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HANNA ROUNDTABLE

*Working Together
for the Future of Our Rural Communities*

SUMMARY REPORT

**Hanna, Alberta
August 16, 2005**

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HANNA ROUNDTABLE

Working Together for the Future of Our Rural Communities

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1. FOREWORD

This report is a summary of discussions that took place at the Roundtable held in Hanna, Alberta on August 16, 2005. No limits were placed on the participants during discussions. Views expressed do not necessarily represent those of the Government of Canada or the Government of Alberta.

Since their first meeting in the spring of 2003, ministers responsible for rural affairs in Canada have been striving to work more closely together and to better take into account rural realities when developing policies and delivering programs and services. Consultations with rural citizens to date have highlighted the importance of supporting communities in achieving their visions and in finding ways to better coordinate actions between governments.

Building on past consultations and in anticipation of another ministerial meeting to decide on an approach for closer cooperation, the Hanna Roundtable was organized and was the first in a series of roundtables being held in different parts of the country.

As governments in Canada continue to explore approaches for closer cooperation, an enhanced understanding of the major challenges and priorities for action will contribute to ongoing joint efforts aimed at improving the viability of rural communities.

2. INTRODUCTION

The Hanna Roundtable was jointly organized by the Rural Secretariat of Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada and the Alberta Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. The event was co-hosted by the Honourable Wayne Easter, Member of Parliament and Parliamentary Secretary for Rural Development, and Mr. Doug Griffiths, Member of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta and Chair of Alberta's Rural Development Strategy Task Force.

Participants at the event (29 in attendance) included: representatives from provincial, regional and local organizations, associations and societies, and area municipalities; community and academic leaders; economic development officers; aboriginal and youth representatives; and representatives of the federal, provincial and municipal governments.

The results of the Roundtable will help guide the future actions of the Government of Canada and the Government of Alberta in support of rural communities and will contribute to the ongoing development of the proposed National Rural Framework (NRF). Joint federal,

provincial and territorial work to date on the proposed NRF has identified five areas of focus for collaboration among governments (described in section 3 of this report), which provided the context for the Roundtable discussions.

Under the theme “Working Together for the Future of Our Rural Communities”, participants were invited to share their views on the major challenges to the viability of rural communities, priorities for government collaboration and action, the roles of communities, and the results or outcomes that could be expected from collaborative action. Opinions and suggestions were transmitted to government representatives both verbally and in writing. This report stems from discussions on and responses to the following questions:

1. What are the two or three greatest challenges or risks related to the viability of rural communities?
2. In your opinion, which of the challenges or risks that you have identified should be priorities that the ministers of both orders of government should be working on?
3. What actions should governments take to address the priorities you have identified?
4. As a stakeholder, what role do you think communities should play in the approach you are suggesting ministers take?
5. What results do you expect from governments? For example, what progress should ministers be aiming for after three --- or even five --- years of engagement, with regard to the priorities you recommend?

3. THE NATIONAL RURAL FRAMEWORK (NRF)

The over-arching goal of the proposed NRF, a framework to facilitate federal, provincial and territorial collaboration on rural issues, is to ensure the long-term viability and sustainability of rural communities by creating an environment in which communities and citizens have access to improved social and economic opportunities.

Throughout the dialogue, participants covered a number of topics relating to the five NRF focus areas (described below). A summary of the topics discussed are presented in section 4 of this report.

Sustainable Livelihoods	Factors affecting how Canadians can provide for themselves and their families to live in rural communities that are economically and socially healthy.
Environmental Stewardship	Ways in which rural and urban communities can share with governments the responsibility for good management, the benefits of natural resources and a healthy environment.
Innovative Approaches to Rural Infrastructure	Approaches allowing communities, working together with governments, to develop and maintain physical, social and knowledge-based infrastructure that addresses their needs.

Engaged Populations and Institutions	Opportunities for institutions and governments to provide the environment where Canadians can actively participate in making decisions that affect the community.
Demographic Adaptation	Openness to the range of options rural communities may need to consider in order to adapt to ongoing changes in population, economics and services.

