

118TH CONGRESS
1ST SESSION

S. 3309

To authorize the Secretary of Agriculture to provide rural partnership program grants and rural partnership technical assistance grants, and for other purposes.

IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES

NOVEMBER 15, 2023

Mr. CASEY (for himself and Mrs. FISCHER) introduced the following bill; which was read twice and referred to the Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry

A BILL

To authorize the Secretary of Agriculture to provide rural partnership program grants and rural partnership technical assistance grants, and for other purposes.

1 *Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representa-*
2 *tives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,*

3 **SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.**

4 This Act may be cited as the “Rural Partnership and
5 Prosperity Act of 2023”.

6 **SEC. 2. DEFINITIONS.**

7 In this Act:

8 (1) INDIAN TRIBE.—The term “Indian Tribe”
9 has the meaning given the term in section 4 of the

1 Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance
2 Act (25 U.S.C. 5304).

3 (2) RURAL; RURAL AREA.—The terms “rural”
4 and “rural area” have the meaning given those
5 terms in section 343(a)(13)(A) of the Consolidated
6 Farm and Rural Development Act (7 U.S.C.
7 1991(a)(13)(A)).

8 (3) SECRETARY.—The term “Secretary” means
9 the Secretary of Agriculture.

10 **SEC. 3. RURAL PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM GRANTS.**

11 (a) IN GENERAL.—Subject to the availability of ap-
12 propriations under subsection (j), the Secretary shall es-
13 tablish a program to make multiyear grant awards to co-
14 ordinate Federal, nonprofit, and for-profit investment in
15 rural areas.

16 (b) GRANT REQUIREMENTS.—

17 (1) TERM.—The term of a grant awarded
18 under subsection (a) shall be not less than 2 years
19 and not more than 5 years.

20 (2) AWARDS.—Except as provided in para-
21 graphs (3) and (4), the State offices of the rural de-
22 velopment mission area shall be responsible for re-
23 viewing applications for grant awards under sub-
24 section (a) and selecting eligible applicants described
25 in subsection (d) for those grant awards.

1 (3) TRIBAL AWARDS.—Except as provided in
2 paragraph (4), in the case of grants under sub-
3 section (a) allocated to Indian Tribes under sub-
4 section (c)(1)(B), the national office of the rural de-
5 velopment mission area shall be responsible for re-
6 viewing applications for grant awards under sub-
7 section (a) and selecting eligible applicants described
8 in subsection (d) for those grant awards.

9 (4) COMPETITIVE PROCESS.—If the amount ap-
10 propriated under subsection (j) for a fiscal year is
11 less than or equal to \$300,000,000, the national of-
12 fice of the rural development mission area shall be
13 responsible for reviewing applications for grant
14 awards under subsection (a) and selecting eligible
15 applicants described in subsection (d) for those
16 grant awards—

17 (A) on a competitive basis; and

18 (B) by giving priority to areas that have
19 higher nonmetropolitan poverty levels and lower
20 population levels, while ensuring that grants
21 under this section are awarded in diverse geo-
22 graphic regions of the United States.

23 (c) GRANT ALLOCATION.—

1 (1) IN GENERAL.—Except as provided in sub-
2 section (b)(4), the Secretary shall allocate funding
3 for grants under subsection (a)—

4 (A) for each State based on a formula de-
5 termined by the Secretary in accordance with
6 paragraph (2); and

7 (B) for Indian Tribes in such amounts as
8 the Secretary determines to be appropriate,
9 subject to the condition that the total amount
10 allocated to Indian Tribes under this subpara-
11 graph shall not be less than 5 percent of the
12 amount appropriated under subsection (j), with
13 Indian Tribes located in areas that have higher
14 poverty levels and lower populations receiving
15 higher levels of funding.

16 (2) ALLOCATION REQUIREMENTS.—

17 (A) IN GENERAL.—The Secretary shall de-
18 velop a graduated scale to allocate funding for
19 States under paragraph (1)(A) based on the
20 nonmetropolitan poverty and population levels
21 in each State.

22 (B) LIMITATION.—The amount allocated
23 to any State under subparagraph (A) shall not
24 exceed 5 percent of the amount appropriated
25 under subsection (j).

1 (3) SMALL STATE EXCEPTION TO FORMULA.—
2 Notwithstanding paragraphs (1)(A) and (2)(A), the
3 Secretary shall ensure that each State is allocated
4 an amount for grants under this subsection that is
5 sufficient to fulfill the purposes of the program es-
6 tablished under this section, as determined by the
7 Secretary.

