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# Energy is Iowa's new cash crop

**T**ODAY, 65 million people live in rural America, but 63 million of them do not farm. As a result, 96% of rural income is from nonfarm sources. About 90% of farm-family income comes from nonfarm sources.

These statistics bring light to the fact that rural America needs viable businesses, self-sustaining communities and young families eager to build a future, according to Tom Dorr, USDA's under-secretary for Rural Development.

"This requires a mental shift for policymakers — one that can't be ignored," Dorr said during a presentation in Ames in February. "While farming is and will remain vitally important, and while we intend that American agriculture remain a world leader, the engines of growth in the 21st century rural economy will lie elsewhere."

### Keys to opportunity

Dorr farmed with his family near Marcus in northwest Iowa prior to going to work for USDA in Washington, D.C. He said there are three areas that will shape the future of rural America:

**1. Renewable energy.** U.S. ethanol production this year is expected to exceed 4 billion gallons, approximately 1.6 billion of which will be produced in Iowa. About 1,000 acres yields roughly 200,000 bushels of corn. Sold as a commodity, this corn will provide a farmer with approximately \$400 per acre. However, as ethanol, the same corn could provide around \$1,300 per acre.

Biodiesel production in America has soared from 5 million gallons in 2001 to 25 million last year. Wind energy is also gaining momentum. Estimates suggest that wind can generate at least 6% of U.S. electricity by 2020.

"Renewable energy means investments, good jobs, opportunities for young people and the recirculation



**TIME IS RIGHT:** "Energy from agriculture offers the rural economy its biggest new market in history," says Tom Dorr with USDA's Rural Development.

of capital through rural communities across the nation," said Dorr.

**2. Place.** Place can be defined as peace and quiet, green fields, lower taxes, and lower cost of doing business. It's affordable housing, a big yard for the kids, low crime rates and good schools.

"These things are significant advantages for rural communities," said Dorr. "Rural communities that can provide good jobs, quality health care and good schools are great places to live. Our goal at USDA Rural Development is to assist in the creation of communities where our kids have a future."

**3. Broadband.** This communications technology makes rural communities more competitive now than they have been for decades. By letting people live locally and compete globally, broadband truly leverages place. "Unprecedented in history, people today have real choices about where to live and how to work," Dorr said. "Rural areas have a bright future, and broadband can make it happen." With information flowing across the Internet at the speed of light, broadband is helping small- and mid-sized companies, many in rural areas, compete in a global economy.

Rural communities today do face challenges. However, Dorr believes pursuing such things as place, broadband and renewable energy provide opportunities that far exceed the challenges.

### Rural Development works

USDA's Rural Development Agency has more than 40 programs that last year in Iowa helped create, retain or save nearly 2,600 jobs, assisted 1,250 families in becoming homeowners and provided water services to 3,030 households in 14 rural areas. The programs assisted communities with the purchase or construction of community needs like child-care centers, fire trucks and senior-living facilities.

## Get help with energy-saving projects

**H**ELP is available for farmers interested in renewable energy and energy efficiency improvements.

USDA recently announced \$176.5 million in loan guarantees and almost \$11.4 million in grants available to help ag producers and rural small businesses buy renewable-energy systems and make energy-efficiency improvements.

Eligible projects include installing wind turbines or high-efficiency grain dryers, or making energy-efficiency changes to facilities, like improving insulation or installing automatic lights.

Iowans were very successful in receiving assistance through this program last year, when 37 projects received \$5.7 million in grant funds. This was one quarter of the nation's recipients and 27% of total funds awarded for the year.

Deadline to apply for this year's grants is May 12. Guaranteed loans will be awarded on a continuous basis. To learn more or to get an application, call the Rural Development state office in Des Moines at (515) 284-4663.