Regional Partnership Program/A Community-Led Approach: National Rural Water Association/Rural Community Assistance Partnership Report



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The National Rural Water Association ("NRWA") and Rural Community Assistance Partnership ("RCAP") have issued a report titled:

Regional Partnership Program: A Community-Led Approach ("Report").

The Report outlines what it describes as a:

… federal policy vision that supports voluntary, community-driven regionalization, strengthens local decision-making, and ensures that rural utilities have access to the planning, funding, and technical expertise needed to evaluate and pursue regional solutions when appropriate.

The Report also describes its objectives as including a "roadmap" to:

- Modernize regulatory structures.
- Enhance federal investment strategies.
- Protect the autonomy and long-term interests of the communities NRWA and RCAP serve.

The stated motivation for the Report includes:

- Water and wastewater utilities are the backbone of every community -- regardless of size (particularly in the case of small and rural communities).
- Small and rural communities often face significant challenges due to:
- Limited resources.
- Aging infrastructure.
- Regulatory pressures.

As a result, regionalization is stated to have "picked up interest in recent years, often being sold as the silver bullet to address the 'small system challenge.'"

The two organizations authoring the Report state that rather than relying on top-down mandates, voluntary regional partnerships impower local leaders to collaborate, share resources, and enhance technical, managerial, and financial capacity while preserving community identity and public accountability. They cite evidence from United States Environmental Protection Agency's Safe Drinking Water Information System, which is stated to show that small systems often report lower rates of health

violations than medium-sized systems. This is argued to underscore that utility performance depends on context rather than size alone.

The two organizations state that this Report clarifies what regionalization is and is not. They define true regionalization as:

... voluntary, community-led, and preserves local governance.

Further, it is stated to be distinct from consolidation (which, when voluntary, is a form of regionalization) and acquisition (which involves loss of local control and is not regionalization). They describe a spectrum of regional collaboration includes:

- Informal cooperation.
- Contractual assistance.
- Joint regional entities.
- Voluntary consolidation.

Additional points articulated by the Report include:

- Communities must retain the right and power to make decisions about their utilities and futures.
- Federal policy must support voluntary, community-driven regionalization by providing:
- Planning resources
- Technical assistance.
- Investment strategies that protect local autonomy.
- Legislative recommendations include:
- Establishing safe harbor provisions for compliance support.
- Leveraging the Farm Bill for targeted assistance.
- Increasing State Revolving Fund resources for regionalization.
- Enhancing flexibility across federal funding programs.
- Modernizing federal underwriting procedures and incentivizing high-performing utilities to partner with smaller systems are also essential steps.

A copy of the Report can be found here.