

What is Rural?

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Commentary by Dean Barber July 26, 2020

For many of us, rural is an abstract concept. We think of farmland and forests. It's a feeling that we get, knowing that we are out in the country. We know rural when we see it.

Not surprisingly, the U.S. government has multiple official definitions of "rural," applying to different programs, often determining which local governments are eligible for rural-aid money. (A Washington

Post story in 2013 identified 15 different federal definitions of rural.)

The U.S. Census Bureau does not actually define "rural." Rather, it says that whatever is not considered urban -- and it gives two definitions of that -- is considered rural.

The first is "urbanized areas," which have a population of 50,000 or more. There are 486 of those, according to the 2010 census. "Urban clusters" have a population of at least 2,500 and less than 50,000. There were 3,087 of those.

But wait, there's more. The Office of Management and Budget designates counties as metropolitan, micropolitan, or neither. A metro area contains a core urban area of 50,000 or more population, and a micro area contains an urban core of at least 10,000 (but less than 50,000) population.

All counties that are not part of a metropolitan statistical area (MSA) are considered rural. (Easiest for me to remember.)

The Federal Office of Rural Health Policy accepts all non-metro counties as rural and uses an additional method of determining rurality called the Rural-Urban Commuting Area codes. Like the MSAs, these are based on census data that is used to assign a code to each Census Tract. Tracts inside metropolitan counties with the codes 4-10 are considered rural.

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