

# RCA Awards 2003 - 2004

## ACTION

### REGION 1

#### **Montana Community Development Corporation**

#### **Craig Rawlings, Smallwood Enterprise Agent**

#### **Rosalie Sheehy-Cates, MCDC Executive Director**

#### **Montana**

It's a dream team of winning proportions—pairing vision with expertise, established infrastructure with evolving partnerships. Together, Rosalie Sheehy-Cates, executive director of the Montana Community Development Corporation (MCDC), and Craig Rawlings, smallwood enterprise agent, are a formidable team helping small businesses and communities in western Montana recover from the devastating fire season of 2000. MCDC's attention has focused on reducing wildfire hazard by turning forest thinning activities into marketable products.

Combining business savvy and long-term community experience, Craig and Rosalie have matched up manufacturers, forest owners, technical experts, and marketing and financial specialists to help business owners broaden their horizons. A stud mill will now create flooring from small-diameter Douglas-fir and western larch, adding value and increasing profits; a post-and-pole manufacturer will produce and market engineered roundwood products. Roundwood trusses have been incorporated into kiosks and a new library, plus a state park and a city are using roundwood in the design of pedestrian bridges. Powerful linkages are forming among businesses that might formerly have been competitors. The teamwork engendered by Craig and Rosalie at MCDC has rejuvenated, expanded, or launched a multitude of businesses and linked them to communities and organizations that together are turning hazardous fuels into useful products and transforming potential defeat into a resounding win.

#### **Darby "Fuels for Schools" Team**

#### **Montana**

The wildland-urban interface around the spectacular Bitterroot Valley in Montana encompasses 150,000 acres of forest, much of it in small-diameter timber. A third of it has burned in recent years, and all of it is pressured by rapidly expanding human population. Recent treatments for fire hazard reduction and forest health left plenty of small-diameter material with limited local use—until now. Building on small-scale biomass efforts in Vermont and Sweden, the Darby "Fuels for Schools" project tested the use of chipped slash piles from fuel reduction projects as heating fuel for the Darby school complex. Their unique system adds value and ensures clean burning of material that normally would be openly burned in the woods, while offsetting the usual costs of treating or disposing of hazard fuel reduction materials. A core group of local bankers, loggers and foresters, economic development specialists, county leaders, and Forest Service employees worked to identify options, seek grants, and engage the public. After completion of a collaborative feasibility study, a winter of engineering and design work, and a summer of construction, today the Darby "Fuels for Schools" project is successfully heating the

campus at a savings of nearly 70%. Darby “Fuels for Schools” reflects the determination of “Bitterrooters” to work together to recover from the fires of 2000 and to relegate such extensive and damaging fires to the history books.

### **City of Pekin and Brenda Bjorlie, Community Development Director**

#### **North Dakota**

If ever there was a “Little Community That Could,” it’s Pekin, North Dakota. Once almost entirely defined by their agricultural lifestyle, Pekin lost stores, a school, their tax base, and their economic stability when family farms began to disappear. Sparked by the leadership and commitment of Community Development Director Brenda Bjorlie, determined residents lost no time in crafting a community action plan with the help of the Forest Service’s Economic Recovery program. They identified key development goals focused on their many strengths: using their abundant natural resources for hunting, fishing, and nature enjoyment; helping farmers remarket their land for tourism and new cash crops; and developing Pekin as an arts and culture center. With numerous partnerships they secured grant money to repair deteriorating sidewalks and streets and to improve water and sewer infrastructure. They created an active forestry program involving hundreds of volunteers who take care of the city’s trees and parks. Home occupancy and new businesses have grown in the past decade. The Pekin Days Art Show draws artists and a thousand visitors from a five-state area and a fine arts youth camp gives kids a chance to study and create visual and performance art. This tiny community of fewer than 100 people has been called a model of “the spirit, commitment, and community focus necessary to survive.” Like the Little Engine That Could, Pekin demonstrates what a positive attitude can achieve. Pekin’s community spirit put the wheels in motion and continues to propel the town forward. As they round the top of the hill toward success, there is no doubt that one day Pekin will be able to look back at their efforts and say, “We thought we could, we thought we could, and we did!”

