

ENERGY EFFICIENCY ISSUES IN RURAL AFFORDABLE HOUSING

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Background

USDA Rural Housing Service has implemented a robust incentive scoring system for energy efficient building construction and energy generation in its Notices of Funding Availability in its Multifamily Housing programs. The projects funded in 2010 are now completing construction and we are seeing some fantastic successes across rural America. There are still challenges in some areas, particularly where there is lack of familiarity with the national measurement and verification programs in the NOFA, but these last few years have been very useful in gaining information to continue with a policy that aims at lower energy usage across the portfolio.

Issues/Challenges and Opportunities

USDA awards points for participation in nationally recognized measurement and verification systems such as ENERGY STAR for Homes, Challenge Home, LEED for Homes, NAHB's Green Building Standard, and Green Communities. While these are national programs, rural areas tend to have less familiarity with them, and fewer qualified professionals for implementation. Because of USDA's inclusion of these programs in its Multifamily Housing NOFAs, companies that serve rural communities are building their skills in these areas, but more is still needed.

California has its own green standards that surpass those of other states. There is now a need to rate California differently than other states because their baseline requirements are beyond the baseline of some of these programs. Other states could benefit from working with folks in California to learn about their achievements and try to emulate them.

Many of the green building programs award incremental points for higher density and increased transportation options. Rural areas have very different standards of density than cities and suburbs, however, and fewer forms of public transportation. Some national programs are beginning to tailor their programs by developing "rural tracks" for scoring projects in rural areas. Through increased collaboration with USDA Rural Housing Service and these programs, adjustments may be able to be made in other programs as well.

Discussion Questions

- What happens in California tends to trickle east over time, but how can other states adopt these policies when some do not have the means to enforce them?
- What organizations are focusing on improving the quality of building construction in rural areas specifically? Can these organizations adopt a green/energy-efficient focus to accomplish quality assurance?
- Enterprise Community Partners has worked to create a rural track in its Green Communities program, but what about other programs? And how do we address ideas about housing, density, and transportation that may be built into the ethos of rural America when it comes to energy conservation and efficiency?