

The Case for Rural Prosperity

by Rhiannon Hampson

Often in the summer, I wake up early enough to hear the hum of the vacuum pump from our milking machine. Not because I like early mornings, but because it's warm enough that the window is open and somehow though asleep, that sound lets me know it's time to meet the day. We installed a muffler on it last year, but with 40 neighbors' houses lining the pasture fence, I worry that the sounds of a working dairy and livestock farm will cause discontent, so I'm particularly attuned to its noise. Complaints could shut us down, new zoning regulations in these fast-growing and rapidly developing parts of Maine, like the one I live in, don't leave much room for the smells and sounds of growing food. People like pastoral scenes, but not necessarily pastoral businesses.

It hasn't always been this way. That phrase is often the prelude to a good-old-days story, but one that is true for many rural spaces: it's my wistful longing for the autonomy of years past. I grew up in a place where the noises of making a living were forgivable sins. Early in the morning, the buzzing of chainsaws or the rumbling of boat and truck engines would outcompete the birds to let us know that the day was beginning. We didn't begrudge one another the loudness of putting food on the table; it was admirable if anything. It signaled to the world that you worked hard at something real, and we all understood that meant you were of good character. Although that over-simplified and nostalgia-tainted summation doesn't capture the very real struggles

that come with living in *Vacationland* and working in a blue-collar economy, it still feels authentic in the context of rural Maine.

For most of our history as a nation, rural dwellers have enjoyed a freedom that comes from living in sparsely populated places: fewer regulations and less enforcement of the rules that do exist. This idea is expressed in our cultural lexicon; we refer to the "Wild West" when describing a remote place that operates outside the law. And it captures our collective imagination, this kind of freedom from the hustle of urban places. We write songs about it and paint peaceful landscapes of wide-open spaces, and when many Americans take that longed-for vacation, they *head for the hills*, quite literally seeking out rural areas that they hope will allow them to recover from the intensity of the city.

But what makes a place rural beyond the kind of work it offers, the low housing density, and the collective identity? Well, the US Census Bureau defines rural as "what is not urban," which means that after applying numerous complex criteria to define higher population areas, rural is what's left over (Ratcliffe et al. 2016). It's little wonder, then, that the back-road towns of Maine feel left behind. While most of us are not consciously aware that remote communities are classified simply by not being urban, I believe that somehow we feel it. We inhabit that *leftoverness*, the othering that comes from being defined in contrast to another place.

Growing up in the 1980s and 1990s, it was hard to ignore evidence of the *two Maines* theory¹ in action. There were bumper stickers proudly touting the driver's bona fides as being from "the other Maine," reminding you to thank a logger, and ensuring you knew your geography: "the real Downeast starts east of Ellsworth." These bumper stickers differentiated rural spaces from urban ones and signaled that the owner of the sticker certainly knew which side of the line they were from. Much of what was captured in those sentiments had to do with the heritage industry economy that was making all that early morning noise. From the farms in the crown of Maine, to the sawmills of western and central Maine, to the wharves lining the coast, our rural towns and townships remain heavily reliant on the natural resources that our uninhabited lands provide us with.

With only one in five people in America living rurally, those of us who do so collectively steward approximately 97 percent of the US land base and nearly all of the natural resources that we use to feed, fuel, and build the nation (US Census Bureau 2017). This is an enormous responsibility when we consider that many of the regulations pertaining to their extraction are crafted at the state and local level.² It is also one of the most compelling reasons that rural prosperity matters to us collectively, regardless of one's zip code. Governing our shared natural resources is largely managed by rural people themselves yet affects everyone.

Consider the Dust Bowl. Faced with plummeting wheat prices and uncertainty in weather forecasts, many farmers had little choice but to "plant more now to ensure against less later"; they plowed up millions of acres of

land. It backfired, and the country suffered the consequences: dust storms that destroyed homes and lives became a regular occurrence. Not only did rural farmers suffer, but so did residents in much of the rest of the nation, including Congress and Washington, DC, residents in the spring of 1935 (NWS n.d.).³ The Dust Bowl storms demonstrated that the stewardship of our natural resources has significant implications for urban and rural communities alike. When we recognize that the decisions of those farmers were made in reaction to economic uncertainty, it further supports the assertion that the prosperity of rural places is a critical element in our national well-being.

There are modern day examples of our interconnected fate as well. Here in Maine, there are roughly 20 miles of working waterfront left and just a handful of people who own or manage that infrastructure (Island Institute 2007). Importantly, they are safeguarding access for the commercial seafood industry that in rural Downeast Maine was responsible for \$264 million in labor income in 2019 alone. Without working waterfront access that revenue would largely be lost, and the communities depending on it changed forever. It would have a ripple effect throughout the state if the more than 10,000 people directly employed by the seafood industry in Downeast Maine were to lose their income (Wallace and Colgan 2023). And the consequences wouldn't end with an individual's diminished spending capacity—there would be a cascade effect across the sectors participating in Maine's seafood harvesting economy. Community lenders that finance boats and equipment would see a decrease in loan revenue, potentially resulting in layoffs and reducing the

breadth of programming they can offer across the state. Commercial mechanics and boatyards would see a sharp decline in demand for their services, leading to shuttered business and greater losses of tax revenue for the state overall.

