

## WHAT'S WORKING IN RURAL CASE STUDY



### Communities Need Safe Drinking Water: A Rural Environmental Justice Case Study

#### VISION: COMMUNITY SOLUTIONS FOR SAFE DRINKING WATER

Everyone deserves to have clean drinking water. But for much of our history, rural communities and Native nations — especially historically marginalized communities — have lacked access to this basic foundation of life and health. While unsafe drinking water is an environmental justice and public health issue for both urban and rural places, rural communities face barriers related to scale and remoteness that require specialized solutions, including prioritization and support from non-rural agencies, organizations, and leaders. Across the country, rural communities and Native nations are working to build systems that work for their specific needs.



**Jacqueline Shirley, RCAC:**

*"They look so pristine and beautiful, we romanticize our rural communities — so quaint — when they're suffering from legacies of poisoning and pollution of source water."*

#### VOICES: COMMUNITIES CREATING CLEAN WATER SYSTEMS

Access to safe drinking water is a question of environmental justice because structural racial, economic, and geographic inequities have contributed to the causes of water contamination and hindered efforts to create needed systems for affected communities. Structural discrimination based on place, race, and class has contributed to the location of pollution sources near underinvested communities and communities of color like Ivanhoe, NC, as well as to challenges in accessing funding and other support for solutions.

#### 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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The communities and organizations profiled below are all working hard to design, build, and maintain effective rural clean water systems. They are envisioning and building thriving futures of equitable rural prosperity. They generously shared their thoughts, focusing on two key questions: *What structural challenges keep rural communities from accessing clean water solutions?* and *What will it take for rural communities to drive their own clean water solutions?*



**Lethia Lee, County Commissioner, Sampson County, NC:**

*"Some people say why don't they move out? These people have lived in these places for 40, 50, 60 years. They can't leave what they've worked for all their lives."*

### Ivanhoe, North Carolina

Ivanhoe is a predominantly Black community located in Sampson County in rural southeastern North Carolina. Because the community is not connected to a public water system, residents of Ivanhoe rely on private wells that typically produce foul-smelling and discolored water. To avoid consuming unsafe water, community residents, three-quarters of whom live in poverty (US Census American Community Survey, 2021), must purchase and haul bottled water for home use.

Ivanhoe area residents have been advocating for connection to public water for decades, so when a state grant funded by federal ARPA dollars emerged in 2022, [they acted quickly](#). After learning of the opportunity through EJCAN (see below), community leaders organized local residents to petition the county government to apply for funding on Ivanhoe's behalf. Following months of consistent advocacy and grant development work, the state awarded a \$13.2M grant to connect 350 households in the Ivanhoe area to public water. This funding is cause for joy and celebration in Ivanhoe, but challenges remain: while grant funding covers the cost of connecting houses in Ivanhoe to the new system, residents in nearby communities must shoulder these costs, which can be up to \$1,000 per household — out of reach for most local residents. And as construction time nears, residents remain concerned about implementation: will the system be built according to the specifications in the grant? Will it serve as many households as originally projected? One thing is clear: local leaders will continue to advocate for their community.



**Edward Gillim, Community Leader, Sampson County, North Carolina:**

*"It was a community effort, what we did. It took all of us organizing for what the community needed. We had churches organizing buses, and elderly people going up to the county commission meeting every month. It opened up the eyes of a lot of people here. Now they're talking about air and water quality—landfill, pollution, hog waste. Our success with the water opened up the door for that."*

### 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 as key parts of their history and identity. 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, manufacturing, 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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### Environmental Justice Community Action Network (EJCAN)

[EJCAN](#) was founded by a group of [Vermont Law School alumni](#) led by Sherri White-Williamson, who grew up in Sampson County, NC, and had worked on environmental justice issues for many years before attending law school. The group supports residents of rural southeastern North Carolina as they address the environmental justice issues that affect their region, including pollution from industrial-scale hog and poultry farming, wood pellet production, and landfills. Access to safe drinking water is a central issue for residents of this region (see Ivanhoe, profiled above), which hosts hundreds of confined animal feeding operations (CAFOs) and associated manure “lagoons” that can pollute waterways and wells, but data on water quality is hard to come by.