8 (4) REALLOCATION.—If a State or Indian Tribe
9 does not use funds allocated to the State or Indian
10 Tribe under this subsection, the Secretary may re-
11 allocate the unused funds to 1 or more other States
12 or Indian Tribes, each of which has used all of the
13 funding allocated to the State or Indian Tribe under
14 this subsection.

15 (d) ELIGIBLE APPLICANTS.—To be eligible to receive
16 a grant under subsection (a), an applicant shall—

17 (1) propose to serve a rural area;

18 (2) be composed of a partnership of 2 or more
19 of—

20 (A) an instrumentality or political subdivi-
21 sion of a State, such as a municipality, county,
22 district, or authority;

23 (B) a nonprofit corporation or association
24 with significant ties to the rural area described
25 in paragraph (1), including through—

1 (i) association with, or control by, 1
2 or more public bodies in the rural area;

3 (ii) broadly based ownership and con-
4 trol by members of the rural area; or

5 (iii) a substantial public funding con-
6 tribution to the rural area through taxes,
7 revenue bonds, other local government
8 sources, or substantial voluntary commu-
9 nity funding;

10 (C) a cooperative with significant ties to
11 the rural area described in paragraph (1);

12 (D) a for-profit entity with a significant
13 presence in the rural area described in para-
14 graph (1);

15 (E) an institution of higher education—

16 (i) with a significant contribution to
17 or presence in the rural area described in
18 paragraph (1); and

19 (ii) that includes representatives who
20 are members of the rural area; and

21 (F) an Indian Tribe—

22 (i) in a rural area described in para-
23 graph (1); and

24 (ii) with demonstrated support from
25 the Tribal council or duly elected Tribal

1 executive of the appropriate Tribal govern-
2 ment; and

3 (3) demonstrate cooperation among the mem-
4 bers of the partnership described in paragraph (2)
5 necessary to complete comprehensive, asset-based
6 rural development through eligible activities de-
7 scribed in subsection (e).

8 (e) ELIGIBLE ACTIVITIES.—An eligible applicant de-
9 scribed in subsection (d) that receives a grant under sub-
10 section (a) may use the grant funds in rural areas—

11 (1) to coordinate Federal, State, regional, or
12 Tribal initiatives to reduce duplicative efforts with
13 respect to Federal investments;

14 (2) to leverage non-Federal financial and tech-
15 nical resources;

16 (3) to complete comprehensive predevelopment
17 activities and planning;

18 (4) to create public-private partnerships and at-
19 tract private investment;

20 (5) to support eligible operational activities, in-
21 cluding staffing, of the eligible applicants, except
22 that a for-profit entity may not use the grant funds
23 for the purpose described in this paragraph;

24 (6) to provide capital to existing or new
25 projects, subject to the condition that not more than

1 50 percent of the grant funds may be used for that
2 purpose;

3 (7) to support regional projects and initiatives;

4 (8) to address economic recovery from emer-
5 gencies and natural or man-made disasters; and

6 (9) to develop strategic community investment
7 plans described in section 379H(d) of the Consoli-
8 dated Farm and Rural Development Act (7 U.S.C.
9 2008v(d)).

10 (f) INELIGIBLE ACTIVITIES.—An eligible applicant
11 described in subsection (d) that receives a grant under
12 subsection (a) may not use the grant funds—

13 (1) to fund operational activities, including
14 staffing, at a for-profit institution;

15 (2) to purchase or lease real property; or

16 (3) to support a non-rural area.

17 (g) SELECTION CRITERIA.—In awarding grants
18 under subsection (b), the Secretary shall give priority to
19 an eligible applicant described in subsection (d) that pro-
20 poses to serve—

21 (1) a rural area with a significant change in
22 population;

23 (2) a rural area with significant workforce
24 changes or changes in major employers;

1 (3) an economically distressed rural area, as de-
2 termined by the Secretary;

3 (4) a rural area that has historically received
4 minimal Federal funding, as determined by the Sec-
5 retary; or

6 (5) a rural area for the purpose of job retention
7 and economic stabilization, as determined by the
8 Secretary.

9 (h) MATCHING FUNDS.—

10 (1) IN GENERAL.—Subject to paragraph (2), an
11 eligible applicant described in subsection (d) that re-
12 ceives a grant under subsection (a) shall provide
13 non-Federal matching funds in the form of cash or
14 an in-kind contribution in an amount that is not less
15 than 25 percent of the amount of the grant.

16 (2) WAIVER.—

17 (A) IN GENERAL.—The Secretary may
18 waive the requirement under paragraph (1)
19 based on the demonstrated need of the eligible
20 applicant or the population served by the eligi-
21 ble applicant, as determined by the Secretary,
22 including—

23 (i) an eligible applicant serving an
24 area with a higher nonmetropolitan poverty
25 level;

1 (ii) an eligible applicant serving a
2 Tribal population; and

3 (iii) an eligible applicant composed of
4 a partnership that includes an entity de-
5 scribed in subsection (d)(2)(A).

6 (B) JUSTIFICATION.—The Secretary shall
7 provide to the Committee on Agriculture of the
8 House of Representatives and the Committee
9 on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry of the
10 Senate a justification for each waiver provided
11 under subparagraph (A).

12 (3) PROVIDERS.—Non-Federal matching funds
13 under paragraph (1) may be provided by any mem-
14 ber of the applicable partnership described in sub-
15 section (d)(2).

16 (i) COORDINATION.—The Secretary shall carry out
17 this section in coordination with the Rural Partners Net-
18 work established by section 6306 of the Agriculture Im-
19 provement Act of 2018 (7 U.S.C. 2204b–3).

20 (j) AUTHORIZATION OF APPROPRIATIONS.—

21 (1) IN GENERAL.—There are authorized to be
22 appropriated to the Secretary such sums as are nec-
23 essary to carry out this section.

24 (2) ADMINISTRATION.—The Secretary may re-
25 tain not more than 2 percent of the amounts made

1 available to carry out this section for administration
2 of the program established under this section.

3 **SEC. 4. RURAL PARTNERSHIP TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE**
4 **GRANTS.**

5 (a) IN GENERAL.—Subject to the availability of ap-
6 propriations under subsection (g), the Secretary shall es-
7 tablish a program to award grants, on a competitive basis,
8 for up to a 5-year period, to be administered at the na-
9 tional level through the Under Secretary for Rural Devel-
10 opment, for the purpose of advising on and assisting rural
11 community organizations with—

12 (1) Federal grant management and the develop-
13 ment of financial management systems;

14 (2) housing or community economic develop-
15 ment projects; and

16 (3) the development of placemaking plans and
17 applications for Federal grants.

18 (b) ELIGIBLE APPLICANTS.—To be eligible to receive
19 a grant under subsection (a), an applicant shall be a quali-
20 fied private or nonprofit intermediary organization, includ-
21 ing an institution of higher education with an existing
22 community development and planning program, including
23 an extension program, that has demonstrated experience
24 and capacity to provide technical assistance on community
25 development and planning in rural areas.

1 (c) ELIGIBLE ACTIVITIES.—An eligible applicant de-
2 scribed in subsection (b) that receives a grant under sub-
3 section (a) may use the grant funds to support the capac-
4 ity building and economic development of identified rural
5 areas and local partners in those rural areas through the
6 following activities:

7 (1) Training and supporting local staff, includ-
8 ing relating to systems development and support.

9 (2) Identifying vetted technical consultants for
10 planning and designing physical infrastructure.

11 (3) Facilitating coordination between Federal
12 agencies and local partners.

13 (4) Providing expertise on developing public-pri-
14 vate partnerships.

15 (5) Development and project predevelopment
16 activities.

17 (6) Grant writing and grant management ac-
18 tivities.

19 (d) INELIGIBLE ACTIVITIES.—An eligible applicant
20 described in subsection (b) that receives a grant under
21 subsection (a) may not use the grant funds—

22 (1) to fund staffing at a for-profit entity;

23 (2) to purchase or lease real property, build-
24 ings, or equipment;

25 (3) to support a non-rural area; or

1 (4) for research and development.

2 (e) PRIORITY.—In awarding grants under subsection
3 (a), the Secretary may give priority to an eligible applicant
4 described in subsection (b) that serves—

5 (1) a nonmetropolitan area with a high poverty
6 level; or

7 (2) an Indian Tribe with demonstrated support
8 from the Tribal council or duly elected Tribal execu-
9 tive of the appropriate Tribal government.

10 (f) MATCHING FUNDS.—

11 (1) IN GENERAL.—Subject to paragraph (2), an
12 eligible applicant described in subsection (b) that re-
13 ceives a grant under subsection (a) shall provide
14 non-Federal matching funds in an amount that is
15 not less than 30 percent of the amount of the grant.

16 (2) WAIVER.—

17 (A) IN GENERAL.—The Secretary may
18 waive the requirement under paragraph (1)
19 based on the demonstrated need of the area in
20 which activities using the grant are to be car-
21 ried out, as determined by the Secretary.

22 (B) JUSTIFICATION.—The Secretary shall
23 provide to the Committee on Agriculture of the
24 House of Representatives and the Committee
25 on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry of the

1 Senate a justification for each waiver provided
2 under subparagraph (A).

3 (g) AUTHORIZATION OF APPROPRIATIONS.—

4 (1) IN GENERAL.—There are authorized to be
5 appropriated to the Secretary such sums as are nec-
6 essary to carry out this section.

