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A New Approach to Building Rural Water Development and Management Capacity: A Mississippi Example

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Abstract Text:

Water quality and quantity issues can constrain economic development opportunities across the country. In addition, Congress continues to transform many water infrastructure programs from grants to loans or require increased local cost share for grants. Rural counties are especially impacted as they work to integrate near-term water development needs with water management programs to address their long-term water needs. Rural counties often have minimal staff to provide elected officials with alternative solutions to comply with new water regulations or to effectively apply for or administer federal financial assistance. Finally, rural counties often lack the tax base to meet cost sharing requirements and must explore alternative methods to provide in-kind services for cost sharing, which further complicates grant administration. To address this issue, Mississippi State University (MSU) partnered with county governments and the private sector on numerous water development and management projects that also incorporated rural economic development. The Mississippi Water Resources Research Institute (MWRRI) recruited necessary faculty for specific tasks and administered the projects, several of which have had several rounds of funding for different tasks. Projects have included faculty and graduate students from academic departments as diverse as Finance and Economics to Forestry. These successful efforts led to MSU cooperating with the Environmental Protection Agency Region IV to expand this model by creating a self-sustaining Watershed Center of Excellence with goals as follows:

- Develop a portfolio of expertise in multi-disciplinary and multi-university teams to deliver technical support, applied research or other assistance as needed;
- Conduct early “scoping meetings” with clientele to identify water development and management needs,
- Develop and maintain a clearinghouse of information, resources and funding sources available for water development and management projects in Mississippi;
- Provide annual reports that fully document projects, outcomes and the ability to leverage funding.

Impact Statement: