

RURAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ACTION PLAN



An economic pathway for rural Alberta

MINISTER'S MESSAGE

Alberta's rural history is inextricably tied to pioneers. They are the men and women who founded farms, built businesses and put their hearts and souls into communities for the promise of prosperity and quality of life unequalled in other frontiers.

Today, that spirit remains. We see the advent of new-age pioneers who look beyond our borders for markets, look outside the conventional for enterprises and look inside their communities for strength of purpose.

Our much-lauded entrepreneurial nature is exploring business and industry opportunities never imagined in recent decades. It is tackling the challenge of bolstering community services and economic infrastructure. It is shaping value-added opportunities for markets at home and abroad. And, it is exploring ways to attract workers and capital to Alberta's rural communities.

With such a driving force of development underway, it is incumbent upon the Government of Alberta and its partners to tackle the barriers that are holding back this new generation of pioneers. We need to make doubly sure the right programs and services are in place and working efficiently. Rural Alberta is building success stories every day; the Rural Economic Development Action Plan will help turn the page on the next chapter.

Hands down, Alberta is the best place in Canada to live, work and raise a family. We continue to be a magnet for the ambitious, the hard-working and the talented. That is why Alberta always has been, and always will be, a province of opportunity.



The Honourable Verlyn Olson, Q.C.
Alberta Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development
Member of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta, Wetaskiwin-Camrose



Hands down,
Alberta is the best place in Canada to
live, work and raise a family.

The Honourable Verlyn Olson, Q.C.

INTRODUCTION AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A strong rural economy means a strong Alberta.

Rural Alberta leaves a \$77-billion economic footprint in this province and across Canada, benefitting every man, woman and child who calls Alberta their home. While our rural economy is strong, there is always room for improvement. As the province prepares to welcome another million new Albertans in the next decade, maintaining a thriving rural economy is vital.

The Government of Alberta, seeking ways to ensure our rural economy continues to flourish, created a Rural Economic Development Task Force in early 2014, chaired by the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development and supported by a team of rural MLAs. The task force held eight in-person roundtable discussions in Athabasca, Fairview, Edson, Olds, Medicine Hat, Lethbridge, Vermilion and Camrose. The engagement sessions were attended by more than 230 participants, representing a variety of stakeholders such as municipalities, post-secondary institutions, chambers of commerce, regional development entities and industry associations. Stakeholders were asked for their input on rural economic development strategies, conditions for success and their ideas for innovation.

They spoke, we listened.

Stakeholders stressed the importance of governments, industries and communities working together to make sure the right programs and services are in place to strengthen rural economic vitality. Stakeholders also said they want the plan to recognize the unique character and circumstance of different regions across the province.

Stakeholders were clear that economic development alone does not create sustainable and vibrant communities. They pointed to key social infrastructure such as hospitals, schools, culture and

entertainment as contributors to quality of life. They readily see the interconnection between developing the economy and ensuring communities have the social support and infrastructure base for continued success.

Stakeholders also noted that some rural communities face unique circumstances in terms of remoteness, transportation and infrastructure issues, limited access to regional economic development opportunities and limited information about government programs and services. This plan recognizes that some of these communities may require additional strategies to facilitate economic development.

A Path for Rural Alberta

The **Rural Economic Development Action Plan – an economic pathway for rural Alberta** outlines the steps that governments, industries, businesses and communities can take to increase economic development capacity, improve on the current suite of initiatives and orchestrate new opportunities to enable rural Alberta's continued success.

The action plan is intended to:

- identify key opportunities to improve the Government of Alberta's current programs and services in response to evolving rural and Aboriginal communities;

- outline how provincial ministries can better work together to reduce duplication and improve the quality of service for stakeholders; and
- identify new and innovative ways to address common challenges, including regional approaches and partnerships.

This **Rural Economic Development Action Plan** focuses on areas outside of Calgary and Edmonton, primarily in communities with populations less than 25,000 people. While Alberta's urban centres are key drivers of economic growth across Alberta, including outlying rural communities, the specific actions detailed here focus on how to grow and develop rural regions and communities.

A solid base of programs and services already exists to support rural economic development, and the action plan intends to leverage and enhance that work. Complementing the action plan are a number of government initiatives and strategies that will help support the plan's successful delivery. These are listed in the appendix of this document.

