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*Regional Application*

2016

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## Stronger Economies Together

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**About the Stronger Economies Together (SET) Program:** In many counties, especially those with smaller populations, finding ways to create, attract, and retain jobs is a challenging process. Pursuing economic development as a single rural county in isolation from other nearby counties is oftentimes unproductive. In today's global marketplace, economic development improvements are more likely to be realized when rural and metro counties work together as a multi-county region to assess, design, and implement plans that build on their assets and comparative economic strengths. That is what the Stronger Economies Together (SET) is all about.

**Purpose:** The purpose of SET is to strengthen the capacity of communities/counties in rural America to work together to develop and implement an economic development blueprint for their multi-county region, one that strategically builds on the region's current and emerging economic strengths.

**Project Partners:** Stronger Economies Together is a partnership among the Cooperative Extension Service, USDA Rural Development, the four Regional Rural Development Centers with leadership from the Southern Rural Development Center, USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA), and the Purdue Center for Regional Development

**Eligible States/Regions:** Regions located in the following states are invited to take part in Phase VI of the SET program:

Delaware/Maryland

New Mexico

Texas

Indiana

North Carolina

Wisconsin

Michigan

South Carolina

Missouri

South Dakota

**What Types of Regions Are the Most Likely to Benefit from SET?** Regions have entered the SET program from a variety of starting points. Some regional groups are newly formed, while others have been in place for an extended period of time. While SET is particularly appropriate for newly forming regions, it can also be helpful for more established regions that are interested in updating or rewriting existing plans, such as a Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS). Successful SET regions share five important features and as such, regional team members are urged to fully embrace the following attributes:

- Recognition that regional strategies represent a key part of the overall economic development blueprint for the region's small communities, cities, and counties;
- Openness to exploring economic activities that focus on strengthening a core of existing or emerging economic clusters that can expand the economic vitality of the region ;
- Commitment to gathering inputs and insights from a large diverse set of institutions and people when determining the region's goals and plans, going well beyond a reliance on economic development professionals and elected officials;

- Willingness to take a fresh look at where the region is, where it wants to go, and the best way to get there;
- Commitment to devote significant time and energy needed (a) to actively participate and work through all SET planning materials as a regional team; and (b) to use this process to develop a High Quality regional economic development Plan (HQP) that is developed and implemented by the regional team.

### The SET Process – Three Important Components:

- **Planning Process: A Key Component of the SET Program:** The SET program includes a civic forum, plus a set of modules tailored to each region’s particular needs. The discussion and application of the modules are facilitated with each regional team on a face-to-face basis. State Resource Teams, made up of representatives of your state’s land-grant university-based Extension Service, state USDA Rural Development staff, and other key partners, will coach the SET planning process and serve as resource persons to your team. Approximately 20+ hours of active facilitated planning will be provided to each regional team over the course of several months. Selected regional teams are expected to actively participate in the entire process. More information about the stages of the process is available at: [http://srdc.msstate.edu/set/files/set\\_overview.pdf](http://srdc.msstate.edu/set/files/set_overview.pdf).
- **The High Quality Plan: A Critical Component of the SET Program:** The SET planning process is a means to an end. The end, of course, is a region with a stronger economy. Regions that join SET are required to develop and implement a High Quality Plan (HQP). The attributes of a HQP is available here: [http://srdc.msstate.edu/set/high\\_quality\\_ed\\_plan.html](http://srdc.msstate.edu/set/high_quality_ed_plan.html). Creation of a HQP positions the region to implement a sound plan that contributes to a stronger economy.
- **Technical Assistance to Begin Implementing the Plan Available to Regional Teams:** In addition to facilitating the SET process, the State Coaching Team will provide in the range of 20 to 40 hours of technical assistance to your regional team for a period of 6-12 months once your team has completed its SET planning process. By technical assistance we mean that Extension educators and USDA RD State staff will assist your team in securing the type of information (e.g., data, expertise, advice), or to provide facilitation or additional coaching on a topic, if needed, to guide your regional team as you begin to implement your High Quality Plan (HQP). This includes securing the help of university colleagues or USDA RD state staff members who may have the background/expertise needed by your team.