As we follow the ripple effect of those consequences, we can identify more lives likely changed and businesses diminished. One of the most severe repercussions would be a shift in the character of Downeast communities. A population made up of the wealthy, the retired, and those employed in other sectors would constitute a major shift in demographics for

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the region, one that would have its own downstream consequences. As we've seen time and again, young people, families, and tradespeople go where the work is, leaving rural schools and hospitals without the students, staff, and property tax revenue, necessary to remain open. These backbone institutions are not only some of the most important employers in rural communities, but they also serve as cultural centers of activity. They are places where bonds are strengthened through the daily work of caring for one another's families. Along with the cultural assets at stake, we bear the burden of managing the grief (and its consequences) that communities hold when forced change occurs. The way of life for so many who work on and next to

the water is inextricably woven into rural Maine's narrative. And as we have learned from our nation's short but tumultuous history, the cultural memory of a place held by those who work and live in traditional ways is not replaceable once it is lost.

Rural places matter to the fate of the nation in nuanced and hard-to-define ways. One school of thought asserts that there's an inherent small-state bias toward less populated rural states, thanks to the US Constitution and its congressional apportionment process.⁴ Because each state has two senators, those of us in Maine with our 1.3 million people enjoy the same Senate representation as ~39 million Californians. This is particularly significant when we consider that the Senate has the power to approve presidential appointments such as cabinet members, department leaders, and judges. Those individuals then shape the way in which valuable federal resources are distributed and laws are applied. This theory holds that states like Maine have an outsized impact on national policy and funding landscapes and that rural voters are actively charting the direction of our country and that their choices have consequences for us all. So, when rural people feel confident about their economic futures, they may be more likely to take a long view in planning and make strategic choices rather than the reactive ones that drive dust bowls.

In the past four years, I have driven more than 65,000 miles across the back roads and rural highways of Maine, listening to the needs and stories of remote communities and celebrating successes that, in the dilution of urban places, might otherwise go unnoticed. During my tenure as the Maine state director for USDA Rural Development,

I was able to see firsthand how the investment of federal or state dollars would be matched by the community in hard work and hope—the currency of rural places. The opening of a single coffee shop or childcare center in a small town helps almost immediately to reinvigorate the community’s sense of identity and pride. It inspires others to dream contagiously. Public investment builds trust by creating a shared fate. We, the federal government, were now linked to that small business owner or community leader by believing in their vision enough to show up with critical financial and technical support. So, it was now *our* success or *our* failure as partners. That bridge building with people who often rightfully feel neglected or unseen by the larger governing forces of Augusta or DC was the most important aspect of my work. In a town of 1,300 people, it is easy to see the benefits of that partnership almost immediately, and I believe that rural communities offer us the opportunity to leverage successes in a way urban spaces can’t. Given the growing mistrust of government that is challenging the foundations of our nation, this work is more valuable than ever. Having rural voices, which are culturally respected as hard working and pragmatic, rise up to counteract this dangerous narrative is critical. Enabling small rural business owners, home buyers, and working families with big dreams to look around their community and point to examples of their tax dollars coming home to work for them is the antidote to the venom that sells ad space. When we show up and do the work to help make it happen, rural prosperity can be a powerful force in turning the tide of national discontent.

When we consider the rural stewardship of our natural resources, the power of congressional members representing rural states, and the voices

setting the tone for our national narrative, it becomes obvious that when rural America prospers, we all do better. Supporting rural communities and states in making strategic and thoughtful decisions by creating the breathing room for them to do so is imperative. Additionally, empowering rural people to step into leadership roles must be a foundation of our strategy to right the ship. Harnessing the authentic expertise of critical thinking earned by making a living from the land and sea or the ingenuity that can only come from having little access to convenience and channeling them into policy making will create tangible benefits for us all. The nation’s fate is inextricably linked to its most rural spaces. We are out here growing and harvesting food, producing energy, stewarding waterways, and tending forests that clean the air for all of us. By investing in rural prosperity, we are investing in our collective future.

NOTES

- 1 The two Maines is a concept largely credited to former Maine State Planning Director Dick Barringer, who employed it during a speech he gave in 1985.
- 2 Only ~28 percent of all land in the United States is federally owned, leaving much of the remaining 72 percent to be governed at the state and local level via local zoning laws, forest management plans, or state agencies (Hanson and Vincent 2020).
- 3 Ironically the dust storm known as “Black Sunday” hit as Hugh Bennett was testifying before Congress about the need to fund conservation practices (NWS n.d.).
- 4 <https://www.census.gov/topics/public-sector/congressional-apportionment/about.html>

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