations have been viewed as more favourably disposed towards rural policy, however, there is no trend of one political party being more attuned to rural policy.

- 1) *Land, Settlement and Sovereignty* (1867–1920s): As a young country, the Canadian government enacted policies and programs to facilitate the migration of people to western Canada to demonstrate sovereignty of the dominion and to create economic outputs that could support the national economy. This was facilitated through the *Dominion Land Act* of 1872, which provided free land to individuals wishing to homestead land in western Canada (Bjork, 1974). This Act brought millions of immigrants to western Canada, predominantly from the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Scandinavia.
- 2) *Enhancing economic performance* (1920s–1950s): During this period rural policy was directly seen as linked to agricultural policy (Savoie, 2008) through the government of Canada Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Act (1935). This Act strived to improve agricultural productivity and made substantial investments in rural communities through infrastructure including, dams, community water supplies, and irrigation (Quinn, 1985).
- 3) *Addressing rural ‘problems’* (1950s–1970s). The post-war boom was a “watershed for rural development policy” (Fairbairn, 1998, p. 13), although many of these policies were experimental in nature. During the 1960s, the government enacted a series of policies to address rural poverty, rural unemployment, and low income. The *Agricultural Rehabilitation and Rural Development Act* (1961) attempted to address rural economic depression by an efficient use of land, economic production of marginal/sub-marginal lands, soil and water conservation (Simms, 1986). This policy was renewed in 1966 as the *Agriculture and Rural Development Act*. The renewed policy expanded the focus to non-agricultural industries and to rural poverty related issues. To complement the *Agriculture and Rural Development Act*, the *Fund for Rural Economic Development* was created in the same year to facilitate the creation of comprehensive development plans for targeted select rural regions with low household incomes, high unemployment rates, and suffering from economic adjustment (Poetschke, 1968). The plans focused largely on the development of infrastructure and new industry development, both of which would increase employment rates and household incomes.
- 4) *From rural development to regional development* (1970s–1980s): The federal government created the new Department of Regional Economic Expansion in 1969, which was reformulated as the Department of Regional Industrial Expansion in 1982. In partnership with the provincial and territorial governments, the federal government introduced a series of co-funded regional development policies, such as

the *General Development Agreement* (1974-1984) and *Economic and Regional Development Agreements* (1984-1994). These complex agreements manifested themselves differently in each jurisdictions, however, they were largely focused on growth-pole theories of development. In this theory of development investments were strategically placed in 'growth poles', often urban areas, while the benefits were anticipated to trickle out into surrounding areas. The effectiveness of these policies was limited.

- 5) *Towards place-based policies* (1980s-present): In 1986, the federal government created the Community Futures Development Program. Initially coordinated by the Department of Employment and Immigration, the Community Futures program serves as a catalyst for job creation and business development in rural regions experiencing high unemployment. The Community Futures program continues to operate in Canada today (cf. Bryant & Joesph, 2001; Fuller & Pletsch, 2003). In 1987, the federal government created three regional development agencies: Western Economic Diversification Canada, Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agencies, and Federal Economic Development Initiative in Northern Ontario. Each of these agencies received slightly different mandates; however, they focused on regional economic development, job creation and entrepreneurship programs, competition in the global market place, and support for communities. Parallel agencies were created for Québec (Canada Economic Development for Québec Regions) in 1991, southern Ontario (Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario) in 2009, and northern Canada (Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency) in 2009 (Hall 2012). These agencies continue to operate today.

Throughout the fourth and fifth phases, the government was focused on regional development and economic development. In the early 1990s, the federal government renewed its interest in rural development (Stephens, 1994). In 1990, the Interdepartmental Committee on Rural and Remote Canada was created. This committee, coordinated by the Department of Human Resources and Skills Development, focused on sharing information among 20 federal departments with mandates involving rural communities. In 1993, the federal government created a Minister Responsible for Small Communities and Rural Areas. The Minister had a mandate to coordinate and share information across multiple government departments. The Minister held a series of consultations with provincial government, researchers, local government, and other stakeholders (7). The role of the Minister was short-lived. In 1994, after a change in government administration, the Minister Responsible for Small Communities and Rural Areas was discontinued and replaced by the Small Communities and Rural Areas Secretariat housed within the Department of Agriculture and Food. The Small Communities and Rural Areas Secretariat was seen as "a single window on rural issues" (Fairbairn, 1998, p. 27). The Small Communities and Rural Areas Secretariat was responsible for coordinating the work of the Interdepartmental Committee on Rural and Remote Canada and facilitating partnerships among federal departments on rural issues.