### Major Benefits to Successful Applicants:

Each selected region will receive many important benefits including:

- **Coaching** on the core building blocks that will serve as the foundation for developing and launching your region’s HQP.
- **In-depth data** that are tailored to your region, information that helps delineate the critical drivers of your economy (including the presence or emergence of regional clusters).
- **Tools that uncover local assets and resources** that can be tapped to advance your region’s economic strategies and actions.
- **Technical assistance** from Extension educators and USDA RD State staff to guide your regional team as it begins to implement its HQP.

**Definition of “Region” and the Rural Requirement:** Each region must encompass three or more contiguous counties and the total population and/or geographic area of the region must meet one of the following requirements: (1) at least 51% rural in nature; OR (2) 75% of the region’s land area is located in rural areas of that region. Regions may cross state boundaries as long as the counties that make up that multi-state region meet the rural requirement.

For purposes of this application, rural refers to counties that are classified as nonmetropolitan areas by the Office of Management and Budget. Nonmetropolitan areas can be either micropolitan or noncore counties. This information can be downloaded from the following SRDC web site:

<http://srdc.msstate.edu/set/definitionrural.html>

**Priority Points for High and/or Persistent Poverty:** Priority points will be given to regions that include at least one county with high and/or persistent poverty as defined below. Evidence must be included within the application indicating that the priority county(ies) are ready to take an active role.

- **Definitions:**
  - High Poverty: at least 20% of the county residents are living in poverty
  - Persistent Poverty: 20% or more of the county's population has been living in poverty over the last 30 years
- **Data** for both high poverty and persistent poverty are available on the county level through this Economic Research Services (ERS) data site:
  - <http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/atlas-of-rural-and-small-town-america/go-to-the-atlas.aspx>
  - Click on "Select Map to Display" above the map on the left.
    - To find Persistent Poverty Counties: Select "County Classifications" then "Persistent poverty counties, 2013"
    - To find High Poverty counties: Select "Income", then "Poverty Rate, 2013"
  - For either map, you can zoom into the state by clicking on the pull-down menu "State Zoom" on the right side above the map.

**Deadline Date for Applications:** Applications are due electronically no later than April 15, 2016 by 11:59 p.m. local time. Please submit your application to: Rebekka Dudensing. You will receive an acknowledgement of your application within two business days. We urge all applicants to contact us immediately if they have not received an acknowledgement within this time period.

All applications will be carefully studied by the State Resource Team representing the state's USDA RD office, Cooperative Extension Service, and other key community/economic development organizations or agencies in your state. The State Resource Team may contact applicants in order to conduct site visits and a tour with representatives of your group. Once the State Resource Team has completed its evaluation of all SET applicants, it will submit its recommendations to the national USDA RD office. Key representatives from USDA RD, the Regional Rural Development Centers and the Purdue Center for Regional Development will review the national pool of finalists. The national USDA RD Office will make the final decision regarding regions in each of the target states that will be invited to be part of the SET program. This announcement is expected to take place in summer 2016.

If you have any questions, please contact:

**Rebekka Dudensing**  
Texas A&M University  
2124 TAMU  
College Station, TX 77843  
[rmdudensing@tamu.edu](mailto:rmdudensing@tamu.edu)  
979-845-1719

## How Proposals Will Be Scored

All proposals will be scored on a **200 points basis**. The following details the maximum amount of points associated with each component of the SET application. Please note that in addition to the scores associated with each SET application, USDA RD will be looking for other key elements in the selection process, such as regions with: (a) a different mix of recent regional work history; (b) varying levels of rurality; (c) different economic characteristics; (d) crossing state lines; (e) varying levels of social and demographic features (i.e., high poverty, population migration patterns, and racial/ethnic changes). These additional elements are intended to ensure that a good mix of regions is part of the SET program.

Please note that incomplete proposals will not be scored.

	<u>Maximum Points Possible</u>
Description provided of your economic region (Part B)	15
Description of history of working together (Part C)	15
Discussion of challenges of pursuing a regional plan (Part D)	50
Discussion of the region's interest in the SET initiative (Part E)	50
Diversity of people/organizations that have committed to be on your SET team (Part F)	50
Priority Points: High or Persistent Poverty	20
<b>TOTAL POINTS</b>	<b>200</b>



Stronger Economies Together

APPLICATION FORM

Stronger Economies Together Program

TX
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Deadline for Applications: April 15, 2016; 11:59 p.m. Local Time

Please Complete All Sections of the Application Form

**Part A: Information about Your Regional Team**

a. Name of your Regional Team (if none has been decided yet, just provide a name that best describes the geographic area of your regional group).