4. IMPROVING COMMUNITY SUSTAINABILITY AND VIABILITY

Rural communities face multiple challenges. International, national, regional and local factors all play a role in their current realities and future potential. Rural challenges are cross-cutting, they do not fall neatly within the mandate of one government department or one level of government. Coordinated approaches are therefore required. As rural communities are very diverse, actions to improve community sustainability must be flexible and sensitive to local circumstances. To meet rural challenges and maximize opportunities, communities and all levels of government should work together.

4.1 Challenges and risks related to the viability of rural communities

As stakeholders active in the development of their communities, participants at the Hanna Roundtable provided their perspectives on current rural challenges. A number of risks were identified and some common challenges emerged.

They acknowledged that their communities face a number of issues such as: undiversified economic bases; global changes to industry; uncontrollable economic downturns; decreasing population; limited opportunities for youth; eroding tax bases; diminishing economies of scale; skilled labour shortages; inadequate support services for integrating immigrants; aging populations; decreasing abilities to manage change; maintaining and developing infrastructure – physical, social and knowledge-based; and difficulties in sustaining community and government enthusiasm for addressing rural viability.

Participants identified challenges in two key areas: retaining existing capacity in the short-term (people, services, facilities) and attracting new assets and initiatives in the medium-term (people, capital, business) which would help to develop sustainable economic bases for the long-term.

4.1.1 Retaining Existing Capacity

A major challenge for Alberta’s rural communities is decreasing population. As youth and professionals leave their communities, attracted by better educational and socio-economic opportunities in urban centres, and as the tax base of their communities erodes, it is a struggle for communities to provide affordable basic services and infrastructure for the remaining

residents, a growing proportion of whom are older. Inadequate services and facilities, in turn, make it difficult to attract new professionals. As communities are already hard pressed to maintain existing services and infrastructure, they cannot conceive of developing enhanced services and facilities that would encourage youth to return and the elderly to stay. Under these circumstances, attracting new businesses to generate economic growth in the community is a significant challenge.

Affordable supplies and deliveries of potable water and adequate wastewater facilities were identified as critical infrastructure challenges, as was improved transportation infrastructure such as roads and bridges. Work needs to be done amongst communities to change attitudes in terms of sharing, managing and strategically planning for infrastructure. However, many communities are already engaged in plans that involve: taking an inventory of their infrastructure, determining replacement or development costs, assessing the age and condition of existing infrastructure, identifying the type of spending needed, and planning for future expenditures.

Retaining essential health and education facilities are necessary elements to sustain rural communities. Affordable, high-quality health care, education, policing, and childcare, were cited as basic services needed to retain and attract people. Inadequate facilities to operate community programs and provide access to technology and high speed Internet service for workforce development were also noted.

Current government funding arrangements for municipalities to deliver services and invest in infrastructure projects were noted, as well as fiscal difficulties in delivering services that support healthy, growing communities. Municipalities need flexibility to allow them to take local situations into account. Per capita funding formulas were viewed as detrimental to rural communities in large geographic areas. The ability for small communities under 10,000 to be able to afford the costs necessary to fund infrastructure projects is a concern. In some cases, they have no alternative but to raise local taxes to move their projects forward.

Agricultural challenges, specifically the demise of the family farm and high costs of operating a farm, were seen as ongoing risks, as was a general lack of confidence in the ability of agriculture to help sustain communities. Ninety percent of farms have off-farm job incomes to survive. The unknowns associated with farming (unpredictable weather, high input costs, uncertain income) have become too high for many farmers. In addition, existing tax laws inhibit parents from assisting their children to stay in the agriculture industry.

4.1.2 Attracting New Assets

Participants identified challenges in developing more diversified economic bases, pointing not only to a shortage of skilled labour, and the difficulties in recruiting and retaining skilled workers, but to a shortage of people with skills, training and experience. Communities need support to build their human capacity.

It is increasingly difficult to find young leaders to respond to challenges and seize opportunities in their communities. Training and skill development programs to suit different local needs are lacking. Youth must leave their communities to access post-secondary education and are therefore faced with high costs of relocation.