# The Rural Secretariat

By 1996, a new unit called the Rural Secretariat was tasked with bringing government departments together around rural issues and priorities and promoting dialogue between rural Canadians and the federal government (Government of Canada, n.d-a). It evolved during a time when many rural communities faced economic challenges, including the collapse of the cod fishery in Atlantic Canada and restructuring in the resource sectors, impacting single industry communities. Politically at that time, the federal government had little visibility in rural Canada and the governing party lacked a strong rural base. The Rural Secretariat operated until 2013 when the government did not renew its mandate.

The Rural Secretariat was housed within the Department of Agriculture and Agri-Food, a sectoral line department within the federal government. It primarily used the Rural and Small Town Canada definition for decision-making, programs, and policies and all sectors of the economy were included. In 1999, the Prime Minister appointed a Secretary of State for Rural Development to assist the Rural Secretariat with its mandate, emphasizing the federal government's commitment to rural. The Interdepartmental Working Group on Rural was also used to promote horizontal coordination across departments (Rural Secretariat, 2000). In addition, Rural Teams were created across the country consisting of representatives from federal departments and provincial/territorial governments. These Rural Teams provided a forum at the local level for information sharing, learning, collaborating and for aligning federal programs and services around the priorities of rural communities and citizens. The Rural Secretariat also placed staff in regional offices to help coordinate efforts.

In 1997, the Standing Committee on Natural Resources released the "Think Rural" report. Based on consultation with key stakeholders, it made 37 recommendations for rural and remote Canada. These recommendations fit within eight general themes including:

- Adopting a comprehensive rural policy;
- Rural development begins and ends with people;
- Infrastructure development does matter;
- Enhancing natural resource activity;
- Value-added is important;
- Supporting tourism;

- Developing small business and entrepreneurship; and
- Designing appropriate development structures (Standing Committee on Natural Resources, 1998).

In 1998, the Canadian Rural Partnership was announced in the Federal Budget. It was a horizontal policy initiative that empowered the Rural Secretariat with a mandate and funding. Key initial activities of the Rural Secretariat under the Canadian Rural Partnership were the creation of a 'rural lens', a Rural Dialogue process, and a Pilot Projects Initiative.

Throughout 1998, the Rural Dialogue process was carried out across the country to hear directly from rural Canadians on local and regional issues, challenges and priorities (Rural Secretariat, 2000). A number of challenges were identified including economic and employment challenges, lack of jobs, loss of traditional jobs in primary resource sectors, corporate downsizing and restructuring, government downsizing, out-migration, and a lack of opportunities for youth. While a number of strengths were also discussed including the natural amenities, the people, a sense of community, the natural resource base, and the quality of life in rural communities (Rural Secretariat, 1998).

A National Rural Workshop, held later that year, identified 11 priorities which became the focus of the *Federal Framework for Action in Rural Canada*, announced in 1999:

- Improve access to federal government programs and services;
- Improve access to financial resources for rural business and community development;
- Provide more targeted opportunities, programs and services for rural and Aboriginal youth;
- Strengthen rural community capacity building, leadership and skills development;
- Create opportunities for rural communities to maintain and develop infrastructure for community development;
- Connect rural Canadians to the knowledge-based economic and society and help them acquire the skills to use the technology;
- Strengthen economic diversification in rural Canada through more targeted assistance;
- Work with provincial and territorial governments to examine and pilot test new ways to provide rural Canada with access to health care at reasonable cost;

- Work with provincial and territorial governments to examine and pilot test new ways to provide access to education at reasonable cost;
- Foster strategic partnerships, within communities, between communities and among governments to facilitate rural community development; and
- Promote rural Canada as a place to live, work and raise a family (Government of Canada 2002).