#### **Region 2**

### **Black Hills Resource Conservation and Development District**

#### **South Dakota**

Among the thorniest needs in a small community is for a willing and competent staff to help write grants, navigate the process, win the grant money, and then help execute the proposal on the ground. The Black Hills Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) District has delivered abundant willingness and competence, exemplified by their often astonishing leadership of the Community Fire Recovery Center following the 2002 fires. The center smoothed the path to recovery by giving fire-affected communities a focal point and source of expertise to get the help they needed. The Black Hills RC&D performed in what were called “spectacular” ways—ringing up grant awards that will increase firefighting capability, improve facilities for a crisis intervention center, pay for an airport feasibility study, and install an elevator for the county courthouse, among other projects. Black Hills RC&D staff didn’t do all the heavy lifting but rather helped citizens learn to lift by themselves. They held peoples’ hands throughout the grant-writing process and guided them through to grant implementation, teaching the communities how to engage the government to help get projects done. With resources to protect their physical and social community, people now can expand their vision beyond meeting basic needs and can focus on the future, on growth, and on getting ahead. Word has spread far

and wide about the exceptional leadership and support of the Black Hills RC&D and its extraordinary ability to make a difference in people's lives.

## **REGION 4**

### **Nevada Fire Safe Council**

#### **Nevada**

The numbers tell the tale: from 0 community fire-safe plans to 10; from fewer than 50 community participants to 700; from 0 hazard fuel reduction projects to 13; from \$150,000 in funding to over \$2 million... in just 2 years. Seemingly overnight, the Nevada Fire Safe Council has mobilized and helped hundreds of communities throughout the state proactively reduce their risk from wildfires. Through grassroots support and action, needed infrastructure and critical lines of communication are in place to help reduce fire intensity, slow the rate of spread, and give firefighters a realistic chance to defend vulnerable communities. Owned by its broad coalition of members and organized into an ever-growing network of chapters, the Nevada Fire Safe Council provides education and funds for community fire protection plans and fuels reduction work. The chapters have helped generate a sense of teamwork and a collaborative approach to the reduction of the wildfire threat and protection of communities. An active multi-agency group has spun off to establish a wood waste utilization industry, which will increase the options for disposal of accumulated biomass generated from the fuel reduction work. Thanks to the extraordinary accomplishments of the Nevada Fire Safe Council, innumerable people and communities are better protected from wildfire and better prepared to work together on effective community actions.

## **REGION 6**

### **United Community Partners**

#### **Oregon**

In a remote and ruggedly beautiful corner of eastern Oregon lie rural communities wearing crowns. One crown honors the area's raw beauty and good schools, health care services, safety, and satisfaction. Other crowns convey more dubious titles: the state's oldest and poorest communities. Hard hit by recent social and economic changes, these towns have struggled to sustain a vital economy and maintain community health. United Community Partners (UCP) was formed in 2001 to identify, prioritize, and find funding for community and economic development projects. Representing a coalition of community residents, city officials, government, and local businesses, UCP aims to build a positive, progressing, and inclusive planning and development effort that will result in more livable wage jobs, solid and reliable services and programs, and a healthy and enviable quality of life. UCP has encouraged and nurtured partnerships that have secured funding for wildfire abatement projects, assessed fuels treatment options, studied uses and markets for small-diameter wood products, orchestrated infrastructure improvements, sought funds for an assisted-living facility, paired volunteers with students to help kids meet state educational standards, and facilitated partnerships to shape economic development plans. Thanks to UCP's spirited guidance, the tough and independent people who live here continue to appreciate their stunning place and are optimistic about their future, wearing a spirit of strength that crowns their many achievements with acclaim.