EJCAN has partnered with Appalachian State University to test local well water quality, and initial results show contamination in two to three times as many wells as expected. EJCAN also recognizes that environmental justice affects a community on many levels, including health, economic outcomes, and quality of life, so the group’s work encompasses efforts to advance equitable prosperity in the region, including improving access to broadband, education, and training. Recent EJCAN activities include successfully advocating for the [inclusion of environmental justice considerations in policymaking](#) at the state level in North Carolina.



#### **Sherri White-Williamson, EJCAN:**

*“There’s a clear correlation between health and prosperity — yes, it’s a question of health access, but they’re more intimately connected, too. The few good-paying jobs here are in the very industries that are harmful to residents’ health. Right now, kids go to school, graduate, go to college, and don’t come back. How do you transform a community such that you can offer training for green jobs? The local community college focuses on agriculture, driven by funding from the hog farming industry. We need to have our kids think about entrepreneurship — creating reasons to go back and make their community better.”*

### Rural Community Assistance Corporation (RCAC)

[RCAC](#) helps rural and Indigenous communities across the western US achieve their vision and wellbeing through technical assistance, training, financial resources, and advocacy. As part of the Rural Community Assistance Partnership ([RCAP](#)) network, RCAC has a long history of supporting communities as they address water issues, from system design to ongoing operation and maintenance. RCAC is also a member of Partners for Rural Transformation ([PRT](#)), a national network of Community Development Financial Institutions working in the poorest rural regions of the country.

RCAC staff members like Jacqueline Shirley, a Yupik Tribal member of the Native Village of Hooper Bay (Alaska), bring their expertise and lived experience to supporting communities using a capacity building approach to technical assistance, as well as assisting agencies like the US EPA in developing programming and policies to support rural clean water access. For example, Shirley, a member of EPA’s [National Environmental Justice Advisory Council](#), recently supported a project to assess what needs to be done to meet the [water infrastructure needs](#) of communities across the country.



#### **Jacqueline Shirley, RCAC:**

*“Our team is focusing on transitional assistance rather than transactional assistance. I could go into a community and do their certification. But would it really change anything? Transitional assistance to build capacity takes a long time. You go into where the community is at and slowly start building relationships and trust. To really build capacity and resilience and longevity of a water system to serve a community, it’s sometimes a gnarly mess, and it takes a while.”*

## STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES: SYSTEMIC DISCRIMINATION, LACK OF INFRASTRUCTURE, SCALE, ECONOMIES

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). Communities of color and



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low-wealth places have historically not been provided with the types of water and sanitation infrastructure that are standard in wealthier, whiter communities. This multi-generational lack of investment in infrastructure means that many rural communities and Native nations are starting from scratch when it comes to building water systems, which can be prohibitively expensive.

Compounding the challenge, rural communities typically lack the scale and density that traditional water systems require to be financially self-sustaining. At the same time, basic services like safe drinking water are required for economic and community growth. Communities may find themselves trapped in a vicious cycle in which they cannot afford to build water systems until they grow, but they cannot grow until they can build water systems.

When rural communities and Native nations do undertake the hard work of building systems for clean, safe water, they are often hampered by a lack of invisible infrastructure, like infrastructure for access to data — from current water quality to regional systems and needs — and infrastructure for regional collaboration to address issues of scale.

Where water systems do exist, rural communities and Native nations often lack funding to adequately maintain and upgrade these systems, especially in the face of threats from natural disasters and growing climate risks. To compound matters, decisions about these systems and mitigation are often made by outside agencies without local input and understanding.

Finally, the underlying causes of unsafe water in rural communities and Native nations form a formidable structural barrier. Not only have rural communities of color and low-wealth places not been prioritized for water infrastructure, but these communities are often host to — and economically dependent on — polluting industries that would not be tolerated in wealthier communities with more power.

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

Effective and sustained investment from government, philanthropy, and the private sector is essential to addressing inequitable access to clean, safe drinking water in rural communities and Native nations. Investments must be flexible and responsive to local needs (e.g., covering essential elements like hookup fees where necessary), and grounded in local trust. Communities and funding agencies must work as partners with mutual accountability to each other, and non-rural organizations and leaders must work to understand and prioritize rural contexts and needs.