In 2000, a National Rural Conference was held to develop a *Rural Action Plan* focused on issues and next steps for government action focused on each of the 11 priority areas. An annual report on achievements was also presented by the Secretary of State for Rural Development to Parliament between 2000 and 2003 (OECD, 2002; Rural Secretariat, 2001a). Encouraging rural dialogue continued to be an important function of the Rural Secretariat throughout much of its existence using a variety of engagement tools like conferences and workshops both at the national and regional levels. The Rural Teams across the country contributed significantly to this activity.

In 2001, the federal government of Canada renewed the Canadian Rural Partnership and its focus remained on horizontal policy coordination and applying the rural lens; continuing the rural dialogue process and the pilot projects initiative; and communication and outreach activities (Rural Secretariat, 2002). By 2003, the Canadian Rural Partnership included: rural dialogue; regional coordination and rural teams; rural research, policy development and the rural lens; programming; and communications and outreach (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, 2003). Beginning in 2008, the work of the Rural Secretariat shifted to a more general focus on building and maintaining research and policy networks, as well as assisting communities with identifying and assessing local natural and cultural amenities, and addressing barriers and challenges to development to increase competitiveness (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, 2008; 2011a).

Over its lifetime, a number of initiatives were introduced through the Rural Secretariat and the Canadian Rural Partnership to promote rural development. Each of these initiatives contributed to enhancing rural policy at the federal level. This included:

- ***Pilot Projects Initiative:*** Funded creative approaches to community development in rural and remote Canada that contributed to at least one of the 11 rural priorities in the *Federal Framework for Action in Rural Canada* (Government of Canada, n.d-c).
- ***Rural and Small Town Canada Analysis Bulletin:*** A partnership with Statistics Canada to generate critical and timely data on rural issues, trends, opportunities, and challenges that started in 1999.

- ***Models for Rural Development Initiative:*** Created in 2003 to identify, test and evaluate various approaches to addressing rural development issues (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, 2003).
- ***Community Information Database:*** Launched in 2006, the Community Information Database was a web-based tool that contained community-level social, economic and demographic indicators (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, 2011; Caledon Institute of Social Policy, 2007).
- ***National Rural Research Network:*** A network that brought together policy and research practitioners from across Canada in partnership with the Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, 2011b).
- ***Rural Development Network:*** A forum created in 2008 to bring together policy-makers involving 250 members from 41 federal departments and agencies. The Rural Development Network shared information and sought collaboration on rural issues (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, 2011b).

There were also a number of additional elements associated with the Communications and Outreach activities of the Rural Secretariat, including the establishment of the Canadian Rural Information Service and the regular publication of federal programs and services available to rural Canadians. While the Rural Secretariat was never provided with sufficient funding for large-scale programming, it was able to provide some funds that could be leveraged with other departments. Although each of these activities had an impact on federal rural policy, this report focuses on the rural lens as an agent of rural proofing.

## Rural Lens

The Rural Lens was created in 1998 as a policy tool to review federal policies and programs from the perspectives of people living in rural and remote regions. A checklist of rural considerations was developed that included the following questions:

- How is this initiative relevant to rural and remote Canada?
- Is the impact specific to a selected rural or remote environment or region?
- Have the most likely positive and negative effects on rural Canadians been identified and, where relevant, addressed?

- Is the initiative designed to respond to the priorities identified by rural Canadians?
- Have rural Canadians been consulted during the development or modification of the initiative?
- How is the benefit to rural Canadians maximised (e.g., co-operation with other partners, development of local solutions for local challenges, flexibility for decision making)? (OECD, 2006).

## The Design of the Rural Lens

The rural lens was designed to be applied by any government department early in the development of a program or policy. The Rural Secretariat created the Guide to Using the Rural Lens publication in 2001 to facilitate the adoption of the rural lens by federal government departments (see Table 2). The Rural Secretariat was also available as a resource to assist any department with implementing the rural lens. There was no legislation that required other departments to apply the rural lens and no sanctions if the rural lens was not applied.

## The Rural Lens Reality

In reality, there is little evidence to suggest that many departments applied the rural lens in the early development of a program or policy. Instead the rural lens was often applied to a policy or program after it reached the Memorandum to Cabinet stage.<sup>2</sup> A Rural Lens Unit was created within the Rural Secretariat which initially started with one employee and eventually grew to include eight employees. It was the responsibility of the Rural Lens Unit to review draft policies/programs and Memorandums based on the key questions in Table 2. Upon completion of this review, they would submit a report to the sponsoring government department on how their policy or program could be improved to better reflect rural and remote realities. It is important to note that sponsoring government departments had no responsibility to report back to the Rural Lens Unit nor to the Rural Secretariat on how they implemented these comments.