7 (2) ADMINISTRATION.—The Secretary may re-
8 tain not more than 2 percent of the amounts made
9 available to carry out this section for administration
10 of the program established under this section.

11 **SEC. 5. RURAL PARTNERS NETWORK.**

12 Section 6306 of the Agriculture Improvement Act of
13 2018 (7 U.S.C. 2204b–3) is amended—

14 (1) in the section heading, by striking “**COUN-**
15 **CIL ON RURAL COMMUNITY INNOVATION AND**
16 **ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**” and inserting
17 “**RURAL PARTNERS NETWORK**”;

18 (2) in subsection (a)(1), by striking “council”
19 and inserting “network”;

20 (3) by striking subsection (b) and inserting the
21 following:

22 “(b) ESTABLISHMENT.—

23 “(1) IN GENERAL.—There is established a
24 Rural Partners Network (referred to in this section
25 as the ‘Network’).

1 “(2) SUCCESSOR.—The Network shall be the
2 successor to the Council on Rural Community Inno-
3 vation and Economic Development established by
4 this section (as in effect on the day before the date
5 of enactment of the Rural Partnership and Pros-
6 perity Act of 2023).”;

7 (4) in subsection (c)—

8 (A) in paragraph (1)—

9 (i) by striking subparagraphs (C),
10 (D), (N), (Q), (R), (S), (T), (V), (X), (Y),
11 and (Z);

12 (ii) by redesignating subparagraphs
13 (E) through (M), (O), (P), (U), (W), and
14 (AA) as subparagraphs (C) through (K),
15 (L), (M), (N), (O), and (X), respectively;
16 and

17 (iii) by inserting after subparagraph
18 (O) (as so redesignated) the following:

19 “(P) The Federal Deposit Insurance Cor-
20 poration.

21 “(Q) The Appalachian Regional Commis-
22 sion.

23 “(R) The Consumer Financial Protection
24 Bureau.

25 “(S) The Social Security Administration.

1 “(T) The Delta Regional Authority.

2 “(U) The Denali Commission.

3 “(V) The Northern Border Regional Com-
4 mission.

5 “(W) The Southeast Crescent Regional
6 Commission.”; and

7 (B) in paragraphs (2) through (4), by
8 striking “Council” each place it appears and in-
9 serting “Network”;

10 (5) in subsection (d), by striking “Council” and
11 inserting “Network”;

12 (6) in subsection (e)—

13 (A) in the subsection heading, by striking
14 “COUNCIL” and inserting “NETWORK”;

15 (B) in the matter preceding paragraph (1),
16 by striking “Council” and inserting “Network”;

17 (C) in paragraph (2), by striking “and” at
18 the end;

19 (D) in paragraph (3), by striking the pe-
20 riod at the end and inserting “; and”; and

21 (E) by adding at the end the following:

22 “(4) to improve the efficiency of Federal assist-
23 ance to rural communities by—

24 “(A) reducing administrative burdens on
25 rural communities to pursue Federal funding;

1 “(B) improving the administrative effi-
2 ciency of Federal economic development pro-
3 grams serving rural communities; and

4 “(C) streamlining and simplifying the ap-
5 plication process for Federal funding opportuni-
6 ties for rural communities.”;

7 (7) in subsection (f), in the matter preceding
8 paragraph (1), by striking “Council” and inserting
9 “Network”;

10 (8) in subsection (g), by striking “Council”
11 each place it appears and inserting “Network”; and

12 (9) by striking subsection (h) and inserting the
13 following:

14 “(h) INNOVATIVE CROSS-AGENCY COORDINATION.—

15 “(1) IN GENERAL.—The Secretary, acting as
16 Chair of the Network, may carry out innovative
17 strategies for coordinating with other Federal de-
18 partments and agencies with respect to programs
19 that serve rural areas.

20 “(2) PRIORITIES.—In carrying out paragraph
21 (1), the Secretary shall prioritize—

22 “(A) improving ease of access to Federal
23 programs for resource-constrained rural com-
24 munities;

1 “(B) utilizing early technical assistance to
2 reduce duplicative applications and administra-
3 tive costs at the Federal level;

4 “(C) leveraging partnerships with local,
5 State, philanthropic, and private entities to
6 maximize returns on Federal investments;

7 “(D) integrating stakeholder and program
8 user experience into program design; and

9 “(E) targeting areas experiencing economic
10 distress, as determined by the Secretary.”.

○