



Rural Pennsylvania: Where Is It Anyway?

A Compendium of the Definitions of Rural and Rationale for Their Use

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The Concept of Rural and the Rationale for Multiple Definitions

Everyone has a general idea about what defines the term “rural.” However, these ideas often are not well articulated. Some examples of expressions of these general notions include, “Where the farms are”; “areas that are located away from the city”; “small places”; or other similar characterizations. These perceptions vary from person to person. For example, someone who lives in the center of a city may think that a farming area five miles outside of the city is a rural area, while a logger who lives in a remote forested area may think of it as urban.

Although these vaguely defined definitions of rural are adequate to serve the needs of the lay person, they are not specific enough to be used in the administration of public programs or in conducting research. It is important to consider both uses since the definitions used in public programs are borrowed from the research literature. For researchers, the definition of rural begins with a theoretical understanding of rural areas and the manner in which they differ from urban areas, both socially and economically. Among the characteristics that have been entertained in the theoretical conception of rural are: (1) population size, (2) population density, and (3) the social and economic ties that the population maintains with more urban centers. These characteristics need to be more clearly defined so that they can be measured consistently and accurately.

Each of these characteristics has been used to operationalize the definition of rural and in developing the multiple definitions of “rural.” Although having more than one definition introduces some confusion, there are advantages associated with the opportunity to select from several definitions. Researchers can choose the definition that has the best fit with the research question being posed or, on a more practical level, the definition for which data are available. Researchers often use one of the definitions used by the U.S. Census Bureau, since significant quantities of data are classified by these definitions. Some of the definitions currently in use may reflect one of the three characteristics in favor of others, while others incorporate a combination of characteristics.

Similar to the definitions used in research, the definition of rural in the administration of public programs also has to be well-defined. Since organizations and agencies at the federal, state, and community levels are involved in the administration of these programs, it is not surprising that several definitions also are used in these applications. Most organizations have relied on U.S. Census Bureau-based definitions because of their availability and the availability of associated data.

One size does not fit all. Different programs use different definitions and the definition that is used may exclude some areas for which the program was intended, while at the same time,

including other areas that were not targeted by the program. Nevertheless, it would be administratively prohibitive for a sponsoring agency to use multiple definitions, allow for many exceptions, or make decisions on an *ad hoc* or case-by-case basis.

The general scenario can be summarized as follows. In everyday life, we use a very general conception about where rural is. This concept is not well-defined, varies from person to person, but has a common basis. There are a variety of definitions that are used in both scientific research and the administration of public programs. These definitions are based on the theoretical understanding of rural which distinguishes urban from rural on the basis of (1) population size, (2) population density, and (3) the social and economic ties that the population maintains with urban centers. Consequently, there is more than one answer to the question, "Rural, where is it anyway?" If one participates in any rural-targeted programs or is engaged in scientific research, it is unarguably beneficial to be familiar with the several possible answers to that question, that is, to be aware of the different definitions of rural currently in common usage.