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<sup>2</sup> At this stage, draft policies and/or programs only require the approval of the federal cabinet before being voted on in parliament. In Canadian politics, it is common that the governing party holds enough seats to ensure the passage of legislature in the parliament. As such, a positive decision by cabinet is often seen as an approval.

**Table 2: A Guide to Using the Rural Lens**

<b>Stage 1</b>	<b>Concept</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Define the initiative (policy or program)</li> </ul>
<b>Stage 2</b>	<b>Environmental Scan and Impact Assessment</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How is this initiative relevant to rural and remote Canada?</li> <li>• Is it specific to a particular rural or remote region?</li> <li>• What are the potential financial and economic impacts on rural and remote regions?</li> <li>• What are the potential social impacts on rural and remote regions?</li> <li>• What are the potential environmental impacts on rural and remote regions?</li> <li>• What are the potential cultural impacts on rural and remote regions?</li> <li>• How can the effects on rural and remote regions be measured?</li> </ul>
<b>Stage 3</b>	<b>Identify people and organizations that need to be involved or require consultation</b>
<b>Stage 4</b>	<b>Development and design</b>
<b>Stage 5</b>	<b>Communication through appropriate media avenues to reach rural and remote regions</b>
<b>Stage 6</b>	<b>Validation and consultations (if needed)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify who is involved, who needs to be consulted and when and identify their concerns</li> </ul>
<b>Stage 7</b>	<b>Refine initiative</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Include results from the consultation if needed</li> <li>• Identify resources including funding, human and organizational</li> </ul>
<b>Stage 8</b>	<b>Approval</b>
<b>Stage 9</b>	<b>Deliver program</b>
<b>Stage 10</b>	<b>Monitoring and evaluation</b>

Source: Rural Secretariat, 2001b

# Evaluation, Successes and Challenges

From 2000 until 2003, the Rural Secretariat produced an annual report to parliament, which outlined key initiatives under the Canadian Rural Partnership. After 2003, information regarding the performance of the Rural Secretariat was contained in the Department of Agriculture and Agri-Food's Performance Reports which simply included performance highlights with regards to spending and achieved results.

Much of the success of the Rural Lens Unit and the Rural Secretariat occurred 'behind the scenes'. When the rural lens operated efficiently, policymakers in other departments understood the potential impacts of their policies/programs on rural communities and revised them to reflect these realities. When this was successfully done, the credit, if any, was given to the department sponsoring the policy or program not the Rural Secretariat or the Rural Lens Unit.

That being said, the successful application of the Rural Lens did help lead to a number of new initiatives targeted for rural communities. This included funding dedicated for rural infrastructure (more than CAD \$427 million), while the Department of Health established an Office of Rural Health. Access was also improved to the federal government through increased Service Canada locations across the country. Likewise, the Community Futures program received additional investment and Community Futures Development Corporations expanded to additional rural communities (Rural Secretariat, 2001a). The Rural Secretariat and the Rural Lens were also instrumental in facilitating the creation of Industry Canada's Broadband for Rural and Northern Development pilot program and the National Satellite Initiative (Rural Secretariat, 2003).

Despite these successes, the partnerships, and engagement with rural Canada, both the Rural Secretariat and the Rural Lens encountered a number of challenges. First was the location of the Rural Secretariat and the Rural Lens in a sectoral line department focused on agriculture. This meant that rural was often equated with the agricultural sector while departments focused on non-agricultural sectors often did not see the association with the Rural Lens or the Rural Secretariat. Second, the Rural Secretariat, as a unit within a line department, had no authority to force horizontal coordination

despite its mandate. Instead, it relied on an active Minister to use “moral suasion” on other departments to apply the rural lens and think about the impacts on rural Canada.<sup>3</sup>

As a result, the degree to which the rural lens was applied was at the discretion of individual departments. Most departments ignored it with little ramifications. The rural lens was often only applied when members of the Rural Secretariat reviewed Memorandums to Cabinet, which were prepared by a sponsoring department for Cabinet approval. However, this meant the Secretariat was constantly “checking the rear view mirror to make sure rural Canada [was] not left behind” (Key Informant, 2016). Even at this stage, the Rural Secretariat could not “force” other departments to apply the rural lens.

