

WHAT'S WORKING IN RURAL CASE STUDY



When Communities Keep Flooding: A Rural Environmental Justice Case Study

VISION: COMMUNITY SOLUTIONS TO REPEATED FLOODING

We all want to live in places that are safe and able to respond to disasters. But right now, many rural communities and Native nations — especially communities of color and low-wealth places — experience repeated devastating flooding. Rural places affected by repeated flooding need to create and drive their own solutions with the country's support and assistance, as reflected in the building blocks of the [Thrive Rural Framework](#).

Repeated flooding is an environmental justice issue for both urban and rural communities, but rural communities need rural solutions when confronting natural disasters and associated recovery efforts, as detailed in our call to action, [Through Natural Disaster to Prosperity](#). The drivers of repeated flooding in rural communities are complex, including climate, unsustainable approaches to development, and structural inequity. Still, rural people across the country are working diligently and creatively on home-grown solutions.

VOICES: COMMUNITIES ADDRESSING REPEATED FLOODING

Addressing repeated flooding in rural communities is a question of environmental justice because structural racial, economic, and geographic inequities have contributed to the causes of flooding and hindered mitigation efforts. Structural discrimination based on place, race, and class has contributed to the location of low-wealth communities of color — like Princeville, NC and Duck Hill, MS — in areas vulnerable to flooding, as well as to delays in and deprioritization of flood mitigation efforts for these communities. These same forms of discrimination have also contributed to the location of and damage caused by industries like mining that put low-wealth communities

RURAL ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

The [US Environmental Protection Agency](#) (EPA) defines environmental justice as “the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income, with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies.”

Environmental justice is central to the ultimate outcome of the [Thrive Rural Framework](#): *Communities and Native nations across the rural United States are healthy places where each and every person belongs, lives with dignity, and thrives.* Issues related to environmental justice — from inequitable access to safe drinking water to inequitable protection from climate risks like flooding — sit at the intersection of health and rural development, providing meaningful opportunities to advance equitable rural prosperity across rural communities and Native nations.



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at high risk of flooding (e.g., in central Appalachia, which has fewer communities of color but an exceptionally high concentration of communities in [persistent poverty](#)).

The communities and organizations profiled below are all working hard to address the causes and conditions contributing to flooding in their areas, as well as to envision and build thriving futures of equitable rural prosperity. They generously shared their thoughts, focusing on two key questions: *What structural challenges keep rural communities from addressing repeated flooding?* and *What will it take for rural communities to drive their own solutions to repeated flooding?*



Mayor Bobbie Jones, Princeville, NC:

"I was very disappointed that a state leader said we may have to leave rural North Carolina. If we leave, who's going to farm—how are you going to eat?"

Princeville, North Carolina

Princeville, North Carolina, the country's oldest incorporated Black town, was founded after the Civil War on low-lying land near the Tar River — a place that formerly enslaved residents were able to settle because it was seen as less valuable. While flooding has always been challenging for Princeville, recent decades have seen increased storms, with the town experiencing [two devastating "500-year" floods in 17 years](#). Princeville has worked closely with federal and state officials for decades to find and implement flood mitigation solutions, but planning and appropriation processes have been plagued by delays. In the meantime, residents have come together to address community needs through grassroots activities to support mental health, education, and economic development — from local youth and citizens' academies to a [countywide effort to address health disparities](#), grounded in the [County Health Rankings and Roadmaps](#).



Mayor Bobbie Jones, Princeville, NC:

"If we don't address the critical issues, all of the dollars we're spending are going to go floating down the Tar River again. If we don't address global warming and build the [flood prevention] dike, all this is for naught."

Mississippi Communities United for Prosperity (MCUP)

The predominantly Black town of Duck Hill, Mississippi, has experienced [chronic flooding](#) for decades, with each rainstorm bringing flooded streets, repeatedly damaging cars and buildings. While major flood mitigation projects have been under discussion with the state and federal governments for many years, the community has seen little progress. In recent years, however, local residents have come together through the leadership of Romona Taylor Williams, an experienced community organizer, and developed their own plan to divert water in the worst-hit areas of town. With the support of national philanthropic organizations,

PLACE MATTERS

"Why don't they just move?" This all-too-common urban response to rural challenges — even from well-intentioned leaders with a stated focus on equity — is to question whether struggling rural communities should exist at all. There is a common and persistent sentiment that people should simply leave these places rather than receive investment and support. As shocking as this response may be, given its prevalence, it is essential to address it directly.