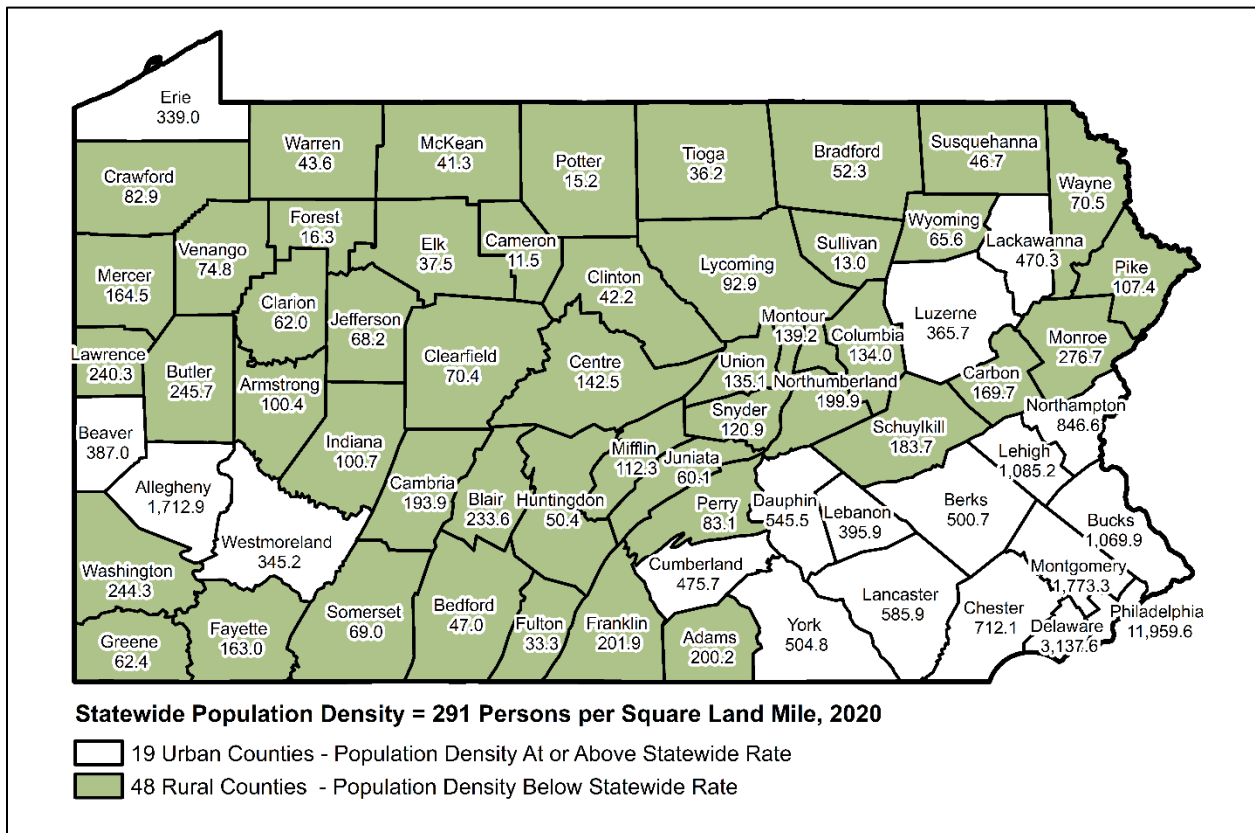
Click [here](https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/am-i-rural) (<https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/am-i-rural>) to see if your location is considered to be rural and eligible for several federal programs.

Rural: Where Is It Anyway? The Most Frequently Used Definitions of Rural

From Lake Erie to the Appalachian Mountains, to state and national forests, Pennsylvania was home to over 13 million people in 2020, becoming the fifth-most populous state in the nation (Krawitz, 2020). According to the Center for Rural Pennsylvania, a bicameral agency of the Pennsylvania General Assembly, nearly 3.4 million of those citizens lived in rural areas of the state. While as a whole, the population of rural Pennsylvania is relatively homogenous, there are unique and noteworthy qualities within that population that deserve attention and dedicated resources. Although some of these qualities present challenges, others offer opportunities for growth and improvement if given the right support.

Defining “rural” can be challenging and federal and state organizations may use different criteria when determining what is considered to be rural or non-metropolitan. The Center for Rural Pennsylvania defines rural counties as any county with a population density of less than the statewide density of 291 people per square land mile, based on the 2020 Census. The Center for Rural Pennsylvania’s definition of rural is shown in Figure 1 (Center for Rural Pennsylvania, 2023).

Figure 1: Rural Counties in Pennsylvania by Population Density, 2020



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2020; prepared by the Center for Rural Pennsylvania, 2023

Federal government entities provide at least seven other definitions of rural which may not align with how individual states designate rural areas. All federal definitions are population-based, and first define various levels of urban areas before describing the remaining areas as rural. The definitions most frequently used in rural health care are included in Table 1. Maps depicting Pennsylvania’s rurality based on these federal definitions are provided in Figures 2 through 5. As of July 2023, the U.S. Census Bureau and the Office of Management and Budget updated their definitions of rural and urban using the results of the 2020 Census.

