February 15, 2002

More Site Visits from National Rural Funders Collaborative!

Dear Friends and Colleagues:

According to the official website www.groundhog.org, Punxsutawney Phil did in fact see his shadow on February 2, 2002! While I am not sure what, exactly, that means for any of us for the next six weeks, I am happy to report that NRFC finished the last of its site visits two days earlier. The unusually mild winter prior to Phil's prediction this year was a big help, considering that the last 14 of the 20 visits were all made in the month of January.

As we promised in our January 6 epiphanal letter (see "Happy New Year's from NRFC" on our website at www.nrfc.org), we are adding a brief snapshot of these 14 visits to the earlier six completed before the end of 2001. Although we are still roughly a month away from our final selections, you will see that the entire 20 represent a formidable corpus of work in rural areas nationwide - with some common issues and approaches beginning to bubble to the surface:

West by Southwest: Expanding Access to Business Credit, Economic Opportunity & Homeownership
Rural communities and unincorporated areas throughout the West and Southwest have for decades struggled to overcome the vast expanses that have separated them from economic opportunity. The emergence and maturation of competent community institutions capable of serving as regional intermediaries - community development corporations; community development financial institutions and community foundations - have measurably increased access to needed resources:

- In New Mexico and Texas, ACCION New Mexico and ACCION Texas, two nontraditional lenders have joined forces to extend credit to businesses in rural areas of both states. Together they are working to provide needed capital to rural entrepreneurs as a means of economic development for distressed rural counties and communities.
- Statewide in New Mexico, the New Mexico Community Foundation and the New Mexico Community Development Loan Fund are stepping out of their traditional roles as grantmaker and lender, respectively, and are now developing strategies for providing new forms of equity and venture capital, as well as customized programs of technical assistance and management support, to emerging community-based industries - e.g., a weavers' collaborative of indigenous women; a small reservation-owned buffalo ranch within the Picuris Pueblo; the development of wood pellets as alternative fuel derived from otherwise wasted small-diameter wood from New Mexican forests.
- The Montana Homeownership Network is extending homeownership opportunities beyond the state's urban areas in order to reach small and remote rural communities that otherwise lack affordable housing for families who live and work there. Neighborhood Housing Services of Great Falls, in partnership with the state housing agency, National Resource Conservation Service, and Fannie Mae are collaborating on this expansive rural housing initiative.