Building on these initiatives, the **Rural Economic Development Action Plan** sets out five Areas of Focus to further advance the health of economies and the sustainability of communities in rural Alberta.

Guiding these five Areas of Focus are three principles:

1. **Empowering:** Sustained rural economic development has to be driven at the grassroots level. Our role together is to empower, connect and create a positive environment for rural businesses and communities to be successful.
2. **Regional:** Actions need to recognize the unique needs and characteristics of different regions of the province and should be coordinated at local and regional levels to exponentially increase results.
3. **Collaborative:** Actions must be based on cooperation and partnership among communities, regions, non-profit organizations and across all levels of government to take advantage of existing experience and ensure effective delivery of services to clients.

The **Rural Economic Development Action Plan** is not intended to capture the entire spectrum of services provided by the Government of Alberta that enable strong economic development in rural Alberta; rather, it identifies priorities. The following Areas of Focus and accompanying strategies were validated by stakeholders as priority areas to pursue to further advance economic development in rural Alberta.



AREAS OF FOCUS

1. Industry and Business Development

- Enhance the capacity in rural Alberta to establish and grow innovative, next-generation and value-added industries.
- Assist rural businesses with capitalizing on opportunities in new local, domestic and international markets.
- Increase tourism and culture-based business opportunities in rural communities.

2. Financial and Capital Access

- Improve access to capital for rural entrepreneurs and businesses.

3. Attraction, Retention and Entrepreneurial Development

- Implement policies and programs that attract and retain families, skilled workers, new graduates, immigrants and Aboriginal people to rural Alberta.
- Expand business coaching services that help connect emerging and established entrepreneurs and business leaders through mentorship, leadership and skill development programs.

4. Rural Business Infrastructure Capacity

- Increase the capacity of industry to efficiently capitalize on value-added processing and manufacturing opportunities.
- Enhance innovation and technology infrastructure to ensure rural businesses are positioned to be effective, efficient and competitive.
- Create alignment with the Water for Life Action Plan for a sustainable water supply to support economic activity.

5. Regional and Cross-Regional Collaboration

- Enable collaboration within and between regions in Alberta to better focus planning, service delivery and project development.



**Developing
new food and
industrial crop options.**

THE PLAN

Area of Focus 1: Industry and Business Development

The spirit of entrepreneurship runs deep in the province. Albertans are innovators who love the work they do and love to work hard at it. The Alberta government's role in industry and business development is a unique one. The province aims to support the 'can do' attitude of new business developers and owners of already thriving industries to grow and prosper in rural Alberta.

Strategy 1.1: Enhance the capacity in rural Alberta to establish and grow innovative, next-generation and value-added industries.

Alberta's rural economy has traditionally focused on the production of natural resource commodities. Transitioning to a broader economic base will require strategies to spark and fuel diversity. The province will support Alberta entrepreneurs to explore next-generation industries. It will help clear the clutter of regulatory barriers that threaten to slow the growth of economic diversity.

Actions:

- Develop options for planting, storing, processing and transporting new food and industrial crops.
- Pinpoint regulatory barriers that inhibit economic diversity in rural Alberta and implement ways to reduce or eliminate those barriers.
- Empower environmental entrepreneurship by enabling commercialization of "green" technologies and implementing improved waste-management practices.
- Partner with post-secondary institutions to develop skilled business leaders and entrepreneurs in emerging industries.

"While Morinville may be home base for Champion Petfoods, our marketplace is the world,"

Peter Muhlenfeld, Champion Petfoods, www.championpetfoods.com

"Rather than commodities, we now raise and grow food."

Don Ruzicka, Sunrise Farm, www.sunrisefarm.com

GROWING VALUE-ADDED INDUSTRIES

Morinville pet food company markets to the world

Peter Muhlenfeld points to the world map dominating his office wall. "We sell a third in Canada, a third in the U.S. and a third overseas."

While Morinville, AB may be home base for Champion Petfoods, its marketplace is the world. It's a shining example of what a value-added industry focused on local agricultural inputs can accomplish when combined with a penchant for international niche marketing. Key to its success is the ability to understand what it is...and what it isn't.