Table 1: Federal Government Entity Definitions of Rural

Entity and Unit of Classification	Unit
U.S. Census Bureau	Urban Areas, 2020
<p>Using the 2020 Census, the U.S. Census Bureau defined an urban area as densely settled core of census blocks that meet minimum housing unit density and/or population density requirements. This includes adjacent territory containing non-residential urban land uses. To qualify as an urban area, the territory identified according to criteria must encompass at least 2,000 housing units or a population of at least 5,000. All areas outside Urban Areas are considered rural.</p> <p>Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2020b</p>	
Office of Management and Budget	Core-Based Statistical Area (CBSA)
<p>Rural areas are all areas that are not:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Metropolitan Area: at least one urbanized area of 50,000+ persons. • Rural areas may be designated as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Micropolitan Area: at least one urbanized cluster of 10,000 to 49,999 persons; or ○ Non-Metro: all other areas not inside the CBSA. <p>Source: Office of Management and Budget, 2024</p>	
U.S. Department of Agriculture	Rural-Urban Commuting Area Codes (RUCAs)
<p>Sub-county components are designated according to population density, urbanization, and daily commuting to urbanized areas or urban clusters:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Metropolitan area core: primary flow within an urbanized area (UA); 2. Metropolitan area high commuting: primary flow 30% or more to a UA; 3. Metropolitan area low commuting: primary flow 10%-30% to a UA; 4. Micropolitan area core: primary flow within an Urban Cluster of 10,000-49,999 (large UC); 5. Micropolitan high commuting: primary flow 30% or more to a large UC; 6. Micropolitan low commuting: primary flow 10%-30% to a large UC; 7. Small town core: primary flow within an Urban Cluster of 2,500-9,999 (small UC); 8. Small town high commuting: primary flow 30% or more to a small UC; 9. Small town low commuting: primary flow 10%-30% to a small UC; 10. Rural areas: primary flow to a tract outside of UA or UC; or 	

11. Not coded: Census tract with zero population and no rural-urban identifier information

Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, 2019

Federal Office of Rural Health Policy

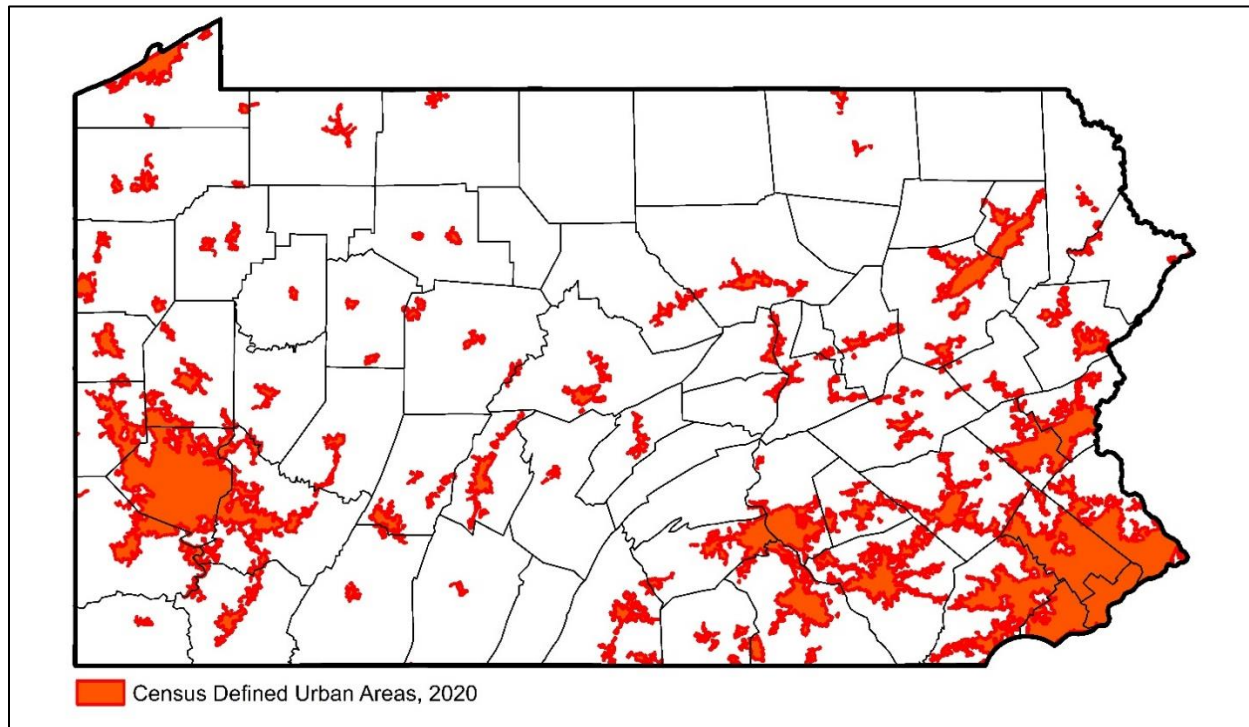
The Federal Office of Rural Health Policy accepts all non-Metro counties as rural and uses the Rural-Urban Commuting Area (RUCA) codes as an additional method to determine rurality whereby tracts inside Metropolitan counties with the RUCA codes 4-10 are considered rural.

