

## 8. POLICY POSITION

### THE TRI-STATE DELTA EMPOWERMENT INITIATIVE

#### BACKGROUND

The Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi Delta Tri-State Region has the nation's highest illiteracy rate, highest rural, minority, and overall poverty rates, the highest infant mortality rate, and the lowest educational attainment rate in the nation.

In 1993, at the urging of Louisiana State Senator Charles D. Jones, the Delta Pilot Economic Development Project was launched with broad-based regional support, including the support of the governors of the Tri-State Delta Region of Arkansas, Louisiana and Mississippi; members of the congressional delegations of the three states; state and local elected officials from the Tri-State Region; business, labor, religious, and community leaders and with the support of the thousands of suffering residents of this beleaguered region.

The Empowerment Zones and Enterprise Communities Act of 1994 will make available up to \$40 million in federal social service grants and tax relief for three rural areas which are designated as Rural Empowerment Zones.

The Delta Pilot Economic Development Project, through its Delta Economic Energy District (DEED, Inc.) developed and is implementing collaborative tri-state economic and human development projects designed to transform the Delta Region from poverty to prosperity. Toward this end, DEED filed an application in a timely manner with the United States Department of Agriculture for designation as a Rural Empowerment Zone.

The DEED application meets all of the requirements for Rural Empowerment Zone designation and is unique in at least the following regards: its tri-state regional approach to addressing the myriad social and economic problems of the Delta; its incorporation of the poorest and most distressed counties of the Tri-State Region in its plan; and the coordinating entity is an African-American corporation which has brought together and will maintain and enhance a diverse coalition of people and interests across the lines of race, ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status and political affiliation.

The towns, cities and parishes of other member states of the Southern Legislative Conference have applied for designation as Rural Empowerment Zones, but lack the levels of distress and poverty found in the Tri-State Delta Region which surpasses all other regions in levels of poverty, illiteracy and infirmity. The United States Department of Agriculture will designate three Rural Empowerment Zones. Thus, supporting the Tri-State Delta effort in no way undermines the efforts of other southern legislators to get their areas designated as Rural Empowerment Zones, but simply recognizes the exigencies and dire distress in the Tri-State Delta Region.

Designating the Tri-State Delta Regional Community as an empowerment zone will foster President Clinton's goal of seeking regional remedies to human and environmental problems, and continue the mission he leads as Chairman of the Lower Mississippi Delta Development Commission.

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**RECOMMENDATION**

The Southern Legislative Conference supports and encourages the Secretary of Agriculture, Mike Espy, to support and designate the Tri-State Delta Regional Community as a Rural Empowerment Zone. In no event is preferential treatment of one application over another implied.

Adopted by the Southern Legislative Conference, July 19, 1994, Norfolk, Virginia.