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**NOTE:** For purposes of this application, a region is defined as an area that encompasses three or more counties that are contiguous to one another. It is acceptable for your region to cross state boundaries.

b. What counties are included in your region? \_\_\_\_\_

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c. Main contact person for your regional team: \_\_\_\_\_

d. Email address: \_\_\_\_\_

*Please indicate whether:*  
 Business OR  Personal

e. Telephone number: \_\_\_\_\_

Business OR  Personal

f. Mailing address: \_\_\_\_\_

Business OR  Personal

g. Please place an "X" by the ONE statement that best describes your regional team.

**Our regional team:**

- Is brand new and has been organized for the purpose of applying for the SET program
- Has been organized for more than one year, but is inactive and/or in need of help to get back on track
- Is less than one year old and is still trying to get off the ground in developing a sound regional economic development plan
- Has been in place for one year or more and has developed OR is pursuing an effective regional economic development plan. The group is open to reconsidering all aspects of the plan

## Part B: Brief Economic Description of Your Region (250 word limit)

Present an overview of why the proposed area is an economic region and the sectors that represent key drivers of your economy. Here are the types of information you might include in your description:

- **Economic region:** Is this region an economic region? For instance, what evidence do you have that the counties in your region, taken together, constitute an economic region (or an emerging economic region)?
- **Key sectors that make up your economy and the current health of these sectors:** In general, tell us about how the economy of your region is doing and why. Are your key industry sectors stable, expanding, declining, or mixed in terms of their performance?

**Part C: History of Working Together in the Region (250 word limit)**

Please describe your regional team’s past history of working together on economic development issues. What have been your successes, if any? What have been your challenges or barriers, if any? Please describe any previous planning efforts among the regional team members including dates and counties involved. Please note that points are not awarded for the volume of your past history, since SET is ideal for new groups. Rather, points are awarded for the completeness and clarity of the description.

**Part D: Challenges of Pursuing a Regional Economic Development Plan (250 word limit)**

In Part C, you discussed the history of working together across your region. In this part, please focus on the future and, specifically, what you anticipate will be some of the key challenges that your team will face as it seeks to develop and launch a regional economic development plan. Please address how you may resolve these issues. For instance, consider potential challenges related to:

- A. Recruiting a large and diverse regional team that will work together through the entire planning process
- B. Developing a regional mindset
- C. Implementing the plan
- D. Committing the time required to be part in SET
- E. Other key challenges your region believes it may encounter



**Part E: Interest in the SET Initiative (400 word limit)**

1. Explain why your regional team would like to be part of the SET program. What are the primary factors influencing your interest in SET right now?
2. Who has expressed interest and why?
3. What do you hope/expect will happen in your region due to your participation in SET?

**Part F: Current Members of Your Regional Team and Commitment Letters**

Please provide the names of the individuals and their respective organization/agency affiliations that have agreed to be part of your regional team. More effective regional teams include representation from many sectors. Applications with broad representation will score higher. ALSO, a **signed commitment letter** from each person on your team that states that he/she has agreed **(1) to actively participate** in the SET planning process and **(2) to honor the commitments** stated below must be included with this application.

Name of Regional Team Member	Primary Organization/Agency the Person Represents	Have Commitment Letter from this Person?
		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No

(Feel free to attach a separate sheet if needed to add more Regional Team members)

**Commitments:** Success of SET depends on the commitment of all regional team members to the following:

- Recognition that regional strategies represent a key part of the overall economic development blueprint for the region’s small communities, cities, and counties;
- Openness to exploring economic activities that will focus on strengthening a handful of key existing or emerging economic clusters in the region;
- Commitment to gathering inputs and insights from a large diverse set of institutions and people when determining the region’s goals and plans;
- Willingness to take a fresh look at where the region is, where it wants to go, and the best way to get there;
- Commitment to devoting the significant time and energy needed a) to actively participate and work through the entire SET planning process as a regional team; and b) to use this process as the foundation for a High Quality regional economic development Plan that is developed and implemented by the regional team.