## **BRING Recycling**

### **Oregon**

“Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle” is the mantra, and BRING Recycling is the promoter of this powerful message that is helping people in Lane County, Oregon, make the connection between the things they use and the clean air, water, forests, and wild places they value. As one of the largest non-profit recyclers in the nation, BRING Recycling promotes resource conservation by creating reuse and recycling programs. A people-oriented, hands-on organization, BRING provides education, recycling services, and used building material salvage and sales in support of sustainable community development. With a visionary yet practical approach, BRING’s friendly and accessible employees help people come together around critical environmental issues. While having fun, more than 15,000 homeowners, landowners, tinkerers, contractors, artists, gardeners, and others are learning, becoming aware and changing attitudes and actions. BRING’s exceptional ability to bring innovative visions to reality have led to the growth of a “repair” cottage industry in the local area and to the availability of low-cost materials for lower income rural residents and landlords. BRING’s Planet Improvement Center, in the planning stages, will be just the most visible manifestation of their inspired leadership, as it combines hands-on conservation education with recycling. Without preaching, condescending, or judging, BRING is inspiring rural Oregon to become a part of a profound and promising shift toward sustainable communities.

## **REGION 8**

### **Marion Mathis**

#### **Arkansas**

When the curtain goes up at the Dixie Theater in Mansfield, Arkansas, people will see more than an artistic performance in a renovated historical building. They will also be seeing a theatrical personification of the outstanding behind-the-scene accomplishments of Economic Developer Marion Mathis, whose efforts to involve local citizens in developing their strategic play are bringing tourists and economic success to the city and the region. Marion’s style is to identify and work with local leaders to facilitate the involvement of all members of the community. Marion expands the scope of citizens’ vision by bringing his knowledge, experience, and formidable facilitating and networking skills into play, deftly directing each project from behind while providing hands-on assistance and connections to outside resources. Following Marion’s example, residents have learned to appreciate their commonalities and have developed a greater sense of community. Under his direction, strategic plans are guiding downtown enhancement projects. Over a million dollars in grants have been funneled toward sidewalks, street lamps, benches, trees, and a new senior citizen center, projects that likely would have remained on the back stage without Marion’s persistence and inspiration. When it’s time for the curtain call, Marion Mathis can take a bow for outstanding vision, dedication, and leadership that will continue to lead to solutions for rural development issues and collaborative efforts in rural Arkansas.

## **Marion County Springs Festival**

### **Florida**

Part of what makes Marion County unique is its central role in Florida's natural water system. The county's network of springs, spring-fed rivers, lakes, and swamps contribute to the state's aquatic wealth. Recognizing the importance of protecting the springs, and the importance of education and awareness to the success of protection efforts, an alliance of public and private partners launched the Marion County Springs Festival. The festival aims to increase tourism and promote stewardship for the springs and other natural resources, through fun and interactive activities that teach about the fragile nature of the springs and what people can do to help preserve them. The customer-driven festival has been enthusiastically embraced because it fits in with the community's vision for itself and its desired quality of life. Protection of natural resources has become a primary value for the local community and is part of the mission for local chambers of commerce. Public and private donations have quadrupled in the first three years and commitment has deepened to work together in partnership for the betterment of the community. The event is continuing to grow and to reach more and more people and different communities each year, with a particular focus on children. The Marion County Springs Festival demonstrates how community spirit and hard work can pay off to diversify community dependence on natural resources, reach community goals, and have fun doing it.

## **SPIRIT**

### **REGION 2**

#### **Grand Mesa Scenic and Historic Byway Association**

##### **Colorado**

The Grand Mesa Byway in Colorado is more than just an attractive way to get from here to there. It also is the route where range activities, agricultural endeavors, water management, hunting and fishing, and recreationalists travel and interact across a large and diverse area. The Byway boosts local economies and ties the Forest Service and communities together, but it also poses challenges for year-round economic stability and for effective communication and cooperation among rapidly expanding populations with varying lifestyles and backgrounds. The Grand Mesa Scenic and Historic Byway Association has been persistently making progress toward resource preservation and economic planning for more than a decade, with creativity, initiative, and a strong devotion to the area and its people. Association directors and volunteers have plunged into collaborative problem-solving and planning to achieve their mission—to provide visitors with safe and enjoyable experiences while enhancing, protecting, and preserving natural resources. The flexible and energetic leadership of the Grand Mesa Scenic and Historic Byway Association has generated high levels of commitment from volunteers, local businesses, other local non-profits, county commissioners, and federal agencies. A revised marketing plan is almost done and an interpretive plan revision is complete. Long-tenured and new residents are learning to handle quality-of-life issues effectively – together - while preserving and interpreting the past and current flavor of the small rural communities whose lives and lifestyles are bound by the Byway.