"We're focused on developing innovative foods that lead our industry and command a top price in the market," says Muhlenfeld. "We are passionate about our foods, so we never outsource. We don't make food for anyone else and they don't make it for us."

Champion makes pet food that is biologically appropriate – how nature intended dogs and cats to be fully nourished before humans came along. The company is stridently regional in its ingredient list: fresh bison from Trochu; fresh wild boar from Mayerthorpe; or fresh laid eggs from Camrose. If items can't be sourced locally, Champion branches

Today, one in six people living and working in Morinville goes to work for Champion Petfoods. As the largest private sector employer in the town, the company's direct economic impact is tens of millions of dollars to Morinville and hundreds of millions to the Alberta economy.

out to regions such as the west coast for salmon and flounder, the Okanagan for fruit or northern Canada for walleye and Northern Pike.

"We're a niche player...but a niche player with scale," says Muhlenfeld. "The big pet food companies can't do what we do. We are the maker of unconventional and authentic foods in the pet food industry."

The company specifically chose the Town of Morinville as the location for its 'kitchen'. Muhlenfeld said the small town of 8,600 people had the industrial area it needed and the labour force and community supports that Champion requires.

Today, one in six people living and working in Morinville goes to work for Champion Petfoods. As the largest private sector employer in the town, the company's direct economic

impact is tens of millions of dollars to Morinville and hundreds of millions to the Alberta economy.

Muhlenfeld says the company's overseas success is due in no small part to the image of Canada. "There are lots of pet food manufacturers in Europe. But we aren't selling a commodity; we're building authentic brands that are trusted by pet lovers worldwide."

Canada is regarded as clean and pure, modern and regulated, with the capability to produce high-quality food that is safe and trusted.

Understanding the customer base is also critical, says Muhlenfeld. "We aren't in the business of making commodity foods...we're in the business of building trust with pet lovers worldwide."

Strategy 1.2: Assist rural businesses in capitalizing on opportunities in new local, domestic and international markets.

The provincial and federal governments, working with business and industry, have seen recent successes on the trade front. Impending new trade agreements, like the Canada-European Union Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA), the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), as well as the development of interprovincial networks, such as the New West Partnership among Alberta, Saskatchewan and British Columbia, present a widening window of opportunity for Alberta producers to explore the global marketplace. Closer to home, local markets are also expanding, keeping local producers agile as they scan the horizon of market prospects and adjust to meet demand.

The province will augment a strong suite of services to help businesses capture the potential of expanded trade networks.

Actions:

- Implement programs to coach companies on business acumen, awareness of global markets, risk management and revenue growth to better prepare organizations to capitalize on new opportunities.
- Support business development and expansion to new markets by developing key relationships, securing agreements and ensuring proper assurance systems are in place.
- Leverage government organizations and partners, such as the Small Medium Enterprise (SME) Export Council and the Asia Advisory Council, to promote

rural Alberta abroad and ensure strategic business information gets to rural businesses on a regular basis.

- Work with partners to develop and implement strategies that address rural transportation needs and the timely and efficient transport of goods by rail and other means to domestic and international markets.
- Increase awareness and promote the opportunities to invest and partner with Aboriginal communities by international investment interests.

Strategy 1.3: Increase tourism and culture-based business opportunities in rural communities.

Alberta's tourism industry boasts multi-billion dollar revenues and creates jobs for people province-wide. It tallies more than 35 million visits a year from people all over the world who revel in our natural beauty and enjoy our cultural offerings.

A significant number of Alberta's tourism operators are small and medium-sized. Many are family

owned and operated. Other businesses in the food and beverage, lodging and retail sectors count on welcoming visitors as part of their revenue stream.

Many rural communities see the potential to grow tourism to help diversify their local economy. Festivals and events, ag-tourism and nature-based tourism offer great potential to not only attract visitors, but also to bring new residents to rural regions.

Actions:

- Develop and implement integrated regional destination management plans that coordinate planning, development, marketing and investment at a regional and sectorial level.
- Spark tourism-focused development and marketing, including new tourism experiences and products.
- Support economic opportunities resulting from cultural industries such as film and television, arts, festivals and heritage facilities.
- Support Aboriginal communities in developing cultural and tourism-related businesses and projects.

“The Town of Cochrane and surrounding area has built and marketed a cluster of businesses, heritage sites and cultural amenities to make a half-hour ice cream stop stretch into a day-long adventure.”

