RESPONSE TO REVIEWERS’ COMMENTS ON PROPOSAL FOR NE 1079

Clearly, the first cut of this proposal needed more focus and a better narrative flow, as all three reviewers pointed out. In particular, there was some confusion about the goals USDA/REE laid out in their report and NE 1079’s project’s goals, which are a related, adapted subset of the REE goals. We have attempted to address this by restructuring the proposal so that justification-objectives-methods are presented sequentially to better tie the three together. We tried to eliminate redundancy and excess verbiage, trimming our justification section to clearly lead into the objectives, and providing specifics in the methods section about data, topics, and tools that directly address the objectives (we also added page numbers!). Responses to specific concerns of the reviewers follow.

Reviewer #1

1. “I simply cannot figure out what their actual objectives are this time around. There is the list of seven goals at the beginning which are loosely tied to ”three primary research areas” (community resilience, rural entrepreneurship and community well-being, and energy and land use policies in rural areas).

   We have selected and highlighted the four relevant goals from the USDA REE list of 7 to reduce confusion. We follow this with a better transition into objectives, which ties back to justification/goals.

2. They immediately lay out reasoning for land use, but don't provide an action plan or examples of planned work there. In the methods they say there are two objectives. Following their methods, they provide information about (1) rural economic opportunities and entrepreneurship and (2) resiliency of rural communities. It seems that land use got dropped, which is fine although it's not clear why or why it alone was discussed previously.

   This is now hopefully clearer as it relates to energy development and its effects on rural communities, which ties in with land and water use issues as spelled out in objectives 2d and 2f. It is also discussed in the methods section on objective 2 with an example of research getting underway in West Virginia.

3. “But I cannot see how these two objectives tie to their seven goals, many of which are extremely important topics.”

   We have tried to tie the ‘goals’—which are drawn from USDA documents—and objectives together by only listing those of the seven goals that relate to our two objectives. We have underlined key terms in the goals which tie directly into the objectives section. There are more ‘goals’ listed than objectives because the USDA goals are subsumed into the two broad objectives.
4. It is possible that goals 1-3 fall within objective 1, but only the local foods movement is discussed related to these goals. Childcare and finance/infrastructure presumably related to goal 7, although it’s not clear how they promote rural-urban interdependence. Perhaps goal 7 should simply read Infrastructure and Prosperity.

As mentioned in the response to comment #1, we have deleted the full list of goals and now only mentioned the relevant ones. Goal # 1 in the revised proposal, Rural-Urban Interdependence and Prosperity, reflects what we believe to be the broadest goal of our proposed work.

5. “On community resiliency, they come back to local finance and also discuss disasters and spatial economic issues. So where do goals 4-6 (Nutrition and childhood obesity, food safety, and education and science literacy) come into play?”

Nutrition, obesity, food safety etc. are not relevant to our proposal, so are not specifically mentioned (so as to avoid the confusion we initially caused!). Education and Science literacy is related to education and skill levels, which in turn is related to the chronic labor problems faced by rural communities. It also relates to the “seven capitals” (human capital in particular).

6. How closely related are the goals and the two objectives? Furthermore, the application opens with concerns about an aging population, health concerns and deaths of despair, and statistics about rural veterans. Health and aging concerns are CRITICAL to many rural areas!!! But there is nothing here that addresses health and aging (other than perhaps a transfer of wealth as an economic opportunity) or veterans. But I’d like to see a more cohesive idea of where the project is headed and how the goals and topics fit.

We have made a more direct reference in objectives and methods to the issue of health care and drug abuse. The issue of veterans is now folded in with the sub-objective on health care infrastructure/provision, 2b. Research on health and aging issues, while it may grow out of the proposal goals, is not a central focus of NE 1079 at this time.

Reviewer #2

7. This specifically why my ratings for many areas were low, is that the approach wasn’t clear, and the goals as they related to what was discussed was really a mix of too many things. There is a lot of talk about entrepreneurship and studying this issue in the goals, but there is no specific information given on how you are going to do this. Such as the social capital theory research, how are you going to test this? What data are you going to use? Why is that data set appropriate since a lot of the entrepreneurship data can be problematic in rural areas? I found the idea of looking at child care access a very interesting, important, and understudied issue, and the proposed method for obtaining this data is sound.

We have kept the child care section in the methods section and expanded with more detail on other topics/data sources/methods. Note also that the child care section
highlights the use of spatial tools in completing the planned research (per the next comment). Specific uses of spatial tools in our proposed work are also highlighted in the methods section. Several specific data sources are now mentioned in the methods section, but of course over the five-year term of the project our work will likely expand considerably, so that both methods and data sources not mentioned in the current proposal will be used.

8. Why is adding spatial econometrics going to advance what you’ve already done?”

Much of the innovative work done by project members has involved spatial analysis. However, there are many ways to address spatial spillovers and our project team will use the appropriate methods as research unfolds. More details are now included in the objectives and methods sections.

9. “This proposal has a lot of talk about cross-university collaboration, which is important to these types of research, but that alone isn't sufficient justification (in my opinion)”

We have attempted to provide additional detail on past and possible future examples of how state level efforts have evolved into regional efforts. The new proposal also includes substantially more detail on the methods for the research we propose to conduct, and how working together can address the differences and similarities between rural areas and how policies, especially at the federal level, may not work if these differences are not considered.

Reviewer #3

10. The organization of the proposal itself made it very difficult to get a clear idea of what is in fact being proposed. Just as an example, p2 describes 7 (!) areas of emphasis, with the following page tossing out 22 examples across three of those specified areas, yet with little sense of how the pieces fit into the larger context.

As noted for reviewer #1, these seven areas were actually those proposed by USDA. We have now only mentioned those that are relevant to our proposed research areas and objectives. We have also done away with the bullet list of examples as it clutters the narrative.

11. In the very next paragraphs, the document describes three very different “research areas around which to engage in the coming years: Community Resilience; Rural Entrepreneurship and Community Wellbeing; and Energy and Land Use policies in rural areas,” which don’t neatly match with any of the previously noted focal areas either. The section on Related, Current, and Previous Work is again a poorly organized collection of concepts and references – all of which lead to now just two Objectives. These Objectives suddenly change narrative structure to a list of Comments, again seemingly randomly tossing out some very good – but also very jumbled – sets of questions.”
We have worked to shorten the justification and methods sections and to tie the objectives forward to the methods and backwards to the justification. Rural entrepreneurship is related to both the REE goals and to objective 1, as is community well-being. Energy and land use policies fits under objective 2 (Sustainable Use of Natural Resources) and objective 4 (Responding to Climate and Energy Needs). We hope our objectives and other sections now reflect all three research areas more clearly.

12. The discussion that follows finally does hew to the now manageable set of two Objectives, and finally focuses the proposal a bit. The list of Measurement of Progress is reasonable, but could use further clarity on the distinctions between the more research-oriented metrics and those for Outreach.

We have added more detailed points to the outreach section.