## **REGION 4**

### **Town of Alpine**

#### **Wyoming**

Located at the confluence of two states and two national forests; serving as a gateway to the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem; surrounded by incomparable treasures of wild lands, wild waters, and wildlife; the town of Alpine, Wyoming has it all—including a sudden influx of year-round residents and seasonal visitors. Local officials recognized that effective civic capacity at the ground level was needed to cope with Alpine’s rapid growth and change, as well as to increase their economic viability while serving visitors effectively. Tourism was identified in their strategic plan as the centerpiece of development opportunities, and the Confluence Information Center (CIC) arose as a key way to bring tourism and economic planning to life. Built through a collaboration of agencies and organizations, the CIC is bringing residents together to enjoy wildlands-related festivals, offer stewardship opportunities to youth, discuss alternative and sustainable enterprises, and capture funding and support for projects and programs. Not only does the Center offer a way to reach out to visitors, but it has also opened the doors of awareness and communication, trust and engagement for the people of this cash-poor but idea-rich local community. The Confluence Information Center opened the spring of 2004, welcoming visitors and residents alike with interesting and important messages and opportunities for enjoying, living in, and making a living in the vibrant community of Alpine.

## **REGION 6**

### **Town of Morton**

#### **Washington**

The logger’s pole is up, storefronts are full, and the tourist train is pulling into the renovated station. The Town of Morton, Washington, is excited and empowered after extraordinary collective efforts to create a brighter outlook for this formerly timber-dependent rural community. When mills closed in the 1990s, solid family-wage jobs disappeared, and hard economic times were reflected in vacant storefront windows. Yet with cooperation and persistence, Morton has struggled successfully to find an economic niche. Through partnerships and community action, informed community leaders have embraced a balanced approach that captures benefits from passing traffic while focusing on and protecting the area’s natural resource wonders. Forest Service funding, technical assistance, and collaborative approaches helped launch efforts to revitalize existing community resources, preserve the history and character of the town, and encourage an attractive mix of uses while retaining the special small-town character. A logger’s pole—a gift from the utility district, adorned by a metal “logger” donated by a skilled metal fabricator—greet visitors at the town’s entry façade. Youth programs are flourishing; new businesses have opened; the hospital is being modernized; and integrated project planning is underway with other highway corridor communities. After nearly a decade, the Mt. Rainier Scenic Railroad will return to Morton, and the early 20th century railroad depot will soon move to a new location downtown. This year the town is hosting “History in Motion,” an event that will highlight not only the historic railroad depot but also the outstanding spirit and commitment of a community that refuses to sit still.

## **LEADERSHIP**

## **REGION 1**

### **George Currier**

#### **Idaho**

The small Idaho community of St. Maries knew they needed to diversify their economy from a primarily timber-based focus. They also knew they would need to find ways to better work together if they were to revitalize their declining downtown area, improve infrastructure, enhance local citizens' appreciation of their area, improve safety for their kids, and develop a new focus on tourism. Leading the way was George Currier, executive director of the Timber Plus/Greater St. Joe Development Foundation, who communicated, coordinated, and even coerced cooperation, and participation at all levels. George dedicated countless hours to securing agreements among disparate groups to reconfigure local parks, build a retaining wall, extend sidewalks and curbs, construct a picnic pavilion and kiosks, and install historical signage. Recognizing the importance of maintaining momentum and generating an aura of success, George used small celebrations and articles in the local newspaper to promote the projects and engage and reward the community. As a result of George Currier's outstanding leadership, communications among many community factions have been strengthened, renovations are in place, and the community is looking toward new projects. Timber Plus is actively recruiting businesses to the area, emphasizing value-added materials, recreation and tourism, and technology transfer. This community has risen to the challenge and needs no more coaxing to collaborate and thrive.

