

Prairie PONDERings

North Dakota
Natural Resources Trust

Program Provides Invaluable Lessons for North Dakota's Rural Leaders

By **Angela Magstadt**

Are great leaders born or made? It's a question that has been pondered for centuries. But whether people are born with qualities that naturally make them leaders or work hard to become that way, North Dakota can benefit greatly from a few good leaders to pave its way from the past to the future.

It is no secret that rural North Dakota has seen great population shifts from rural to urban communities over the past several decades, but thanks to select members of small communities across the state, these communities are not only surviving, but thriving.

What is RLND?

Rural Leadership North Dakota (RLND) is a program that was created by the NDSU Extension Service in 2003 to develop the leaders necessary to strengthen the state's rural communities. RLND has four goals:

- To create a network between participants and alumni of the program.
- To increase participants' skills, and help them to better understand the theory of leadership, which is to model the way, encourage others, enable others to act and take leadership roles, challenge the process (ask hard questions), and have vision.
- To improve the quality of life for participants and their communities.
- To give back. This is done through community projects and service.

RLND meets five times each year for two years at various locations across the state. There are always two sessions in Bismarck – orientation

and one focused on legislative policy during the legislative session; one in Fargo, focusing on issues such as research at NDSU; and the others are held at locations from which participants are located. There are also two sessions held out-of-state – one is in Washington, D.C., to learn about national issues such as federal government policy making and the functions of national organizations such as national commodity growers associations and the United States Department of Agriculture. The other out-of-state meeting is held in the Winnipeg area to examine international issues such as trade, the Canadian government, and water issues between Canada and the United States.

Benefits of the Program

"The different programs presented as part of RLND give participants excellent skills to take back to their



This photo shows a RLND class visiting the Winnipeg Floodway in Canada. Steve Topping (pictured standing in front), the executive director of the Manitoba Water Stewardship Program, explains how water from the Red River is diverted.

communities,” says Marie Hvidsten, program director for RLND. “The programs help the students move projects ahead that they otherwise might not have followed through with, and teach them how to get things done, such as communicating with the media or dealing with issues that can divide a community.”

“RLND is definitely improving my leadership skills,” says current RLND participant Chet Hill, NDSU Extension Service ag diversification specialist. “It is teaching me how to better deal with situations in team settings and improve my conflict management and public speaking skills.”

Hill says that while not many of RLND’s participants have been farmers or ranchers, other states with similar programs are just the opposite – 80 to 90 percent is made up of agricultural producers. “We’re working to get the word out about this program – especially to the people who work the land,” Hvidsten says.

April Jepson is the economic development director with the Dunn County Jobs Development Authority and ranches with her husband near Killdeer. A past participant of RLND, she says it would be a great experience for producers and those who are on water or ag-related boards. She says producers can especially benefit from the parts of the program that deal with the legislative process, which gives participants firsthand knowledge of how the process works and the challenges and issues that come before the legislature, issues that oftentimes affect farmers and ranchers.

“The trip to the legislature in Bismarck helps people see the impact they truly have on the process, whether they are testifying or just there to be counted for a specific measure,” Jepson says. “And the Washington, D.C., study tour is also very beneficial, especially from a networking standpoint. Participants get to meet people at the top of

the totem pole and have one-on-one meetings with them – that’s an opportunity most producers don’t get. It puts faces with names. After meeting face-to-face, these people know who to call or e-mail when they have an issue. And, if those people can’t help, they can usually put them in contact with someone who can. This type of networking is invaluable in agriculture or any other profession.”

Natural resource concerns part of program

Because natural resources are such a big part of rural North Dakota communities, RLND discusses them at length in several of its sessions. Water is discussed heavily during the study tour of Canada because of the extensive water issues that exist between the two countries.

Another session describes the seven capitals of a community, listing natural resources as one of the key elements of a healthy community. “In this session, we examine what natural resources exist in the community we’re currently in, and how they contribute to the overall health of the community,” Hvidsten says. “If we’re in Williston, we talk about Lake Sakakawea, the beauty of the area’s geography, hunting, fishing, and other natural attributes. We then discuss the natural resources that exist in the participants’ communities and how we can start conversations about them and what they contribute to the quality of life in these areas.”

“Jobs and economic development are covered extensively in the RLND program, and they are things we should all be concerned about,” says Keith Trego, a RLND council member and the executive director of the North Dakota Natural Resources Trust. “However, another important issue to consider is the conservation of our natural resources. The landscape, wildlife, and resources such as native grass and water are all reasons most of us



RLND’s second class visited Antelope Valley Station near Beulah to learn about coal and how it is mined.

live here. They create a quality of life that is unsurpassed anywhere else in the country and are a big part of the legacy we want to leave for future generations. I encourage all of our current and future leaders who participate in the program to advocate for a balance between development and protection of our natural resources.”

Trego stresses that the values expressed by future leaders will influence important public policy decisions. “I hope the leaders exposed to the RLND program will develop the skills and vision to think ‘big picture’ and ‘long term’ in their leadership roles as they help shape the future of our great state,” he says.

How can one join?

There is significant interest in the RLND program, but there is still room for additional participants. The 2011-2013 class will begin in October 2011, with applications due by July 1, 2011.

Tuition is \$3,000, but is often paid by participants’ employers or organization to which they belong. Scholarships may be available for those who need them. For more information, visit the RNLND website at www.ag.ndsu.edu/rlnd or contact Hvidsten at 701-231-5803 or e-mail marie.hvidsten@ndsu.edu.



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