Venture capital funding to improve global and local competitiveness and promote local economic growth is a priority in rural Alberta. However, businesses have difficulty accessing venture capital. The level of business research and development is too small. Métis land is owned collectively, therefore cannot be used as equity.

Inadequate support for communities to attract and retain immigrants and refugees was identified as a challenge, as was the lack of adequate integration and settlement services for immigrants. Many French-speaking immigrants find existing French language services inadequate. Refugees experience problems adjusting due to insufficient orientation processes. Immigrants have difficulties in having foreign credentials recognized. There are additional challenges with family sponsorships, cultural recognition issues, insufficient language training for new immigrants and lack of counselling for immigrants.

Participants voiced their frustration at the complexity of government programs and regulations. Communities experience difficulties accessing programs and are overcome by bureaucracy; completing the necessary documents for applications and reports has become an overwhelming obstacle. They often face additional costs from having to hire people to help complete applications. Complying with numerous rules and regulations creates lengthy approval processes, which often result in increased costs and delays. Some communities choose not to apply for funding, given additional costs required for staffing, time investment, and the uncertain outcome of their application.

“Rural communities are looking at \$1000 for every inch of paper (funding agreements reporting) they have consultants produce.”

4.2 Priorities for government collaboration

Participants were invited to make suggestions as to what roles governments could play and what priorities should shape government activities, in addressing communities' challenges over the next three to five years. These are presented under the relevant NRF areas of focus.

4.2.1 Sustainable Livelihoods

Communities would like governments to help them plan and develop the economic and social bases that provide better access to opportunities and healthy, sustainable livelihoods. Governments should look at ways of utilizing the tax system to provide personal and business tax incentives to encourage sustainable community development. Incentives for existing businesses and for new businesses to start up in rural communities, or to relocate to rural areas from larger centres, should be explored. Governments should encourage competitive business and a service environment as well as provide incentives for the sharing of facilities between communities.

Economic renewal and diversification is another key priority for rural communities in Alberta; improving the viability of family farms and reducing high operating costs of farms in particular. Governments should help communities identify, attract and retain new sustainable industries and businesses. The agriculture industry should be diversified, ownership of processing or

value-added materials should be retained, and light manufacturing opportunities should be facilitated.

Improving knowledge, understanding and collaboration among and between diverse economic sectors and all levels of government was encouraged. Governments should work together to support communities in renewing and diversifying their economies. However, the community development process should be private sector-driven with governments providing “hand-ups” not “hand-outs”. As one participant noted, government programs and funding should aim to:

“Fire up rural Alberta, NOT prop it up!”

Governments should help communities put research and development to use to improve the social and economic well-being of local populations by facilitating the “piggybacking” with universities engaged in research and development. Communities are looking to universities to create and sustain innovative ideas such as alternative energy sources, both in the business sector and in communities.

Governments should collaborate to encourage entrepreneurship. Venture capital should be made more accessible and small business development should be facilitated. The cooperative business model is one of the most successful business structures. Co-ops keep the ownership and profits in the communities, ensuring their sustainability. Legislation enabling cooperatives to compete on an even playing field is required.

Trade policy and market development was identified as another area requiring attention. Governments should assist communities to develop new partnerships and connect globally and should help increase access to a variety of large markets. Rural Alberta’s role in the province’s competitive advantage in the global marketplace should be promoted and expanded. Internal trade policies should be examined.

4.2.2 Innovative Approaches to Rural Infrastructure

Infrastructure development, both physical and knowledge-based, is a key priority. Water and water management was identified as an area requiring immediate attention. Governments should collaborate in the area of water management and allow communities to combine funding received through various programs so they can get water to their residents. Investments and improvements in wastewater infrastructure and transportation infrastructure such as roads and bridges are required. Communities are looking for governments to help anticipate costs and provide long-term support for infrastructure needs. Current funding arrangements for rural infrastructure development should be reviewed. Per capita funding allocations disadvantage rural communities with small populations and large geographic areas. Governments should provide more flexibility and give municipalities more project control.