The Federal Office of Rural Health Policy has also designated 132 large area census tracts with RUCA codes 2 or 3 as rural. These tracts have an area of 400+ square miles and population densities of no more than 35 people per square mile.

Source: Health Resources and Services Administration, 2020

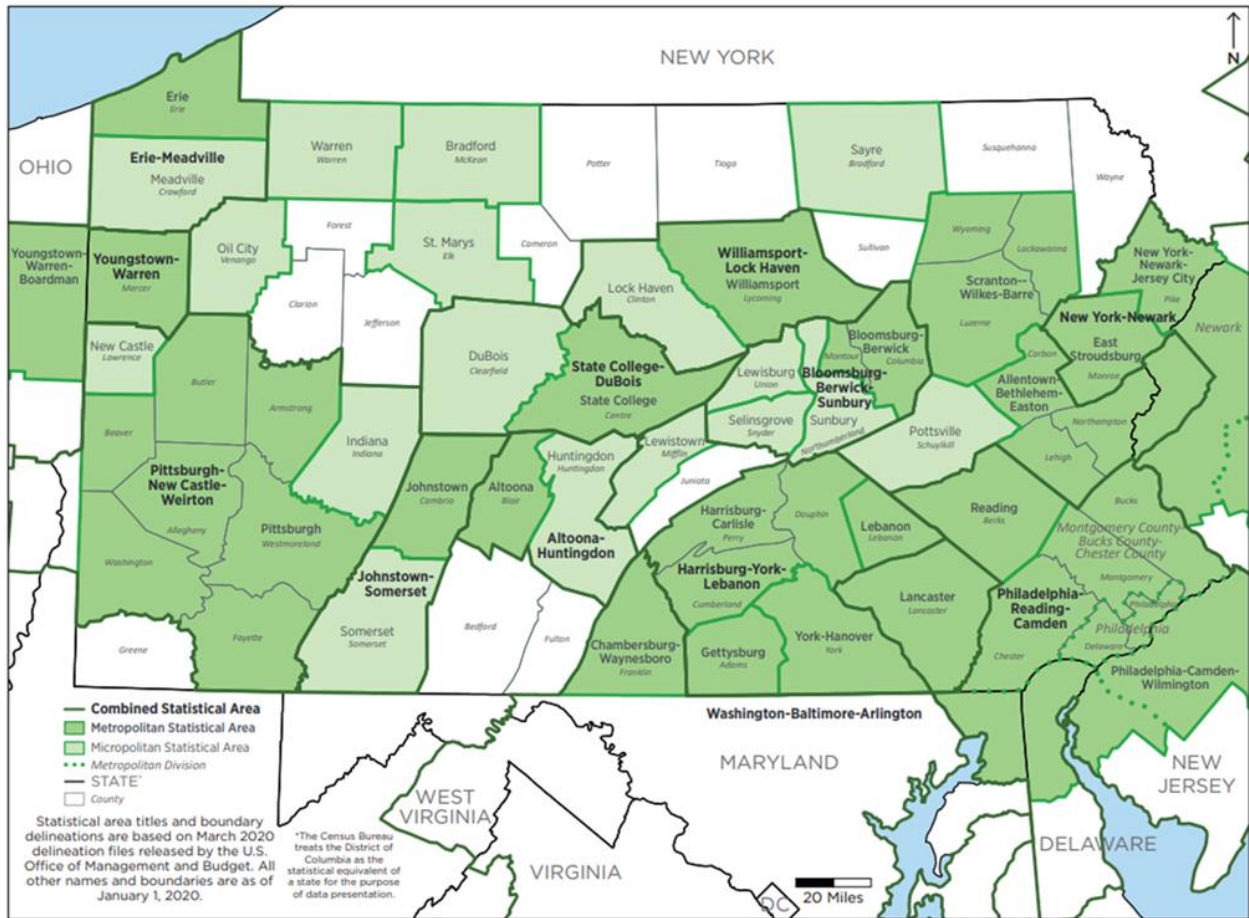
Figures 2 through 5 show rural and urban areas of Pennsylvania based on these definitions.