## **REGION 3**

### **Herb Hopper**

#### **Arizona**

Herb Hopper's plainspoken, polite, and straightforward style belies his steely, Marine-made leadership skills and work ethic. In just a few years as project director of the Little Colorado Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) area, Herb has launched and carried out a passionate campaign to engage the public in Arizona and New Mexico in building community capacity and solving complex forest health problems. Herb has nurtured effective partnerships among the forest products industry, tribes, government agencies, and community members. With calm, logic, and enthusiasm, he brings all voices to the table to help build bridges and achieve consensus on achieving mutual goals. Under Herb's leadership, the RC&D has enhanced its already exemplary program of grant-writing workshops, provided opportunities to expand forest restoration work, increased access to small business capital, and provided technical assistance in the development of innovative new industries to use and market value-added products from small-diameter trees. Because of Herb's inspired guidance and the trust it fosters, issues are being addressed and communities are becoming energized and are more able to respond effectively to change. Individuals and businesses are increasing their economic viability and state governments in two states are working together more effectively to address forest and rural community health needs. The superb leadership of Herb Hopper truly personifies the RC&D's motto, "Making Things Happen."

## **REGION 4**

### **Tom Baker and the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest**

#### **Nevada**

On one particular day in the near future, all the mayors of all the cities of Nevada, along with the governor, will plant a tree. This small gesture will be a big public example of the extraordinary leadership exhibited by the Humboldt-Toiyabe (H-T) National Forest in promoting and delivering rural community assistance programs in a state where federal land management agencies are, at best, unpopular. Under the direction of Forest Supervisor Bob Vaught and Capitol City/State and Private Forestry Program Coordinator Tom Baker, the H-T gradually has developed and strengthened numerous partnerships to help communities with economic development, small-wood utilization, and quality-of-life activities. Working closely with Nevada state and county agencies, the H-T has funded and helped develop projects such as the Plant Materials Center, which will address ecological functions and values in arid environments. Opportunities to use biomass removed from public and private lands are the focus of a multi-agency partnership. Collaborative efforts with the Nevada Fire Safe Council are mobilizing and assisting communities to reduce risk from wildfires. The bold leadership provided by the H-T has resulted in unique and flexible financial and technical support that helps natural resource-based businesses and rural communities learn and grow, like the small trees that will be planted soon as part of the project inspired by the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest.

## **REGION 5**

### **Plumas Fire Safe Council**

#### **California**

It's often said that "no news is good news," particularly in Plumas County, California, where the news often is ominous when it's related to wildfires. The Plumas County Fire Safe Council took the lead in 1998 to focus attention on fire safety and awareness, when it launched an annual "Firewise" newspaper. Boosted by increased funding in 2001 but facing a hurdle to coordinate activities across private and public lands, the Council expanded its board of directors to include fire and planning specialists from the state department of forestry, the Forest Service, county planning; volunteer fire chiefs; registered foresters; and other citizens. The Fire Safe Council's dedication and commitment to partnerships and communication have led to unique projects to reduce the loss of natural and human-made resources caused by wildfire. Today 11 community-level fuels reduction projects - totaling 1,400 acres - are funded and underway. Defensible space has been created around 15 individual homes of elderly or handicapped people, with 60 more similar projects in the works to help those unable to do the necessary work themselves. Rigorous county-wide educational and informational activities are working well in 13 communities. The culmination of the council's guidance to date is a county-wide strategy and fuels reduction program that defines the wildfire threat and maps upcoming fuels reduction projects. Thanks to the significant and determined leadership of the Plumas Fire Council, for the first time all the stakeholders are working together to leverage federal money with private dollars and reduce the risk of catastrophic wildland fire. Success will be theirs, they say, when you DON'T hear about Plumas County burning to the ground on the 6 o'clock news.

## **REGION 6**

### **Jeff Ranger – Administrator - Town of Naches**

#### **Washington**

Sometimes a single individual can make the difference between a community's declining or prospering. For the revitalized town of Naches, Washington, that difference was made by town administrator Jeff Ranger. Jeff's tireless efforts and openness to possibilities have united the community and forged partnerships that are helping the town recover from declines in the forest and agriculture industries. His actions and leadership style completely turned around the community's disinterest in Forest Service-supported local action planning; thanks to Jeff, Naches went from overwhelmed by the thought of community-based planning to energized and actively engaged via a grant and Agency cooperation. Jeff's leadership characteristics have been listed by admiring partners: honest, fair-minded, dependable, capable, and determined. His vision and foresight, "unbelievable degree of integrity," strong work ethic, and intelligence have been brought to bear on numerous projects, such as the depot and trail project in which a tourism center will serve as an anchor for the scenic byways that skirt the town. Jeff has been instrumental in water and sewer improvements, beautification of the town hall, lighting projects, new public tennis court acquisitions, sidewalk replacements, and comprehensive plan updates. Thanks to his vision and skills, businesses, agencies, foundations, clubs, elected officials, and individuals have embraced community action planning and are donating time and resources to work together toward a positive future. The challenges ahead are daunting but the town of Naches is better prepared for that test thanks to Jeff Ranger's inspirational leadership. His efforts have made a tremendous difference in providing local leaders direction, opportunity, and optimism for the future.