First, people are not pieces on a game board — they have deep relationships with family, friends, community, and land that sustain them. Rural place-based networks are essential to the health of rural people and communities, and they support people when formal systems fail them — and formal systems are failing rural people, especially in historically marginalized communities.

Second, for communities of color and Native communities, the land they occupy is a vital part of their history, resilience, and perseverance. These communities were often forced to their current locations because the land was less desirable, and they should not be asked to abandon these places without the investment and opportunity they have historically been denied.

Finally, rural and urban communities are also deeply interdependent — rural communities provide food, energy, and other resources that the country depends on, though this relationship has historically been inequitable and extractive. At the most basic level, rural communities are valuable in and of themselves and deserve to achieve equitable prosperity and thrive on their own terms.



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community members installed water diversion systems in the hardest hit areas, dramatically decreasing flooding. A [Community-Driven Vulnerability Assessment and Climate Action Plan](#) completed in 2020 provides a roadmap for future efforts. The community, energized by their locally-driven success, continues to work together on projects to address climate risks and advance equitable prosperity, from academic partnerships that democratize data to youth environmental engagement.



Romona Taylor Williams, MCUP:

"When communities that are traditionally underserved (I don't like the term disadvantaged — we have lots of advantages) are provided with the resources, tools, guidance that they need, they should be the architects of public policy, architects of the design of how their communities are to look — chart the pathway to thriving and sustainable communities."

Invest Appalachia

Central Appalachia, including eastern Kentucky, West Virginia, and southwestern Virginia, has experienced [devastating flash flooding](#) with alarming frequency in recent years. Increasing storm intensity linked to climate change, combined with historical patterns of settlement and environmental damage related to surface mining, means that these floods overwhelm small creeks with little or no warning, destroying whole towns and causing tragic loss of life. [Invest Appalachia](#) (IA) is working across the Central Appalachia region to support communities as they recover from floods and to facilitate climate-informed investment strategies that advance community resilience. IA seeks to democratize access to climate data and best practices that enable rural communities to access and deploy capital for housing development, small businesses, and emerging industries that enable Appalachian communities to thrive long-term.



Baylen Campbell, Invest Appalachia:

"Looking to the future, we're working to incentivize and infuse climate resilience and sustainability in all our projects — building a pipeline to advance regenerative agriculture, conservation, and regionally rooted solutions."

STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES: SYSTEMIC DISCRIMINATION AND LACK OF INFRASTRUCTURE FOR PLANNING AND MITIGATION

A legacy of systemic discrimination based on place, race, and class was evident in each of the conversations for this case study (see the [Foundational Element](#) of the Thrive Rural Framework). At the government level, this shows up as generational neglect of infrastructure and risk mitigation strategies in communities of color and low-wealth places. In the private and philanthropic sectors, it may manifest as mindsets and practices that approach rural places with a deficit framework, associating rurality with risk and leading to underinvestment. The historically extractive and unbalanced relationship between urban and rural is also a challenge for public and private investment in rural communities. This is despite the tradeoffs rural communities made and continue to make to provide food and energy for the country in exchange for employment and short-term prosperity. And crucially, some industries, like mining, have directly contributed to rural communities' increased flooding risks.



Romona Taylor Williams, MCU:

"Systemic racism is the major barrier, and power building is the first step. I feel an ancestral obligation to do this work and fight this fight."

Lack of infrastructure and support for collaboration and community-led planning and mitigation work is another structural challenge for communities affected by repeated flooding. These challenges are often regional, yet communities often work on their own to address issues, recover from disasters, and plan for the future. Agencies responsible for managing flooding and supporting mitigation have widely varying relationships with other agencies and with communities across jurisdictions, leading to confusion and difficulty with



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effective collaboration. While many agencies do involve communities in planning processes, opportunities for involvement can be perfunctory or inaccessible. And communities often need access to data and planning support that would allow them to understand the best approaches for their unique situations.

WHAT IT WILL TAKE: INVESTMENT, SUPPORT STRUCTURES, LONG-TERM VISION



Baylen Campbell, Invest Appalachia:

"Rural communities are best placed to be their own responders and agents of recovery."