Improving communications infrastructure through the Internet, and enabling communities to share the technology of larger centres, is of major importance. Access to technology would allow communities to provide distance education and health services and assist development in the workforce.

Priorities were also identified in the areas of social and cultural services. Governments should expand and improve primary bilingual services, make post-secondary education more affordable and accessible, improve policing services, and increase support to public libraries. They should support the development of community capacity and community leaders.

Governments should coordinate their approaches and policies in support of community development. They should simplify their programs and improve access by reducing barriers.

4.2.3 Engaged Populations and Institutions

Participants urged governments to be more engaged at the community level, to move beyond matters of jurisdiction and work cooperatively with each other and with rural communities to develop integrated problem-solving approaches. They added that governments should take strategic, long-term views, involving future generations and cooperative approaches to rural community development.

4.2.4 Demographic Adaptation

A federal/provincial/local strategy should be developed to address current skilled labour shortages. The immigration policy is a priority for government action. Residents of communities should be made aware of issues that could arise from attempts to attract newcomers and retain them in their regions. Communities and governments should remove barriers that prevent new arrivals in Canada from settling into rural areas. Attracting entrepreneurial immigrants should be made easier. Timeframes for processing applications should be shortened. Immigrant integration and settlement services require additional support.

4.3 Actions for governments

Participants were invited to make recommendations as to what actions governments should take to address the priorities identified in support of rural community viability.

All levels of government should put jurisdictional matters aside and work together as partners at the community level. Action – public, visible progress on rural issues – needs to be taken soon as time is running out for some communities. They should be facilitators, actively supporting communities to find ways to develop new opportunities driven by the vision and passion of the communities. Governments should also maintain an ongoing dialogue with rural Alberta communities.

Government policies, programs, regulations and actions should reflect rural realities and their activities should be coordinated. All levels of government and departments within governments should be on the same page. Governments should develop flexible programs and policies that can be adapted to fit the needs of the community. There should be less bureaucracy and “hoops” to climb through.

Governments should work together so that communities are supported, empowered and engaged in the decisions that affect them. Communities should have more influence in planning, decision-making, implementation and follow-up stages for initiatives designed to strengthen community viability. Empowering communities will lead to higher levels of success.

Governments should approach economic development with careful planning to ensure an adequate social and economic infrastructure base to support further development. It was suggested that federal and provincial governments select one or two tasks that are achievable and plan for the future, considering global forces, trends and activities. Communities and governments were told not to chase yesterday's challenges nor fight yesterday's battles.

Governments should encourage opportunities for cooperative participation (multi-community or regional). Network and service centre areas should be explored. Governments were urged to stop funding "one-off" projects that are funded only for a short one-project basis. An endowment fund could be established from surplus funds to allow communities to work towards their goals. Governments should consider "rewarding" communities that show greater commitment to their future viability with a larger share of tools and resources.

Governments should promote and support plans for community development that are economically sustainable and allow people to maximize their potential: opportunities to participate and have influence are greater in rural communities than in urban centres. In terms of policy, governments should look at communities that are growing, not just at those that are declining. They should look at the aboriginal population's economic and social development opportunities. More emphasis should be placed on aboriginal participation and capacity building.

Governments should take actions to support small businesses. A federal/provincial/municipal strategy, through an offset of relocation costs that would encourage small businesses to relocate to rural communities, should be developed. Businesses and entrepreneurs, particularly new start-ups, would benefit by receiving better support and information on procedures and regulations. More cooperatives and lower tax rates for businesses to set up in rural areas are encouraged. Better interest rates would be an incentive for businesses to "set up shop" further away from the corridor - the further the distance, the greater the incentive. Providing tax breaks was another suggestion, one similar to the northern allowance for people settling in rural areas, and one to help offset the debt incurred by university graduates.

Governments should provide resources to communities to help them develop community economic plans and strengthen their competitiveness. Tourism opportunities should be explored. Community development friendly policies and regulations should be implemented. This is critical in the areas of trade, transportation, taxation and investment. Governments should assess and adjust current trade positions to support the move towards more value-adding of resource-based commodities and help rural areas add value to their products.