## **REGION 8**

### **Jerome Thomas and Stephanie Neal Johnson – Francis Marion and Sumter NF**

#### **South Carolina**

Working together on projects can be fun, especially under the spirited leadership of Forest Supervisor Jerome Thomas and Public Affairs Officer Stephanie Neal Johnson of the Francis Marion and Sumter National Forests. Jerome and Stephanie have provided integrated natural resource and local development services to nearly 50 eligible communities, tribes, and organizations that have been wrestling for decades with social, economic, and environmental problems. These dynamic leaders empower their staffs to work closely with communities and foster strong working relationships with other agencies. Jerome and Stephanie help people learn to organize, plan, solve problems, strengthen their local economies, manage change, and effectively engage in land stewardship. They have inspired those who have felt hopeless and they have fostered a spirit of working together through relationship building, shared services, and community engagement. Projects are far-ranging—from increasing adult basic skills, offering outdoor classes, and making trails improvements, to helping with strategic and feasibility plans and studies, leadership training, acquiring technology, creating an informative Web site, and even producing a play that brought the arts and natural resource issues to light. Jerome and Stephanie have made a concentrated effort to link national forest and community planning, especially in the areas of recreational resources and tourism, watershed restoration, and forest products. Thanks to the outstanding guidance and leadership of Jerome Thomas and Stephanie

Neal Johnson, rural communities across South Carolina have developed diverse natural resource solutions to their economic, environmental, and social problems.

## **Jim Brigance**

### **Arkansas**

Local foresters in Arkansas often work directly with individual landowners, but Jim Brigance takes action in a bigger landscape. Jim works with whole communities and organizations to increase the general level of economic activity, enhance the condition of the local environment, and raise the overall living standard in the area. Under Jim's widely admired leadership as coordinator for rural development programs, the Arkansas Forestry Commission works with partners to nurture grass roots leadership. Jim's outstanding ability to get people working together, combined with his experience and knowledge about community development, have been instrumental in funneling resources and funding into rural areas and communities of greatest need. Whether it's organizing conferences and workshops, conducting leadership training, developing community action plans, operating educational programs, or simply printing brochures, Jim brings technical skills into the planning process and links partners in ways that leverage funding, increase cooperation, and stimulate an abundance of good ideas. By weaving together the cultural, geographical, and economic components of rural community assistance, Jim Brigance's outstanding leadership and commitment have resulted in increased fire protection in rural areas, improved quality of life for local residents, new jobs and businesses, and a heightened awareness of natural resource issues and solutions for rural Arkansas.

## **Bennie Hutchins**

### **Mississippi**

In 1991 Bennie Hutchins conceived the idea of having a national timber bridge design competition for university engineering and forest products students. That year, 8 teams competed. In 2004, more than 125 teams of some 1,500 future engineers from 39 universities vied for the prizes and prestige of designing the best timber bridges in the nation. In coordination with Mississippi State University, the Forest Service, and others, Bennie led the Southwest Mississippi Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) Council to find timber bridge solutions to transportation system problems, by stimulating synergistic creativity among communities, academics, and industry practitioners. His innovative leadership has raised awareness that these beautiful, cost-effective, and relatively easily-installed bridges can boost rural economies through value added to a local, renewable natural resource and through improved access to goods and services. On the heels of the huge success of the collaborative efforts of the competition, the RC&D has expanded into other partnerships to write or administer grants for a host of projects including firewise programs, hazardous fuel reduction enterprises, arts-related regional plans, alternative water supplies, environmental adventure booklets for elementary schools, and, of course, construction of timber bridges. Bennie's success with the timber bridge competition has led the way for forest products companies to expand and provide new jobs and products in rural Mississippi.