Meghan Tayfel, Mackay's Ice Cream
www.mackaysicecream.com

CAPITALIZING ON NEW MARKETS

Sunrise Farm couple nurture their land while they raise and grow food

Don Ruzicka admits he's in a love triangle. And his wife condones it.

"I truly believe the new model of agriculture is based on a three-way relationship," says Ruzicka, a third-generation farmer near Killam, AB. "There's the farmer. There's the land. And there's the consumer."

Ruzicka and his wife, Marie, morph theory into practice at Sunrise Farm, an 800-acre holistic operation that includes 200 acres of native prairie, wetlands, sloughs trees and bush. They nurture the land as much as their livestock...as concerned with the health of the dragonfly population and the quality of their water as they are with the chickens and cattle they raise and sell.

"Rather than commodities, we now raise and grow 'food'," says Ruzicka.

It was a course in 1995 that turned Ruzicka's mind from industrial agriculture to holistic farm management. Health issues had challenged him to eat more wholesome foods. At the same time, the couple's farming operation was \$250,000 in debt with no change in sight.

The Ruzickas started their journey with a small organic operation.

"I found I was already dabbling in organics," Ruzicka says. "Like many farmers, I was intent on clearing more land for production and I had ploughed under seven acres of native prairie." They began using grain from that untainted piece of

But Ruzicka says he soon realized their operation needed to shift from primary production to niche marketing. "We were turning the whole idea of how we eat and how we farm upside down."

land to feed their chickens and hogs as well as milling the flour for their own consumption.

But Ruzicka says he soon realized their operation needed to shift from primary production to niche marketing. "We were turning the whole idea of how we eat and how we farm upside down."

That meant establishing relationships with the consumers who were buying their products so they, too, could learn the story behind how their food was grown and produced.

It also developed into a passion for biodiversity on the Sunrise Farm. For instance, Ruzicka says they wanted to nurture the bird population, so he installed 30 bird houses on each quarter section of land.

The Ruzicka's also turned their attention to their water supplies and the riparian areas bordering them. They built 10 dugouts and fenced them off from their cattle to improve the quality and quantity of water. Vegetation such as cattails, grasses, shrubs and trees began sprouting up and soon the Ruzicka's noticed a huge increase in the dragonfly population, helping control pests such as grasshoppers.

"These wetlands and sloughs are important habitats as food for wildlife, but also for pollinators like honeybees, bumble bees, beetles, butterflies and moths," says Ruzicka. "It is a very interesting journey, trying to understand nature and to bring back a partnership with her."

They have planted over 60,000 trees of 16 different species to increase the diversity of their flora and fauna.

The Ruzickas are happy to share their story. In fact, they insist on it if you are buying their products. They want consumers to understand how the chicken on their Sunday dinner table was fed and housed. They proudly point out their certification of Animal Welfare Approved Grassfed – the first food label in Canada that guarantees animals are fed 100 per cent grass and forage and are raised outdoors on pasture or range for their entire lives.

They host 150 to 200 people a year from as far away as Australia, Pakistan, Mexico and China to see their operation and admire the solar-powered portable water pumping system. Along with that, they have delivered hundreds of presentations on their farming methods and experience.

"I sincerely believe our health and happiness depends on the food we eat and how the land is cared for," says Ruzicka.

"Rather than commodities, we now raise and grow 'food'," says Ruzicka.

AREA OF FOCUS 2: FINANCIAL AND CAPITAL ACCESS

Albertans' entrepreneurial spirit and innovative outlook is a major chapter in the economic success story of the province. However, spirit and drive alone do not translate to strong, thriving business and industry development. Rural Alberta requires reliable and efficient access to capital through financial institutions or community-driven initiatives. Increased capital translates to greater innovation, productivity and prosperity at the local, regional and provincial levels.

Strategy 2.1: Improve access to capital for rural entrepreneurs and businesses.

The Agriculture Financial Services Corporation (AFSC) provides a wide variety of risk management products and financial services to fit the business needs of the agriculture industry and commercial enterprises in Alberta. Improving access to capital and financial services can enable new businesses to emerge and help existing businesses to flourish.

