

BIDEN LAUNCHES “RURAL PARTNERS NETWORK” TO REFORM AND IMPROVE SUPPORT FOR AG- AMERICA PART 2



By: [Richard M. Blau](#), Chair
Nationwide Food Law Group

The Biden Administration recently [announced an interagency effort](#) to help state, local, tribal, and territorial governments in rural areas implement much needed infrastructure for agricultural communities. Late last year, the federal government made funding available through passage of the \$1.2 trillion **Bipartisan Infrastructure Law** – one of the most important bipartisan efforts that Congress achieved in 2021. To put those funds to work, President Biden directed federal agencies to reform and improve the way they deliver infrastructure improvement services.

HOW THE RPN WORKS

The result of those federal efforts is the [Rural Partners Network \(RPN\)](#) -- an alliance of federal agencies and civic partners working to expand rural prosperity through job creation, infrastructure development, and community improvement. Led by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, RPN will deploy reformed and streamlined operations to provide rural communities with collaborative partnerships that will expand rural prosperity through job creation, infrastructure development, and community improvement. The RPN also is designed to improve equitable access to federal programs and funding, and help drive local economic development.

A key component of the RPN requires federal agencies to designate key points of contact who focus specifically on rural strategies, improving visibility and attention to rural issues. Known as “**Community Liaisons**,” these federal employees will provide local leaders with the expertise to navigate federal programs. Community Liaisons also will help build relationships and feed key information from the communities to federal agencies regarding local needs, while identifying solutions to overcome existing barriers to accessing federal resources.

GETTING THE WORD OUT

The administration is promoting the RPN and its related [Rural Playbook](#) initiative with a cross-country rural infrastructure tour led by President Joe Biden and key cabinet officials. The information campaign began with President Biden's visit to Iowa on April 12, 2021, to announce more than \$5 billion in federal grants to the state, including \$400 million to fix a high number of deficient bridges across the state, more than \$600 million to update public water systems, and \$100 million to bring high-speed internet access to rural areas throughout Iowa.

Interior Secretary Deb Haaland underscored the President's message at [an event in Colorado](#), along with Colorado elected officials and the U.S. Forest Service chief, focused on wildfires, forest management, conservation programs, and federal support for climate mitigation and ecosystem restoration included in the infrastructure bill. Secretary Haaland and others also discussed progress on the administration's [America the Beautiful](#) initiative, a locally led, voluntary land restoration project.

RPN was unveiled shortly thereafter by **U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Secretary Tom Vilsack** and **White House Domestic Policy Advisor Susan Rice**. In addition to President Biden and Secretary Haaland, the Rural Playbook and RPN rollout, dubbed the "Building A Better America Rural Infrastructure Tour," will entail public meetings and information sessions led by senior officials including:

- Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg
- Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo,
- Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm,
- EPA Administrator Michael Regan and
- Infrastructure Coordinator Mitch Landrieu,

along with other senior administration officials as events are planned throughout the next few weeks.

RURAL INFRASTRUCTURE NEEDS PRESENT GREAT CHALLENGES

Across much of rural America, many infrastructure needs have gone unaddressed for years, in large part because rural communities are ill-equipped with the typical federal grant application process.

For example, water and wastewater projects often require \$100,000 pre-development engineering and design documents before they can even apply for federal grants. Likewise, high-speed internet projects, which are desperately needed by rural communities in the South and Mid-West, require expensive mapping and technical diagnostics as prerequisites for submitting viable grant requests.

Rural communities of Florida, including those in the Panhandle (such as Jefferson, Lafayette, and Liberty counties) and predominantly agricultural counties (such as

Glades, Highlands, and Okeechobee counties) generally have limited staff and minimal experience accessing and managing federal resources.

Advocates for farmers and ranchers operating in the least populous parts of Florida and the rest of America face significant challenges in trying to navigate a complex piece of legislation full of opportunities for their communities.

Unlike past initiatives, these grant programs also are backed by serious dollars. Florida is a clear case in point.

For decades, infrastructure in Florida has suffered from a systemic lack of investment. There are 408 bridges and over 3,564 miles of highway in Florida that are in poor condition. Since 2011, commute times have increased by 11.6% in Florida, and on average, each driver in the Sunshine State pays \$425 per year in costs due to driving on roads in need of repair. Not surprisingly, the American Society of Civil Engineers gave Florida a "C" on its infrastructure report card.

To address this need, RPN will coordinate directly with local officials to explain how the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law will:

- **Repair and rebuild Florida roads and bridges** with a focus on climate change mitigation, resilience, equity, and safety for all users, including cyclists and pedestrians; Based on formula funding alone, Florida would expect to receive approximately \$13.3 billion over five years in Federal highway formula funding for highways and bridges (on an average annual basis, this is about 26% more than the State's Federal-aid highway formula funding under current law).
- **Invest \$13 billion over the *Fixing America's Surface Transportation (FAST) Act* levels directly into improving roadway safety.** Over five years, Florida will receive approximately \$100 million in 402 formula funding for highway safety traffic programs, which help states to improve driver behavior and reduce deaths and injuries from motor vehicle-related crashes (on an average annual basis, this represents about a 29% increase over FAST Act levels).
- **Open to local and tribal governments in Florida eligibility to compete for \$6 billion in funding for a new *Safe Streets for All* program** which

will provide funding directly to these entities to support their efforts to advance “vision zero” plans and other improvements to reduce crashes and fatalities, especially for cyclists and pedestrians. In addition, Florida can expect to receive approximately \$103.7 million over five years in funding to augment their commercial motor vehicle (CMV) safety efforts to reduce CMV crashes through the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration’s *Motor Carrier Safety Assistance Program* (MCSAP) formula grant (this represents about a 65% increase in funding compared to FAST Act levels).

