

Six Common Myths About Rural America

By Tim Slack and Shannon M. Monnat

Roughly one in five Americans live in rural areas—places the federal government defines based on small populations and low housing density. However, many people understand rural America through stereotypes. Media and political conversations often use words or terms such as “fading,” “white,” “farming,” “traditional,” and “politically uniform” to describe rural communities. In reality, rural communities are more varied. Getting these facts right matters because public debates, policies, and resources—including money for programs—often rely on these assumptions, and misunderstandings can leave real needs neglected.

We are rural demographers at Louisiana State University and Syracuse University who study the causes and consequences of well-being in rural America. Here we outline six myths about rural America—a few among many—highlighted in our recent book *Rural and Small-Town America: Context, Composition, and Complexities*.

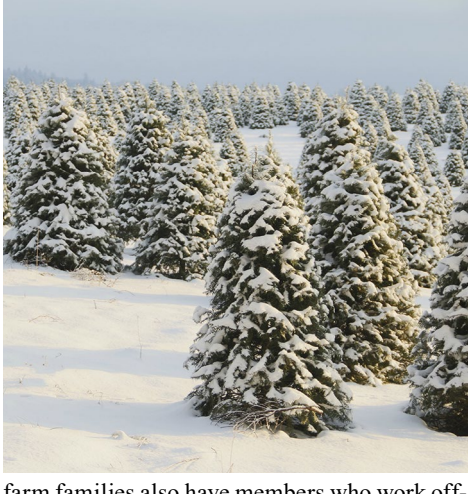
Myth 1: Rural America is disappearing due to depopulation

Many people think that rural America is emptying out. The story is more complicated. It’s true that between 2010 and 2020 most rural counties lost population. But about one third grew, especially those near cities or those with lakes, mountains and other natural attractions. And there have been times, like in the 1970s and 1990s, when rural populations grew faster than cities—periods called “rural rebounds.”

An important thing to know about rural population change is that places defined as “rural” can change over time. When a rural town grows enough, the United States Office of Management and Budget reclassifies it as “urban.” In other words, rural America isn’t disappearing—it’s changing and sometimes urbanizing.

Myth 2: Most rural Americans live on farms

Farming is still important in many rural places, but it’s no longer the way most rural Americans make a living. Today, roughly six percent of rural jobs are in agriculture. And most



farm families also have members who work off-farm jobs, often for access to health insurance and retirement benefits.

A bigger source of employment in rural America is manufacturing. In fact, manufacturing

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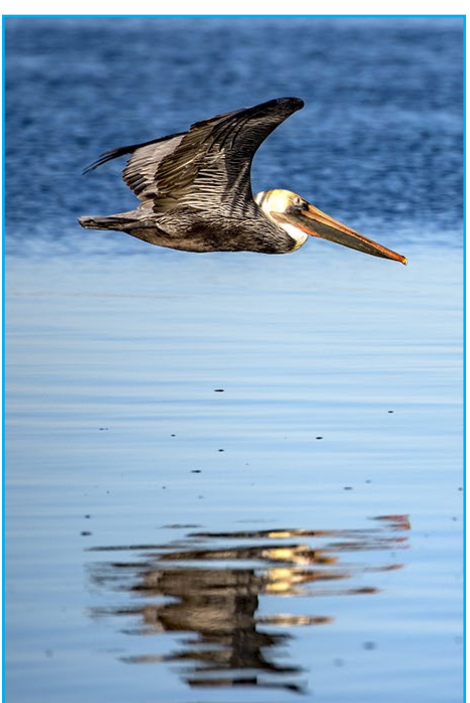
Federal Contracting: Woman-Owned Small Business (WOSB) Certification Program Webinar
Tuesday, December 16, 2025, 1:00 pm–3:00 pm CST Online
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Contact: Patrice Dozier, patrice.dozier@sba.gov
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Thursday, January 15, 2026, 9:00 am–10:00 am CST Online
Main Sponsor(s): US Small Business Administration, Rhode Island District Office
Contact: Brian Hopkins, 401-528-4575, brian.hopkins@sba.gov
Fee: Free; registration required

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