Actions:

- Increase existing AFSC lending limits to allow greater investment and, in turn, increase the ability to leverage additional investment from other sources.
- Improve existing programs to reduce barriers to accessing capital for rural Albertans.
- Strengthen access to capital for rural entrepreneurs from domestic and international investors.
- Examine how to expand community-driven funding models, which pool local funds to finance community or entrepreneurial projects.
- Improve existing programs to support the next generation of entrants into agriculture.
- Increase individual loan limits to address the new price advancements in the feeder cattle market.
- Support new and enhance existing lending, debt capital and venture capital programs for Aboriginal communities.

“New industries are being created in rural Alberta, but not without some difficulties. Initiatives outside of the resource sector can mean risky research and development costs, which are difficult to finance.”

Diane Szumilas, Community Future East Parkland
www.eastparkland.albertacf.com

AREA OF FOCUS 3: ATTRACTION, RETENTION AND ENTREPRENEURIAL DEVELOPMENT

Rural Albertans work hard. But there are not enough workers to meet job demand and not enough workers with the right skills in rural Alberta.

Qualified, talented workers and their families are key to ensuring rural Alberta is a first-rate place to live, invest and do business. The Alberta government, working with provincial and federal counterparts, will focus on strategies for attracting, developing and retaining this workforce.

Strategy 3.1: Implement policies and programs that attract and retain families, skilled workers, new graduates, immigrants and Aboriginal people to rural Alberta.

Alberta's rural population has continued to grow, reaching more than 615,000 people in 2011. However, the population has not grown in all communities and regions. And rural population growth continues to be outpaced by growth in urban centres. As a result, the percentage of rural Albertans as a share of the total Alberta population continues to trend downward. As well, rural Alberta is proportionally older on average than urban Alberta and struggles to attract immigrants.

The Alberta government will explore policies and programs focused on attracting and retaining youth, families and industry leaders to rural Alberta to support community-based approaches that increase the vitality and economic sustainability of rural communities.

Actions:

- Provide incentives, such as scholarships and bursaries, to youth and new graduates to bring their skills to rural communities.
- Increase coordination of labour attraction programs and initiatives to more effectively promote opportunities across Alberta.
- Provide information and tools for employers in rural regions to help address labour requirements.
- Increase employer engagement and investment in workplace-based training through developing new government-sponsored training programs.
- Develop and implement targeted entrepreneurial and small business workforce programs tailored to rural communities and underrepresented populations.
- Encourage municipalities to implement initiatives to welcome and include Aboriginals and newcomers from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds to their communities.
- Work with municipalities, regions and Aboriginal communities to increase housing in growing areas.



Strategy 3.2: Expand business coaching services that help connect emerging and established entrepreneurs and business leaders through mentorship, leadership and skill development programs.

4-H. Junior Achievement. Business Link. Community Futures. FarmOn. Green Hectares. University of Alberta Centre for Entrepreneurship and Family Enterprise. These are a few of the organizations that provide expertise in connecting entrepreneurs with mentorship and leadership programs. Many financial institutions also support business start-ups with information.

Encouraging networking among these organizations would ensure all players know what each offers – from services for youth and new entrepreneurs to those contemplating expansion – and allow simplified access for clients.

Actions:

- Strengthen connections among existing mentorship networks and enable the establishment of additional mentoring opportunities for small businesses in rural Alberta.
- Foster collaboration among regional businesses by enabling the creation of matchmaking forums and leadership groups.
- Establish a one-window service provider network connecting entrepreneurs and business leaders to development services for their individual needs.
- Expand targeted entrepreneurial and training programs for First Nations and Metis youth in rural regions.

“The real opportunity in rural Alberta is for new-age pioneers who live local and think global.”

Christie Dick, Return to Rural
www.returntorural.ca

EXPANDING BUSINESS COACHING SERVICES

Rural development initiative builds ‘the new rural’ in southeastern Alberta

They’re turning the ‘wild west’ into the ‘wired west’ in southeastern Alberta.

“It’s the new rural,” says Christie Dick, Project Manager of Return to Rural.

“We’re telling young people they can have it all – live local and think global.”

Their welcome mats suddenly grew a whole lot bigger.

That’s an extreme advantage for young, savvy entrepreneurs who want to grow a traditional business or germinate a new one, says Larae Pierson, R2R’s Special Media Manager. “We want them to think about mapping out their future in the new rural frontier.”

shopping.