Effective and sustained investment from government, philanthropy, and the private sector is essential to addressing repeated flooding in rural communities and Native nations. Effective investment requires shifting from a deficit to an [asset framework](#), prioritizing a comprehensive [community prosperity approach](#) with future-focused projects that drive equitable prosperity rather than simply "building things back the way they were." Investments must be responsive to local needs, flexible in response to changing conditions, and grounded in local trust. Communities and funding agencies must work as partners with mutual accountability to each other.

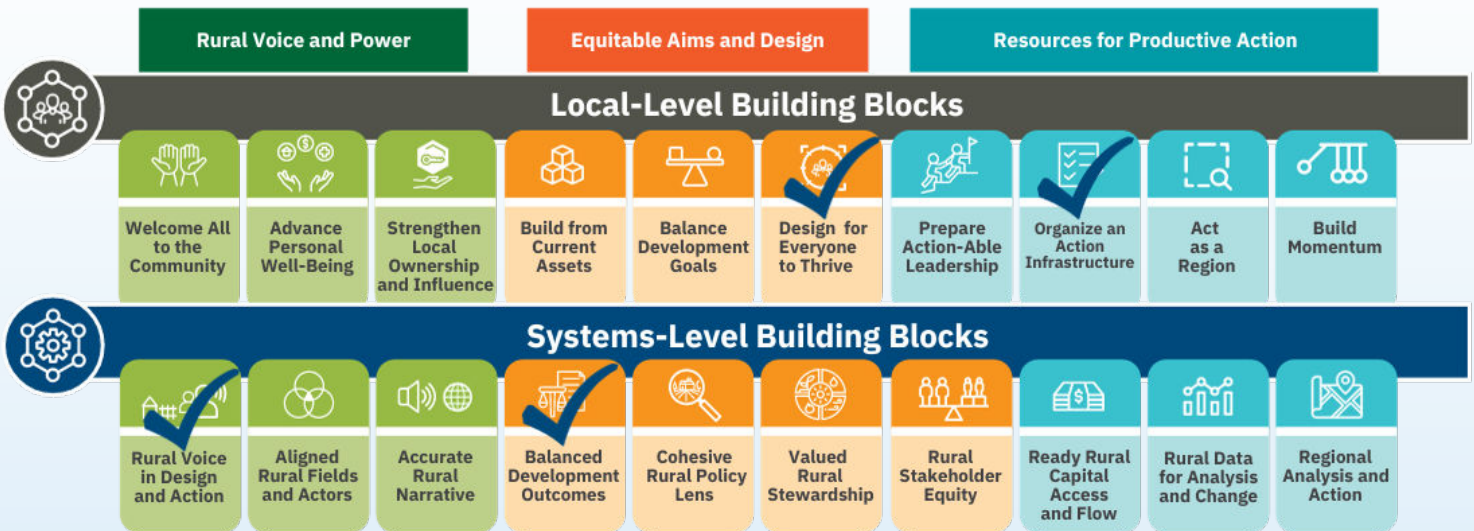
Structures for community support and regional collaboration are also key to addressing repeated rural flooding. [Rural Development Hubs](#) can provide infrastructure for equitable community partnerships with agencies and academic institutions (e.g., for access to data), as well as facilitating regional collaboration where appropriate. Shifting disaster response systems to a locally-driven structure (e.g., workers grounded in the local community) would also enable a more effective disaster response and allow communities to move through disasters toward equitable prosperity.

Continued work to address structural discrimination based on place, race, and class in rural communities and in the country as a whole will be central to this work. In the long term, development of regenerative rural economies to replace extractive and damaging industries that contribute to flooding and climate risks will also be essential. Both will require sustained national focus, including an emphasis on the role of and impact on rural communities.



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ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE IN THE THRIVE RURAL FRAMEWORK



Foundational Element: Equitable flooding prevention, recovery, and mitigation requires local leaders to have mutual decision-making power and the tools to dismantle discriminatory practices based on place, race, and class.

Community Strategies Group

aspen institute

Since 1985, the [Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group](#) has been committed to equitable rural prosperity. We work towards a future where communities and Native nations across the rural United States are healthy places where each and every person belongs, lives with dignity, and thrives.

Aspen CSG serves as a connecting hub for equitable rural community and economic development. We design and facilitate action-inducing peer learning among rural practitioners, national and regional organizations, and policymakers. We build networks, foster collaboration, and advance best practices from the field.

The foundation of our work is the [Thrive Rural Framework](#) — a tool to take stock, target action, and gauge progress on equitable rural prosperity.

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