**Sherri White-Williamson, EJCAN:**

*"Rural economic justice is so different from what everybody understands — we have to do so much education. My fear is by the time people I work with get to explain what it's like, the funds will have evaporated and folks who really need it won't get it. I feel like we've missed some grants because the funders didn't quite get the difference between rural and urban projects."*

Structures for adding capacity to organizations and communities and regional collaboration are also key. Regional [Rural Development Hubs](#) are vital infrastructure for equitable community partnerships with agencies and academic institutions (e.g., for access to data), as well as facilitating regional collaboration and organizing where appropriate.

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 that [build wealth locally](#) to replace damaging industries that contribute to pollution and climate risks will also be essential, given the role of natural disasters and industry in water contamination. Both will require sustained national focus, including an emphasis on the role of and impact on rural communities.



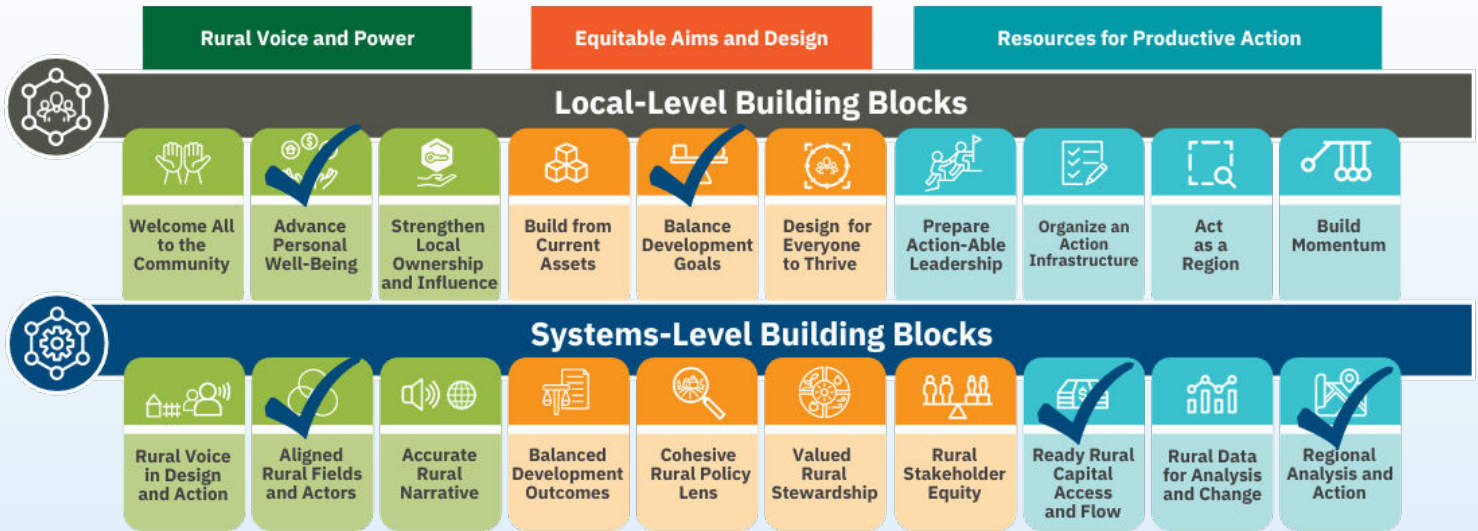
**Jacqueline Shirley, RCAC:**

*"In my traditional Indigenous lands, they're not actually natural disasters, they're human disasters. Mother Earth, she's just doing what she needs to do, she's being insulted and abused. What are we going to do with those water systems [damaged by disasters]—are we going to rebuild them as is? How do we think outside the box on reconstructions? How are we going to construct water systems that are more resilient and can withstand more? How are we going to protect our source of water for all living beings (which include all animals & plants)? How are we going to lessen depletion of water and all its needs to provide to us?"*



# Communities Need Safe Drinking Water: A Rural Environmental Justice Case Study

## ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE IN THE THRIVE RURAL FRAMEWORK



**Foundational Element:** To equitably design, build, and maintain effective clean water systems 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.

Aspen CSG's consultant Rebecca Huenink led the writing process for this case study. We are grateful for her contributions.

*This work was supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the views of the Foundation.*