Closing the digital divide between urban and rural is critical, says Andrea Thornton, R2R Project Coordinator. So R2R has offered training sessions for community leaders to become comfortable with new technologies and take advantage of tools that can close the gap between large rural distances.

“Sharing what we have learned is a really big part of what we do,” adds Thornton.

“We’re telling young people they can have it all – live local and think global.”

Dick is a major force behind Return to Rural (R2R), a one-of-a-kind rural development strategy that sets its sights on young Albertans, enticing them to migrate back to their roots, set up shop and build their lives in a group of communities in the Special Areas region. It’s helping stem the demographic tide of rural Alberta, growing greyer as youth seek post-secondary education in larger centres and never look back. R2R wants to turn them around.

“The real opportunity is for new-age pioneers,” says Dick. Enhanced broadband technology in the Special Areas and MD of Acadia No. 34 region has brought the world to the front doors of local businesses.

Using social media tools – Facebook, Twitter, YouTube – R2R targets well-educated young people from 21 to 45 years of age. There’s even a #WorkWednesday hashtag that offers new career postings.

But R2R support doesn’t end there. Backstopping new or expanding ventures is a whole range of group or one-on-one sessions on business tools or social media marketing. This support has: helped build a new web page for a local photographer to expand her business; provided assistance with a business plan to help an aspiring auto body shop owner return home to their community; and helped an Oyen clothing store venture into online

“We have touched base with tons of communities in rural Alberta as well as presented at conferences and community meetings and continue to develop toolkits, models and best practices.”

Dick adds that the collaboration of the communities involved in R2R is essential, pulling the project in the same direction. The partnership has meant access to government funding and successes that would not be possible without the collaborative regional approach.

“We’re all on board with the message that living in rural Alberta doesn’t mean you can’t reach out to larger markets because of technology,” she says.

AREA OF FOCUS 4: RURAL BUSINESS INFRASTRUCTURE CAPACITY

Give Albertans the right tools to work with and they will be the architects and builders of their own success. Enabling business development and the sustainability of commerce in rural communities relies on the province's commitment to increase the infrastructure capacity of value-added processing and manufacturing, innovation and technology, as well as water storage. These building blocks will give entrepreneurs the basics they need to turn their ingenuity into products and merchandise that can reach untold markets and achieve new levels of competitiveness, locally and beyond.

Strategy 4.1: Increase the capacity of industry to efficiently capitalize on value-added processing and manufacturing opportunities.

Value-added processing and manufacturing gives Alberta producers and agri-businesses exponential benefit from the raw products and services they produce. With the right production capacity, more value-added products can be introduced in the marketplace and more quickly, too. Encouraging and supporting rural businesses to develop and augment their capacity to manage, market and access capital will position them to capitalize on new opportunities.

Actions:

- Increase capacity at the Food Processing Development Centre in Leduc and expand operations into non-food value-added processing.
- Expand opportunities for entrepreneurs to use established facilities for value-added processing.
- Increase research and innovation to support commercialization and development of new products and solutions.

Strategy 4.2: Enhance innovation and technology infrastructure to ensure rural businesses are positioned to be effective, efficient and competitive.

Advanced information and telecommunications infrastructure has brought rural Albertans closer to people around the world and markets never before imagined. However, a digital divide between rural and urban continues to disconnect entrepreneurs, businesses and rural residents from technological applications and information communications technologies that would increase their productivity and competitiveness in a connected world.

Actions:

- Identify and reduce constraints to rural Internet speed and capacity.
- Approve additional projects through the Final Mile program to further expand connectivity in rural areas.
- Negotiate a new SuperNet contract upon expiration in 2018 to ensure the appropriate broadband services continue to be available to rural businesses and communities and that the SuperNet can further enhance community broadband infrastructure, with approval from Service Alberta.
- Advocate federal regulators for increased cellular coverage and capacity in rural areas, reducing the number of areas where service is unavailable.

ENHANCING RURAL TECHNOLOGY INFRASTRUCTURE

O-NET brings fast times to Olds

It's a fast crowd in Olds. Ten times faster than the rest of Canada, in fact.