Governments should ensure safety net programs work so the agriculture sector can be profitable again. Governments should make certain that farmers are paid for what they produce to help secure the survival of small family farms. Governments should also provide assistance to young people, perhaps through mentoring, grants or loan guarantees, to enter into agricultural production.

Governments and communities should work together on a public relations program for rural areas, promoting both the importance of agriculture to Canada and the overall advantages and benefits of living in rural areas as an alternative to urban living, such as affordable housing.

Governments should ensure their human resources skills development, training, employment and recruitment strategies reflect and meet the different requirements and views of individual communities. These should include: encouraging more women to pursue non-traditional occupations; supporting training for skilled trades; and developing incentives targeted to rural Alberta development.

Governments should provide increased education opportunities for rural Canadians by: increasing the number of scholarships available to non-agricultural sectors that support rural communities (educators, accountants, lawyers, entrepreneurs); providing scholarships and bursaries to students wanting to pursue a trade; and expanding the “small schools by necessity” concept to include libraries and communities. In addition, colleges should visit rural areas to provide training, instead of people having to travel to cities. Post-secondary education institutions should open satellite campuses in rural communities and offer a selected curriculum of interest to rural economies and youth. Governments should provide financial incentives to post-secondary institutions through the student loans program.

Provincial and federal governments should act on the findings of the September 2004 report “Foundations for Prosperity” delivered by the Canada West Foundation and consider uniform models for inter-municipal revenue and cost-sharing arrangements.

Governments should provide increased funding to “communities of necessity” for infrastructure and basic services. They should also provide better access to essential services, such as mental health and justice, through outreach programs brought to the community rather than citizens having to travel to access them.

Governments should pursue alternative methods for providing primary health care in rural communities, particularly the use of locally residing nurse practitioners, with physicians consulting at a distance via videoconferencing.

Provincial and federal governments should provide bursaries to studying nurse practitioners. They should also fund the operation of Wellness Centres and agree to compensate physicians for lost income from patient visits made at Wellness Centres rather than doctors’ offices.

Governments should provide more support for immigrant recruitment, integration and settlement services. They should also review and adapt certain aspects of the settlement policy to attract immigrants to rural areas and to support immigrants while they are adjusting to a significantly new culture and community experience.

4.4 Roles for communities and stakeholders

Participants were invited to make suggestions as to what roles communities and stakeholders should play in addressing the issues and approaches discussed.

Communities should take the lead in identifying the roots of the issues they face and in finding solutions to the issues. Initiatives should be community and grassroots driven. They should forge stronger relationships with governments to build understanding and develop a stronger, more effective and proactive voice at provincial and federal government levels. Communities should be a partner in their development.

Communities should adopt a proactive approach to attract new businesses and industries by marketing and promoting the benefits and opportunities of living in rural environments. They should consider quality of life, and the facilities and incentives that will retain and attract people and business. Communities should ensure they are environmentally sustainable. They should consider global dynamics and think about different approaches and opportunities, such as adding value to agriculture.

Communities should encourage continued training and development and invest in people who will promote their communities. They should show active and visible support to the volunteers who keep their communities going by providing essential social, economic and cultural services. Communities should engage and promote increased citizen participation in community events and community development and incite opportunities to share and learn with First Nations and aboriginal peoples. They should also encourage the recruitment of immigrants and refugees and provide a welcoming and supportive environment, with adequate settlement services, to retain and successfully integrate newcomers. Communities should raise awareness of the socio-economic and cultural benefits of Francophone immigration.

4.5 Projected outcomes and results

Participants were invited to share the outcomes and results they expect from government actions over the next three to five years to address the priorities raised throughout the dialogue. Participants envisaged many positive outcomes for their communities.

Overall, it was felt that collaboration and cooperation between all levels of government and integrated long-term planning for community-based development would significantly improve the viability of and quality of life in rural communities. Increased collaboration would result in:

- governments being more accountable;
- local government services becoming more effective, efficient and cost-effective in terms of their delivery;
- increased regional and cooperative inter-municipal working relationships, perspectives and initiatives.