Figure 1: U.S. Census Bureau Definition of Urban Areas, 2020



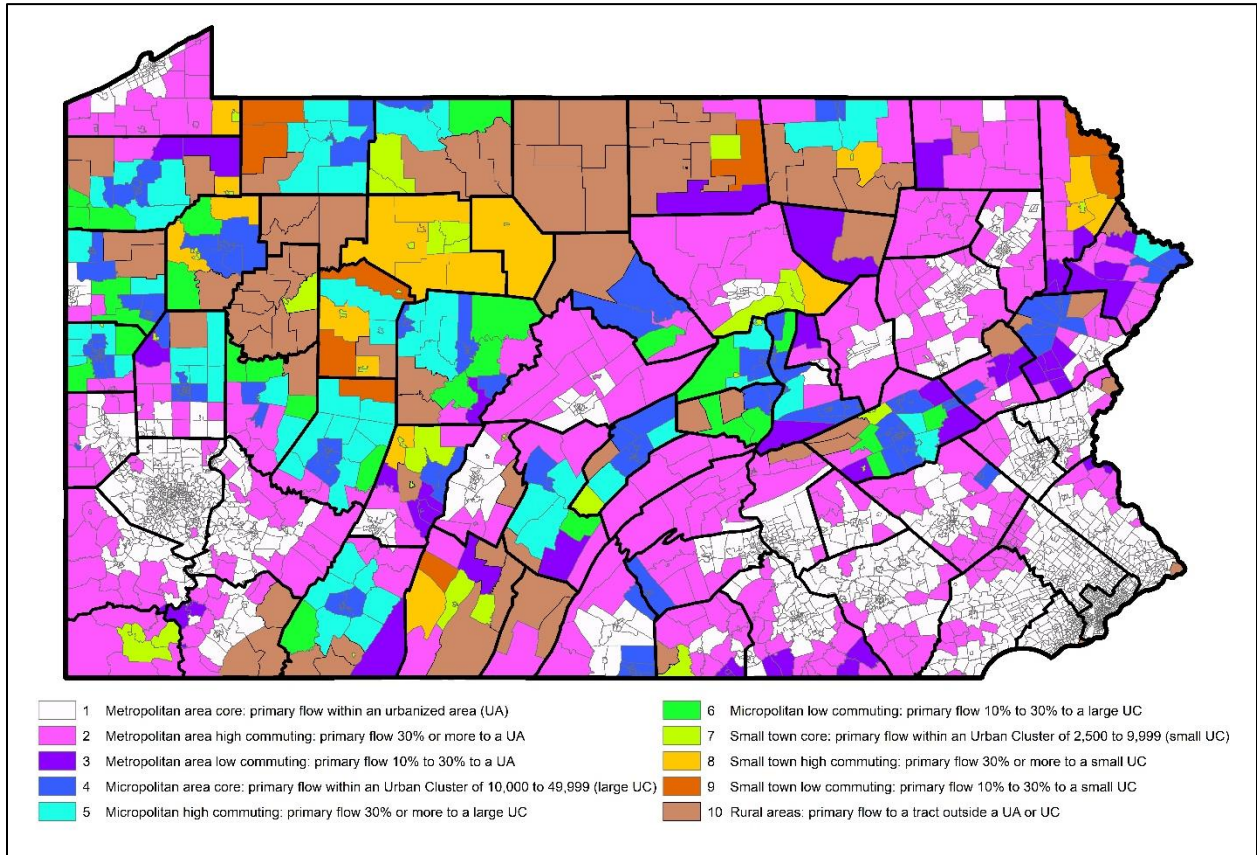
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2023; prepared by the Center for Rural Pennsylvania, 2023

