

# Program takes regional tactic

BY DARIN LEACH

**R**URAL communities and areas that have engaged residents and regional development plans based on locally identified needs and growth strategies may be eligible for additional funding opportunities offered through federal agencies such as USDA.

USDA's Stronger Economies Together (SET) program began in 2009 to help rural communities and counties work together to implement an economic development blueprint. That blueprint strategically builds on the current and emerging economic strengths of their region.

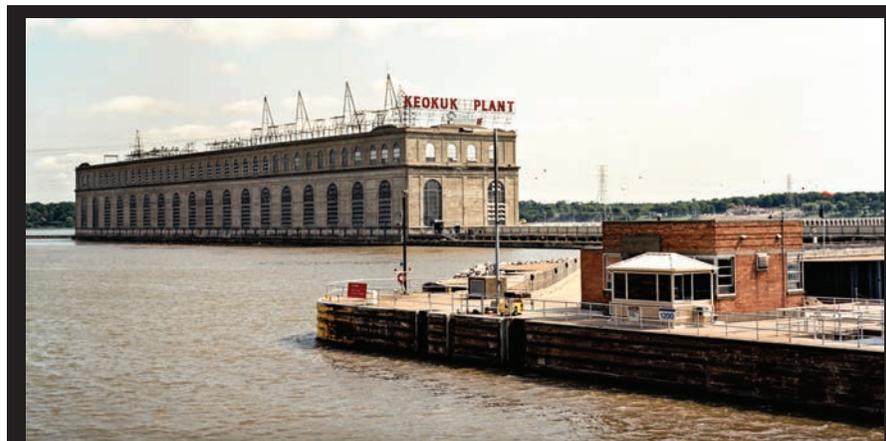
Earlier this summer an application from Henry, Jefferson and Washington counties in southeast Iowa, as well as the Mississippi and Des Moines Rivers Confluence Region, were the first two in Iowa to be approved

for SET program assistance.

"USDA Rural Development's SET program helps establish a state resource team that will bring the talents and resources of key state and federal agencies, Extension programs, and other organizations together to provide coaching and technical assistance to each of the regional teams," says Bill Menner, USDA Rural Development state director in Iowa. "Rural communities that work through regional and strategic partnerships can complement and draw upon the resources of another to create jobs and strengthen economies."

## Partnerships and opportunities

Today, more than 1.7 million Iowans live in rural communities, and nearly half of these communities have fewer than 500 residents. In fact, 75 counties in Iowa have less than 25,000 residents, with 24 being



**LOCK & DAM 19:** USDA's Stronger Economies Together (SET) program is helping the Mississippi and Des Moines Rivers Confluence Region expand economic development opportunities and increase the region's competitive position in the world market. Lock and Dam 19 and Ameren's Keokuk Energy Center and hydroelectric power plant play an important role in advancing the area's economy.

PHOTO CREDIT: KEOKUK AREA CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

less than 10,000. These smaller populations make regionalization efforts critical.

Leaders in Henry, Jefferson and Washington counties plan to use the SET program to develop an extensive regional economic development plan to create new partnerships and opportunities for such communities as Fairfield, Mount Pleasant and Washington.

Participants in the Mississippi and Des Moines Rivers Confluence Region (Lee County in Iowa, Clark County in Missouri and Hancock County in Illinois) will use the SET process to drive development of river, rail and road infrastructure to increase the region's competitiveness.

"As citizens of a tri-state region, we cross state borders with little thought when it comes to employment, shopping and entertainment," says Shelley Oltmans, community development specialist with Iowa State University Extension and Outreach and executive director of the Keokuk Area Chamber of Commerce. "But when it comes to collaboration between businesses, economic development organizations and governments, it is perceived to be more difficult."

## Regional goals, strategies

Oltmans says the SET process will help bring these groups together and build on strong relationships between organizations in the region. "The SET planning process will assist us in developing regional goals and strategies that will strengthen our global competitiveness, increase the quality of life for our residents across the region and help us build upon our long industrial history."

Staff with ISU Extension will play a key role in providing guidance to the Iowa SET recipients by assisting with leadership and community development, civic engagement, and economic development.

"SET is a remarkable program. What makes it unique is it is about innovative partnerships," says Deborah Tootle, an ISU Extension specialist. "By working together, USDA Rural Development and the cooperative Extension service in each participating state are combining critical resources and creating synergies that did not exist before. SET enables communities and counties in rural America to work together in developing and implementing economic development blueprints for their multicounty regions that strategically build on current and emerging economic strengths of the regions."

Another way USDA is committed to enhancing rural economic opportunities is the Strategic Economic and Community Development provision in the 2014 Farm Bill. Sometimes called Section 6025, the provision gives priority scoring to projects that support the implementation of regional or multijurisdictional strategic economic development plans. "The new regional development priority policy will make it easier for rural communities to access resources to invest in long-term community development efforts by giving priority to applications for USDA Rural Development programs that include regional partnerships and strategies," says Menner.

"Combining great local leadership with strong regional planning maximizes the effectiveness of our investments in rural America," he adds. "When communities come together to share resources, ideas and expertise, they can develop a cohesive economy strategy and invest in their future. With a strategy in place, USDA-funded projects can spur regional economic transformation, increase job opportunities and improve quality of life for residents in rural communities."

*Leach is public information coordinator with USDA Rural Development in Iowa.*

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