Third, in trying to apply the rural lens and influence a variety of policy issues, the Rural Secretariat had an extremely small number of employees and limited financial resources which was both a challenge and an opportunity (Savoie, 2006). Some argued that the Secretariat was constantly justifying its existence to Cabinet for funding which prevented long-term planning. While the lack of program money impacted its political importance. On the other hand, having little financial resources prevented competition from other departments allowing the Rural Secretariat to focus on its mandate and work with other departments.

## Lessons Learned

The experience of the Rural Secretariat and Rural Lens in Canada offers a number of important lessons and questions that should be considered in other jurisdictions.

### *Where the rural development unit and rural lens is ‘housed’ matters.*

If the rural development unit and the rural lens coordination responsibility was housed in a central unit of government, such as the Privy Council, versus a line sectoral department it would have shed the ‘agricultural only’ persona. More importantly, being housed in a unit like the Privy Council would promote

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<sup>3</sup> In Canada, there are central agencies that have authority over other departments (e.g. the Prime Minister’s Office, the Privy Council Office, the Treasury Board) and line departments, which have no authority to direct other departments

horizontal policy coordination and facilitate stronger relationships between the rural lens and each of the departments of the federal government. There also needs to be recognition by the administration (e.g. Deputy Minister's and Assistant Deputy Minister's) for horizontal activities within line departments for the rural lens to be supported with meaning.

*Having a rural voice.*

During its tenure, the Rural Secretariat had either a Minister of State or the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food at the cabinet table providing an important voice on rural issues. Creating a Secretary of State for Rural Development or a Minister for Rural Development will provide priority to rural issues.

*A rural lens without authority becomes a 'suggested practice'.*

As noted, the rural lens was never mandatory for any department of government, including the Department of Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, and the Rural Secretariat did not have the mandate or tools to enforce participation. If the rural lens is to have authority, it is clear from the Canadian experience that legislation is required along with financial and human resources to ensure its effective application.

*Seeing the rural lens 'in action'.*

The formation of the rural lens was the culmination of multiple discussions, workshops, and conferences facilitated by the Rural Secretariat. However once the rural lens was created, most of the work was performed "behind the scenes". Few details were publicly released on its operations, including: how many initiatives were reviewed, which departments applied the rural lens and which did not, what changes were proposed, or what changes resulted from the rural lens. Seeing the rural lens in action might help showcase its importance, both within government and with the general public.

*Partnership with a central statistical agency is imperative from the onset.*

The 60 plus Rural and Small Town Analysis Bulletins published by Statistics Canada, and financially supported by the Rural Secretariat, generated critical and timely data on rural issues, trends, opportunities, and challenges. Statistics Canada was able to access data and provide an analysis, ensuring the highest of standards were met. The data generated through the Rural and Small Town Bulletin Analysis series was important for the Rural Secretariat to justify their programs and funding and was also used as a tool to encourage other Departments to use the rural lens.

*It is important to ensure dialogue between different levels of government.*

The Rural Teams were valuable forums that brought together all departments of government at the federal and provincial/territorial level to discuss rural issues. Through these discussions, opportunities for information sharing and project co-funding emerged. The success of the Rural Teams varied among the provinces/territories; however, strong Rural Teams were a good investment for partnerships, knowledge mobilization, and connecting federal and provincial/territorial initiatives.

As of 2016, there is no longer a formal mechanism within the Government of Canada to ensure new policies and programs are appropriate for rural communities. The Rural Secretariat was not renewed in 2013 and no federal department has assumed this role. This decision was part of a series of sweeping cuts to federal government programs and policies by the governing political party in what has been described as a “retreat from rural.” At the time, Agriculture Canada released a statement that argued the federal government would continue to use a rural lens, however no formal mechanism exists. It also argued that rural communities could take advantage of opportunities on their own. Rural researchers and organizations, like the Rural Caucus for the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, expressed deep concerns over this decision (Wilson 2013). Currently, there are units within federal departments with an emphasis on rural, however these units do not have a mandate beyond their departments.

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