Figure 2: Office of Management and Budget Definition of Rural, 2020



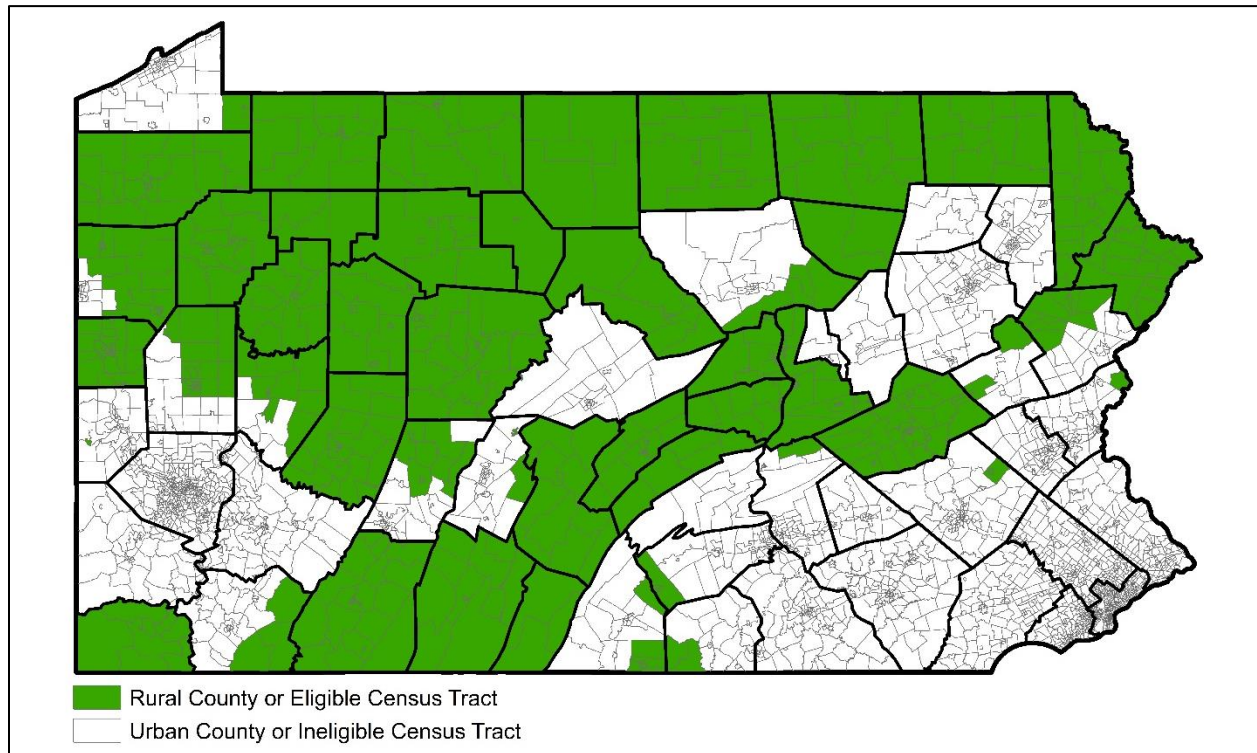
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2024

Figure 3: U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural-Urban Continuum Codes, 2010



Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, 2019

Figure 5: Federal Office of Rural Health Policy Rural Counties and Eligible Census Tracts, 2022



Source: Health Resources and Services Administration, 2023; prepared by the Center for Rural Pennsylvania, 2023

Each of these definitions is useful for defining metropolitan and non-metropolitan and urban and rural areas although most define larger and more densely populated areas and regions that are outside of those areas are considered to be non-metropolitan or rural. The sole definition that addresses rural is the Rural-Urban Continuum Codes, also known as the Rural Urban Commuting Area (RUCA) codes, is a definition funded by the Federal Office of Rural Health Policy to delineate areas of rurality in a state.

The specific similarities and differences of “rural” as indicated in these maps become relevant when applied to state and federal policies, health care provider placement opportunities, health care facility designation and service reimbursement, and more. To determine eligibility for a range of federal programs that fund rural eligible areas, the use of the Am I Rural Tool (Rural Health Information Hub (2024) and the Rural Health Grants Eligibility Analyzer (Health Resources and Services Administration, n.d.) provide the most accurate identification of eligibility and are the most frequently used tools to determine potential rural health funding.

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