## **Alan Pigg**

### **Southern Region**

He's a preacher, a teacher, a cheerleader. He's an expert, an organizer, and the "ultimate networker." But above all, Alan Pigg is a leader. The Forest Service's Rural Community Assistance (RCA) regional program manager for the Southern Region since its inception, Alan has demonstrated vision, perseverance, wit, wisdom, unflagging energy, enthusiasm, good humor, and southern rural charm in ensuring that RCA programs truly make a difference in communities across 13 southern states. Through a mixture of advocacy, education, capacity-building, leadership development, and direct community assistance, Alan has engaged people of all ages, classes, and races to help communities plan, implement, and evaluate natural resource-based development. His quiet leadership style and inherent understanding of how rural communities work have helped temper long-term mistrust of the Forest Service and each other, as well as enable people to focus on building the ability to overcome severe and persistent poverty. Alan encourages and inspires rural communities to connect with other partners, leverage Forest Service resources, and reach out to garner donations and investments. He gets people excited and helps them see the possibilities - he encourages them along the way and helps them if they stumble - and then he waits at the finish line and cheers them across. As a result, jobs are being created, young people are receiving training, senior citizens are sharing natural resource-based knowledge and traditions, businesses are starting, local programs are working, and people are feeling a renewed sense of hope. Grassroots leaders of all ages have learned new skills. Alan's highly respected leadership has single-handedly helped communities believe in themselves enough to begin reversing generations of economic distress. While many problems will likely take generations to resolve, the rural South today is a better place because of Alan Pigg's incomparable leadership.

## **SPECIAL AWARDS**

### **INTERAGENCY COORDINATION**

#### **Region 1**

#### **North Dakota Economic Action Interagency Team**

##### **North Dakota**

It takes foresight and confidence to relinquish independence and recognize the possibilities offered by joint management, accountability, and success. The managers of the Dakota Prairie Grasslands and the North Dakota State Forester's office exhibited those leadership qualities when they created a unique Memorandum of Understanding and Program of Work in 2001 to accomplish jointly what neither could easily accomplish alone: delivery of effective economic recovery programs to forest- and grassland-dependent rural communities and residents. Joined since then by the State's Department of Commerce, the North Dakota Economic Action Interagency Team has leveraged existing resources and communication channels to deliver programs, develop training and education activities, and build support from the bottom up. More than half a million dollars in project and planning grants have been awarded by the team in its first few years and the joint delivery of programs now provides "one-stop shopping" for the

public. Application processes have been simplified, opportunities for more direct technical assistance have increased, and the integration of various agency programs has resulted in more substantial accomplishments in local communities. The outstanding coordination exhibited by the Interagency Team has resulted in improved service to these rural communities based on their needs and has heightened local abilities to develop sustainable natural resource-based strategies that will work for all.

## **OUTREACH and CULTURAL HERITAGE**

### **Region 8**

#### **Mississippi Cultural Crossroads**

##### **Mississippi**

In an economically challenged rural county in southwest Mississippi, some young women are defying the odds. They are creating educational, cultural, and economic opportunities while maintaining their traditional heritage, through participation in the Folk Quilters Program. Operated by Mississippi Cultural Crossroads (MCC), the community-based apprenticeship program in the small town of Port Gibson trains local craftspeople in the skill of quilt making and celebrates the distinctive African-American quilting aesthetic of the region. By working together to explore their artistic and cultural heritages in a common setting, the once-estranged multi-racial population has found keen interest and respect for each other and their work. With enthusiastic help from many partners, the quilters have revived and elevated a once-dying tradition and turned it into a cottage industry that provides supplemental income and teaches job skills. Beyond the exquisite quilts—which hang in museums and galleries and attract tourists from all over the world—the program has helped overcome the prejudice and fear that had clouded citizens’ visions of their community and its accomplishments. Planning, partnering, creating jobs, training, learning, and sewing together have boosted self-esteem and given this community a substantially improved capacity to deal with recurring social, economic, and environmental concerns. MCC’s recognition and support of the talents, needs, realities, and visions of this community are helping Port Gibson neighbors stitch together educational and economic opportunities for all.