

2. POLICY POSITION

RURAL DEVELOPMENT FOR THE LOWER MISSISSIPPI DELTA REGION

BACKGROUND

The Clinton Administration has included in the Federal Budget the creation of a Delta Regional Commission, with \$26 million in existing funding for targeted rural development through the U. S. Department of Agriculture. The region that is affected includes the following member states of the Southern Legislative Conference: Mississippi, Arkansas, Louisiana, Tennessee, Kentucky and Missouri.

The Delta Region is the nation's poorest region and accounts for most of the poverty attributed to the Southern region by the U. S. Census Bureau. Unlike other regions of the South and the United States, it has not participated in the booming economy. Poverty and unemployment rates are twice the national average. The area has the highest percentage of houses without running water, children living in poverty, and high school drop-outs. It is the worst in the nation in life expectancy for men and women, and has infant mortality rates so high they exceed the rates of some undeveloped countries. It has the highest welfare rolls and the highest dependency on farm subsidies. Moreover, the recent changes in welfare and farm policies will combine in the next few years to place this region in even greater peril as those who sell their farms to bigger interests and those who are off the welfare rolls look for jobs.

Almost every member state of the Southern Legislative Conference has benefitted greatly from targeted rural development monies distributed and managed by regional agencies of the federal government. Since the 1930s, the Tennessee Valley Authority has helped make that region one of the fastest growing regions in the nation. The Appalachian Regional Commission, created in the 1960s, has cut poverty in half and opened the area up to interstate commerce. In large part, these targeted programs have helped the upper South outpace the rest of the South in the economic growth that has occurred there in recent years. It is time that the national government provide similar regional assistance for the poorest region of all, the lower Mississippi Delta.

RECOMMENDATION

The Southern Legislative Conference of The Council of State Governments supports the use of federal monies (supported by matching state and local funds), and the creation of a Delta Regional Commission to target economic assistance to the lower Mississippi Delta region. Also, the Southern Legislative Conference recognizes the importance of this initiative to the entire South and the nation.

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Furthermore, the Southern Legislative Conference urges the transmission of this policy position to the president, members of the U. S. House and Senate and its leaders, the U. S. secretary of agriculture, and to the governors, legislators and legislative clerks of the states in the lower Mississippi Delta Region.

Adopted by the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee, August 9, 1998, Charleston, South Carolina. Sponsored by Senator Kevin Smith, Arkansas.