Additionally, if governments followed through on the actions outlined in this report, it was felt that rural communities would have the tools and capacity necessary to ensure their long-term viability. Providing rural citizens with access to post-secondary education and training would not only keep many people (particularly youth) from leaving their communities, but provide these people with the knowledge and skills to be economically productive citizens in a variety of sectors. For instance:

- the advantages and assets of rural areas would be promoted, both domestically and internationally;
- small rural schools would thrive and grow;
- the delivery of vocational and professional training would be more effective and cost-effective;
- there would be more emphasis on trades;
- rural public libraries would have increased support and could play a greater role as one-stop sources of government information in communities with a reduced, or non-existent federal or provincial government presence.

Similarly, more encouragement for immigration and increased support for immigrant integration and settlement services would not only help to attract and retain newcomers, but also provide communities with the needed skilled workers and an increased tax base. For example:

- improved access to primary bilingual services would result in more successful rural communities that can attract and retain newcomers;
- the population growth ratio between rural and urban areas would change;
- an increase in rural population growth would be a sign of success.

Government efforts to foster a healthy and competitive business climate would create an environment in which small and medium-sized businesses can thrive and provide the foundation for economic diversification and growth. Prosperous businesses would also provide additional economic/job opportunities which would enable rural communities to retain core human and intellectual capacity. As a result:

- family farms would be viable and sustainable;
- diversified economic bases and prosperous businesses would foster the growth of recreational and cultural facilities and activities;
- the exodus from farms and the exodus of youth and professionals would be reduced;
- rural communities would be viable and sustainable in the long-term.

Government support for citizen-engagement initiatives would get more citizens involved and contributing to the development of their communities which would result in increased community capacity. Youth would also have greater opportunities for civic participation and involvement, as well as increased economic and employment prospects. For instance:

- communities would improve their ability to respond and adjust to changing circumstances through the retention of skilled, trained and educated human capital;
- communities would expand their capacities and economic growth, leading to less stressful environments for social and community volunteers.

In the area of health, appropriate government support would allow the highest possible primary health care services to be delivered equitably to all Albertans. As a result:

- communities would be able to provide improved and assured essential health services with more emphasis on preventive care, reducing the demand for and operating costs of acute care systems;
- rural citizens would be able to “age in place”.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEP

Participants at the Hanna Roundtable were satisfied or very satisfied with the results of the event and felt that the event had met, and in some cases exceeded, their expectations.

They stressed the valuable human and natural resources their communities and areas continue to possess and the major contributions rural Canadians have made, and continue to make, to Canada's well-being and prosperity. Underscoring the importance of rural communities to Canada, one participant remarked:

*"Tear down your cities and watch them spring up again
as if by magic; tear down your farms in our rural communities
and watch the grass grow in every city street in this country."*

Rural Canada's pivotal role in the development of the nation and the many successes of its communities and citizens deserve to be more widely understood and appreciated. Significant potential for even greater contributions exists when the energies and ideas of rural residents are harnessed in place and communities are engaged as full participants in their ongoing development.

Throughout the discussions, participants emphasized the need for initiatives to be community-based and community-driven and highlighted the need for flexibility in approaches to rural community development, to allow for variations in individual community circumstances. Communities, it was stressed, should be partners with governments in coordinated, community-specific solutions. Governments can help communities meet their challenges by supporting the development of the tools and capacity communities require to adapt to changing circumstances.

Enabling rural citizens to share fully in existing opportunities and maximize their future potential requires innovative and holistic thinking, planning and implementation. Governments should develop long-term visions and integrated problem-solving approaches to the issues facing rural communities, in partnership with rural communities.

As a next step, the Hanna Roundtable discussions will help guide the federal and the Alberta governments as they continue to explore opportunities for cooperative and joint action in support of rural community viability. Federal/provincial work to date on the proposed National Rural Framework has identified opportunities for collaboration in all five areas of focus: sustainable livelihoods; environmental stewardship; innovative approaches to rural infrastructure; engaged populations and institutions; and demographic adaptation.