That's because of O-NET, the community-owned fibre optic network providing up to one gigabit per second of bandwidth to businesses, organizations and residents across the community. The service is symmetrical, meaning upload speeds are the same as download speeds.

Why is this town of 8,500 leading the bandwagon on high-speed Internet? It's all about rural development, says Joe Gustafson, Chair of Olds Fibre Ltd., which operates as O-NET. In 2003, the town saw some businesses struggling from lack of bandwidth and began exploring how to hook on to the Alberta SuperNet, the ultra high-speed broadband network connecting government, learning, health, library and municipal locations.

"In our naivety, we imagined some kind of giant extension cord to plug into the SuperNet," laughs Gustafson. Many years later, what emerged was a fibre optic network that can connect to every property

in the community to bring a bundle of services to residents, businesses or institutions.

For an educational institute like Olds College, it has meant an exponential increase in speed for uploading or downloading files, allowing for video streaming and distance learning. Businesses enjoy uploading files of information rather than couriering chips of data. A denturist, for instance, can take an impression of a mouth, upload the data to a lab in another location where dentures can be built. Residents can take advantage of a package of TV, Internet and phone from one provider.

"We're trying to take the barriers away," says Gustafson. "There were limits before on how much data you could convey and when. A good comparison would be if Highway 2 were a two-lane highway – you'd have to decide when traffic was the lowest so you could travel to Calgary. It would likely be 3 a.m."

One of the stumbling blocks along the way has been access to capital. Olds town council recently agreed to loan up to \$8 million to the Olds

"We're trying to take the barriers away."

Institute for Community & Regional Development to complete the short hook-ups to each home and three remaining service areas. The Institute is a partnership among the Town of Olds, Olds College, Olds and District Chamber of Commerce and the Olds Regional Exhibition and is the only shareholder of Olds Fibre Ltd.

That governance model has been extremely effective, he says.

"We've had conversations with other communities interested in doing something similar," he says. "We always tell them as a starting point, you need a governance process in place that actually works."

Gustafson describes himself as "consciously incompetent" when it comes to technology.

"You just have to be aware of what you don't know and surround yourself with knowledgeable people with the technical skills to get the job done."

Strategy 4.3: Create alignment with the Water for Life Action Plan for a sustainable water supply to support economic activity.

Water is an essential resource for the economic development of rural communities. The continuous improvement of water management practices and technologies can help ensure the availability of reliable, quality water supplies over time.

Maintaining strong partnerships with landowners, farmers, ranchers, as well as local and regional organizations, is key to sustaining our rural economy.

Actions:

- Enable partnerships, regional-based solutions and information sharing to enhance effective water management practices and promote long-term sustainable water supplies.
- Empower collaborative planning for improved stability and predictability in response to water shortages such as droughts.
- Continue to improve productivity and efficiency of irrigation infrastructure to support additional economic activity without increased water consumption.



AREA OF FOCUS 5: REGIONAL AND CROSS-REGIONAL COLLABORATION

Regional economic development entities are located across the province to help position regions to compete more effectively in a global marketplace and improve investment attraction in rural Alberta. The province will help improve coordination and cooperation of those entities to share the knowledge of available programs, services and initiatives to further strengthen economic opportunities in rural communities.

Supporting collaborative planning and projects within and between different regions will lead to more economically diverse and sustainable rural communities. Seeking opportunities to partner not only within Alberta, but also with other jurisdictions, will further enable government to ensure the best programs and services are available for rural communities.

Strategy 5.1: Enable collaboration within and between regions in Alberta to better focus planning, service delivery and project development.

Rural regions that work together under an economic development banner are magnets for investment attraction and global market access. Through successful cooperation between economic development entities, non-profit organizations, municipalities and government, rural communities and businesses will be better positioned to succeed.

Actions:

- Increase coordination and support in regional economic development planning, programs and services by clarifying roles, reducing existing inefficiencies and focusing on outcomes.
- Create greater awareness of existing regional economic development entities and the services they provide.
- Encourage and recognize partnerships between municipalities that collaboratively address regional needs.
- Support increased collaboration between Aboriginal communities and neighbouring counties and municipalities.
- Identify and pursue options for Rural Electrification Associations to diversify their business model and enterprise portfolios to improve their economic viability and long-term sustainability in rural areas.
- Create opportunities for discussion among economic development stakeholders to build relationships, encourage collaboration and share ideas.



