

New Rural Development leader in Idaho sees opportunities

By BRAD CARLSON
Capital Press

Idaho's rapid urbanization offers the opportunity for USDA Rural Development to have a big impact, new State Director Rudy Soto says.

"I see incredible growth in our metro areas spilling over into our rural areas," he said. "And it's high time we focus more on folks outside the big cities."

Increased funding also bodes well, said Soto, whom President Joe Biden appointed in mid-January.

The appointment "is an incredible honor that I'm extremely grateful for because we are in the midst of a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity," Soto said. "Because of bipartisan efforts, there is an abundance of federal financial resources going to rural communities."

Planned new investment targets



Rudy Soto

are all going to be better off," Soto said.

Population growth helped push home prices out of reach for many, and "we need to provide housing options so that we can meet our workforce demands," he said. Rural Development's single- and multi-family housing programs can help.

"One of the administration's priorities is to focus on equity," Soto said. He plans to evaluate 10 Idaho communities, yet to be identified, with the highest rates of persistent poverty.

broadband internet, economic development, community infrastructure, affordable housing and other needs.

"If we strengthen our rural communities, we

On tribal lands, Rural Development wants to increase first-time homeownership and broadband access, he said.

"We have considerable pockets throughout the state where reliable broadband infrastructure is not accessible," Soto said. "We've got to build that out and make sure everybody can get connected."

Applications will be accepted through Feb. 22 for Rural Development's broadband-focused ReConnect loan and grant program, and through March 31 for its Rural Energy for America program.

Rural Development, which employs about 30 in Idaho, recently announced major new funding for job training, business expansion and technical assistance.

Soto said agriculture production, "the backbone of Idaho's economy," is positioned to have an even greater impact on rural economies.

Advancements in farm and ranch technology bode well, as does recently announced Rural Development funding that targets climate-friendly ag projects and sustainability, he said.

"Idaho could be very well positioned to tap into the millions of dollars available for new opportunities and markets for ag and forestry industries," Soto said.

Rural Development can help maximize agriculture's local economic impacts by financing projects ranging from workforce housing and technology infrastructure to rebuilding a small-town fire station, he said.

Idaho outdoor recreation "is booming with opportunity," Soto said. Rural Development, as the Great American Outdoors Act is carried out, "is going to create some new rural tourism and economic development opportunities."

Wildfires are a concern, he said. "I think we are going to be increasing opportunity for Rural Development to help with mitigation measures in local communities that are on the front lines."

Soto, 36, lives in Nampa. He is a Shoshone-Bannock Tribes member and the son of a farmworker. He graduated from Portland State University.

He previously worked for the conservation-focused Western Leaders Network and the National Indian Gaming Association. He is a former U.S. House of Representatives legislative assistant and an Army National Guard veteran. He was the 2020 Democratic nominee in the westernmost of Idaho's two congressional districts.

"I look forward to getting out there and visiting every county in the state," Soto said.

Despite thorny supply chains, demand for flowers booms before Valentine's Day

By SIERRA DAWN McCLAIN
Capital Press

U.S. flower growers and wholesalers are racing to keep up with consumer demand in the lead-up to Valentine's Day.

According to Elizabeth Daly, spokeswoman for the Society of American Florists, the association recently polled 761 floral industry members, mostly retailers, about sales projections. About half of the respondents said they expect Valentine's Day sales in 2022 to top those of 2021.

If retailers are predicting correctly, it would mean a continued growth trend, as 27% of Americans bought fresh flowers or plants as Valentine's gifts in 2021, up from 25% in 2020.

Like other farmers, flower growers are facing significant challenges, including supply chain disruptions and higher input costs. But because demand for flowers is high, optimism is widespread.

Steve Dionne, executive director of the Califor-



Sierra Dawn McClain/Capital Press

Tyler Meskers of Oregon Flowers Inc. in one of his greenhouses. Meskers said that despite shipping delays and rising costs, now is a "joyful time" to be in the flower industry because consumer demand is so strong.

nia Association of Flower Growers and Shippers, or CalFlowers, said the spike in demand started in 2020 and hasn't receded. The pandemic, he said, changed the American consumer's relationship with flowers. People don't just give flowers to others now; they also treat themselves.

"There is signifi-

cant increased consumer demand," said Dionne.

The industry, however, has faced difficulties.

Dionne said that bulb growers especially have struggled with global supply chain problems because most bulbs are imported.

Tyler Meskers, vice president of Oregon Flowers Inc., a cut flower busi-

ness specializing in bulbs in Aurora, Ore., said shipping delays have made it hard to plant on time.

"The containers are just so delayed," said Meskers. "That's really interfering with our planting schedule."

Meskers ordered bulb stock from Holland last year. The stock was harvested in November, the shipping

container was ready by the first week of December and the bulbs were supposed to arrive in early January. But Feb. 7, Meskers said the container still had not arrived, extending even past the 2-to-3 week "buffer time" the company had built in for delays.

Domestic trucking disruptions have been a problem too, said Meskers.

Costs have also increased. Meskers this year is spending 10% to 15% more on bulbs, and freight containers which used to cost him \$6,000 to \$7,000 each now cost \$15,000.

Other growers say they're worried about the rising costs of fertilizer, packaging and other supplies.

Because of intense consumer demand, the flower industry has fortunately been able to pass on its costs. Domestic flower prices have risen 10% to 15% during the pandemic, said Dionne of CalFlowers, but "profit margins (for growers) are staying roughly the same."

Demand for imported flowers is also on the rise.

The majority of roses that Americans give one another for Valentine's Day are grown in South America. Each year, they are shipped in cargo jets to the U.S., where agricultural experts X-ray the flowers for contraband and examine them for pests or diseases.

Abel Serrano, U.S. Customs and Border Patrol assistant director of agriculture at the Miami Airport, a flower importation hub, said he has noticed an uptick in consumer demand.

In 2021, his site processed 850 million stems in the four-week period leading up to Valentine's Day, up from 720 million stems pre-COVID. This February, he said, the volume appears 5% to 10% higher than last year.

Despite foreign competition, Dionne of CalFlowers said he sees room for domestic industry growth.

"There's consolidation at the top of the industry, but at the same time, we see this robust and healthy new wave of entry into domestic floral production," he said.

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