

FAQs for “Building a Resilient Economy in the Lower Illinois River Valley – Considerations for Farm Profitability, the Workforce, and Rural Recovery”

What is the purpose of this report?

In early 2020, John Wood Community College (JWCC), with cooperation and support from the Illinois Green Economy Network (IGEN), identified a need to better understand the challenges facing rural communities in the Lower Illinois River Valley (LIRV) especially as it pertains to workforce development needs and opportunities. In order to develop relevant strategies, JWCC requested THG Advisors to prepare a rapid needs and opportunities assessment of current conditions in the LIRV. The report is the result of that effort, and provides actionable recommendations for positive impact on the lives of the people who live in the LIRV.

Where did the information contained in the report come from?

There were two major components. First, literature research provided a snapshot of the baseline condition in the LIRV in terms of economic status, technological capability and opportunities, workforce readiness and federal, state and regional policies. Concurrently, one-on-one interviews were conducted with practitioners in the region, adding a grounded, realistic perspective.

Is there a limited geographic scope?

The LIRV includes all or parts of Brown, Cass, Pike, Calhoun, Morgan, Macoupin, Greene, Jersey, and Scott Counties, generally bounded by the Mississippi and Illinois Rivers. However, the information and recommendations contained in the report can be relevant and exportable to rural agricultural regions throughout the State of Illinois and beyond.

In summary, what’s the prognosis for the region?

The LIRV has an established and mature position in national and global agricultural production. As a whole, Illinois ranks first in the nation in soybean production, first in providing processed foods, second in corn production, fourth in hog and pig production, and on the world market, third in the export of agricultural commodities. While the region is rich in assets, it faces a mix of challenges and opportunities. From 2010 to 2019, the population in the LIRV has declined, and pre-Covid unemployment rates exceed the State average in nearly every county. Poverty rates are above average, and the region’s population, including agricultural producers, is aging. Regional transformative leadership will be central to rallying a well-directed and measurable effort to bolster the region’s overall resiliency.

What kinds of technical advances impact rural communities?

Technological advances have become increasingly accessible. Precision agriculture, Internet-enabled devices, alternative energy sources, and smart tools are increasing sustainability, efficiency and risk management, and profitability. Tools from GPS-guided equipment to drones for crop dusting to plant-based moisture sensors are in use. This technology comes with a cost, both economic and in terms of a learning and acceptance curve. A principal challenge to widespread use of new technologies is the accessibility of reliable hi-speed broadband.

I don't have time to read the whole report. Can I focus on one section?

Let us recommend two sections. First, the Executive Summary for context, but more importantly the Recommendations within Section V, which features five action areas that mirror the focus of the 2017 White House Interagency Task Force on Agricultural and Rural Prosperity. The five action areas were: achieving e-connectivity for rural America, improving rural quality of life, supporting the rural workforce, harnessing technological innovation, and developing the rural economy. The Recommendations section includes a call to action for each of these focus areas and provides several "activation project ideas" that are regionally specific but transferrable.

Is there a single "big idea" that came out of this effort?

Yes, the creation of the LIRV Regional Agricultural and Rural Innovation Center (Center). Workforce efforts need to be coordinated and could be strategically advanced with the development of a regional career academy. The Center could also address rural capacity-building and problem-solving, while building rural social capital, sense of community, and optimism about the future. The Center could serve as a direct connection between educational and agricultural communities, providing space for learning, collaboration, and idea generation. The Center could house partnerships with allied organizations and provide direct farmer training through these cooperative relationships.

Finally, the Center could be a place where experienced farmers and producers can participate and train, but also facilitate connections to novices who need their help. This single idea could provide enough transformative energy to create a direct pathway to regional resiliency, greater self-reliance, long-term economic prosperity, and regional livability.

Is there follow-up anticipated or envisioned following release of the report?

Yes, JWCC and IGEN will be taking the counsel of others on strategies to keep this dialogue active, stay engaged with interested parties, and finding opportunities to operationalize key recommendations that find popular footing with our regional audience.