



Rural Development Initiatives: History

With the drastic downturn in the timber industry in the 1980s, many rural communities in the Pacific Northwest lost hundreds of high wage jobs. The spotted owl was listed as an endangered species, drastically reducing the harvest on public lands causing many rural mills to close. RDI started in 1989 as the Community Initiatives Program which was part of the Oregon Economic Development Department. The Community Initiatives program was established to help these communities diversify their economies. We began by facilitating a Strengths Weaknesses Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) Analysis in each community, formed a diverse group of citizens representing each, and facilitated visions and strategic action plans. These plans detailed the steps to build on local assets to create new job opportunities, develop community infrastructure, strengthen the workforce and lifelong learning, and implement projects to improve the community quality of life. In 1991 the state legislature passed Senate Bill 713 transforming the Community Initiatives Program into the private non-profit, Rural Development Initiatives (RDI). RDI received 501(c)(3) in 1992.

RDI's initial work continued with community assessments, creating a vision and a detailed strategic action plan. And to ensure these plans were implemented, we developed Rural Futures Forum to train rural leaders to work together, build consensus, and develop projects to create local jobs and improve the quality of life.

Some of RDI's early successes include:

- Working on 12 former mill sites to get them assessed and cleaned up so that they can be re-used as industrial sites
- Facilitating more than 100 community and regional strategic plans
- Forming business assistance teams in a dozen communities to build the capacity to meet with local businesses, determine their needs, and connect them to resources to stabilize them and create jobs
- Training more than 500 leaders through the Rural Futures Forum leadership program
- Helping entrepreneurs in Oakridge and other communities start businesses to replace jobs lost by the timber industry

RDI Today

RDI has been working for more than 23 years building leadership networks and rural communities and has trained more than 8,000 leaders in the Northwest through the RDI-delivered Ford Institute Leadership Program and other leadership programs. Our graduates include formal and informal leaders such as local residents and business owners, nonprofit leaders and mayors, county commissioners and state legislators.

RDI has worked with more than 350 rural northwest communities and offers services and programs in two areas: Leadership Development and Rural Economic Vitality. Our Rural Economic Vitality programs include Economic Vitality Summits, HomeTown Competitiveness, Learn By Doing, Pasos al Éxito, Rural Tourism Studio, and WealthWorks Northwest.

RDI has a staff of 29 with our administrative office in Eugene, Oregon and our program staff working from home offices throughout the state and in Idaho. We are governed by a 14-member board of directors. Our annual budget is approximately \$2.9 million and our funding comes from foundations, the federal government, donations, and fee for service work. RDI's mission, to develop leaders, strengthen organizations and activate collaborative networks to enhance economic vitality in rural communities, will continue guiding us in our journey as neutral conveners supporting rural people for many years to come.