- **Provide access to funds for modernizing data collection systems to collect near real time data** on all reported crashes, including fatal ones, to enhance safety and to allow the Department of Transportation to understand and address trends as they are identified.
- Dedicate funding for community grants to community owned utilities to support **the repair or replacement of leaky and unsafe cast iron and bare steel natural gas distribution pipelines**, some of which are over 100 years old.
- Investing **\$1.6 billion in Florida to eliminate 100% of the state’s lead pipes** and provide clean drinking water to Floridians who lack it. This will not only improve the quality of drinking water throughout Florida, but also generate of thousands of good-paying jobs for plumbers and pipefitters.
- Award approximately **\$198 million over five years to support the expansion of an EV charging network in the state**, and also provide the opportunity to apply for grants out of the **\$2.5 billion available for EV charging**.
- Offer Florida the opportunity to compete for **\$5 billion for rail improvement and safety grants and \$3 billion for grade crossing safety improvements**.
- Provide airports in Florida approximately \$1.2 billion for **infrastructure development for airports over five years**. This funding will address airside and landside needs at airports, such as improving runways, taxiways and airport-owned towers, terminal development projects, and noise reduction projects.

Aside from transportation infrastructure, the Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill offers Florida badly needed help in other areas, such as Everglades restoration. New federal funding includes the largest investment ever, more than \$1 billion, to revitalize and restore the Everglades by combating pollution, rising sea levels, and droughts, providing drinking water supply for over 8 million Floridians -- all of which also will support Florida's tourism economy.

FIND THE DETAILS

The RPN program is a broad-based program. [USDA Rural Development](#) is leading the RPN in collaboration with 16 federal agencies and regional commissions through the **Rural Prosperity Interagency Policy Council**, co-led by the White House Domestic Policy Council and USDA. This coordinated effort encompasses the following federal agencies:

- Department of Commerce
- Department of Education
- Department of Energy
- Environmental Protection Agency
- Department of Health and Human Services
- Department of Housing and Urban Development
- Department of the Interior
- Department of Labor

- Small Business Administration
- Department of Transportation
- Department of the Treasury
- Department of Veterans Affairs
- Appalachian Regional Commission
- Delta Regional Authority
- Denali Commission
- Northern Border Regional Commission

In its first year, these government agencies are mandated to launch dedicated community liaison staff in more than 25 rural communities in multiple U.S. states, Tribal Nations, and territories. RPN will coordinate the activities of 16 different federal agencies and regional commissions through the **Rural Prosperity Interagency Policy Council**. Additionally, the RPN will launch an interagency public Website dedicated to the needs of rural America by highlighting federal rural development resources.

RPN will build on existing programs, while also helping local communities identify, apply for, and implement new infrastructure programs. Examples of existing programs include federal efforts such as [Interagency Working Group on Coal and Power Plant Communities and Economic Revitalization](#) and the President's [Justice40 Initiative](#); and staff of the Regional Commissions.

To help rural communities identify potential funding for new local infrastructure improvements, resources include agency-specific fact sheets for rural infrastructure grant programs, as well as documentation of rural set-asides for specific pools of funding or waivers on matching fund requirements. Rural-specific fact sheets are available from the following agencies:

- [Department of Transportation](#)
- [U.S. Department of Agriculture](#)
- [Department of Commerce](#)
- [Environmental Protection Agency](#)
- [Department of the Interior](#)
- [Department of Energy](#)
- [FEMA](#)

RPN Directors will be placed in states, territories and Tribal Nations to coordinate RPN activities, and RPN Liaisons will be placed in selected community networks to work with local leaders on an economic development vision and to secure the funds to make those plans a reality.

THE BOTTOM LINE

With the implementation of RPN, agencies across the federal government will contribute to what the Biden Administration calls a "whole-of-government" initiative for the rejuvenation of the nation's rural infrastructure. RPN will deploy economic development resource guides and other informational material to help all rural

communities better identify and access federal funds. Agencies also will proactively conduct outreach to rural communities and rural leaders to disseminate information, offer technical assistance support, and seek input regarding the economic development barriers they face and support they need.

For additional information, including information on which states and communities have been designated for initial support by RPN, contact GrayRobinson's [Nationwide Food Law Group](#) via email at: foodlaw@gray-robinson.com; or via telephone at **(866) 382-5132**.



[Richard M. Blau](#) leads GrayRobinson's [Nationwide Food Law Group](#), focusing on the laws that govern the production, importation, processing, marketing, distribution, and sale of foods and beverages throughout the United States. Richard works with all levels of the food industry. He has represented international importers and domestic manufacturers, statewide wholesaler trade groups and regional distributors, and retailers (including multistate restaurant and grocery store chains) across the United States. Richard has achieved numerous peer-related accolades for his legal work, including: **Chambers and Partners** - Nationally ranked as "Band 1" for Food and Beverage Law; **Best Lawyers in America** - Nationally listed for Food and Beverage Law; and **Super Lawyers** - Elected member.