**Growing
innovative
industries.**



CONCLUSION

The **Rural Economic Development Action Plan** provides strategies that will help rural communities continue to build on their economic development success, both in the near future and years down the road. Stakeholders were engaged to identify challenges and areas where the Government of Alberta could help rural Alberta flourish and grow. They identified several key issues for ongoing rural economic development:

- There are barriers to development for next-generation, value-added enterprises to capitalize on new markets and new growth opportunities.
- There are financial obstacles for those businesses seeking capital for new and expanding enterprises.
- There are demographic realities. The rural population is greying as youth migrate to larger city centres. Attracting skilled workers and their families is a hurdle faced by rural industries and businesses across Alberta.
- There are infrastructure challenges such as technological connectivity and value-added processing capacity.
- There is a need for regional and government coordination and cooperation to make effective use of resources.

The actions laid out in the **Rural Economic Development Action Plan** directly respond to these barriers, and outline practical steps the Government of Alberta, in partnership with communities, can take to ensure rural Alberta continues to thrive. Through collaboration and

a shared commitment between all stakeholders, the **Rural Economic Development Action Plan** will support rural Alberta as it continues down the path to a sustainable and vibrant future.



APPENDIX

Government of Alberta Initiatives

A solid base of programs and services already exists or are currently being developed to support rural economic development, and the action plan intends to leverage that work.

The following strategies and frameworks complement the **Rural Economic Development Action Plan**. These will help support the plan's successful delivery.

Economic Development Framework: Building on Alberta's Strengths

This framework was developed across government and identifies strategic goals, outcomes and performance measures for economic development in the province.

Alberta's Transportation Strategy

This 50-year strategy outlines the overarching vision for Alberta's transportation system, including all forms of transportation that ensure the safe and efficient movement of people, goods and services. For rural communities, a proper transportation system is key for economic diversification and success.

Alberta's Tourism Framework: A Pathway to Growth

This framework creates a common vision to grow Alberta's tourism industry and communicate the goals and priorities that will position Alberta for success. Rural Alberta has great potential to enhance tourism opportunities and grow its economic base.

Alberta's Small Business Strategy

This strategy acknowledges and responds to the needs of Alberta's small businesses and entrepreneurs. Rural Alberta has a strong foundation of small and medium-sized businesses that are prepared for growth and diversification.

Alberta's International Strategy

This strategy was developed to bolster market access for Alberta products, strengthen the province's reputation abroad and position Alberta as a safe and strong place for international investment.

Alberta's Plan for Parks

This plan introduces short- and long-term activities and a framework for decision-making to enable Alberta's parks to inspire people to discover, value, protect and enjoy the natural world and the benefits it provides for current and future generations. Rural regions are able to realize increased economic opportunities through tourism to Alberta parks.

Alberta Research and Innovation Plan

This plan reflects the role of research and innovation in advancing the Government of Alberta's long-term vision of focusing on families and communities, securing Alberta's future and advancing world-leading resource stewardship.

Aboriginal Economic Partnerships Program

The Aboriginal Economic Partnerships Program provides funds for economic development and capacity building in Aboriginal communities while building partnerships between First Nations, Métis settlements and organizations, governments (federal, provincial and municipal), industry and other stakeholders.



Economic Opportunities Initiative

This initiative is intended to increase Aboriginal participation in the economy and includes: preparing youth to participate in the economy; increasing the participation of Aboriginal women; promoting entrepreneurial participation; reducing social barriers to participation; and building organizational capacity to support economic participation.

Social Policy Framework

Alberta's Social Policy Framework provides broad, overall direction for social policy in Alberta, including housing, employment, safety, and child care. It is intended to guide collective efforts to meet the growing and diverse needs of Albertans, and it provides a common foundation to evaluate, measure, and report progress on achieving desired outcomes.

Water for Life

The Water for Life Action Plan addresses the management of the province's resources for the benefit of all Albertans. The action plan's three main goals include safe, secure drinking water; healthy aquatic ecosystems; and reliable, quality water supplies for a sustainable economy.

Other initiatives intended to support the continued vitality of rural Alberta include: a review of the Municipal Government Act, Alberta's Cultural Policy, and Workforce Partnerships Program, among others.

