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LSU AgCenter Research & Extension

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Introduction

An innovative approach has been developed at the Louisiana Forest Products Laboratory to alleviate chronic long-term economic deterioration and to stimulate economic development in rural resource-based regions (Vlosky, Chance, Monroe, Hughes and Blalock, 1998a; 1998b). Targeting the secondary forest products industry as a driver for economic development, the methodology addresses a number of areas including markets for value-added products, potential economic outcomes based on various industry development scenarios, industry labor skill requirements, training needs and socioeconomic factors that have an impact on or influence the labor market. The goal is to develop the secondary forest products industry while adding value to existing resources, creating employment opportunities with transferable skills and maintaining the stewardship of renewable resources in rural communities.

Many states and regions in the United States are diversifying rural economic opportunities through forest resource based industry sector development. Kentucky, Maine, Oregon, Pennsylvania and Washington are examples of states taking advantage of forest resources to improve economic conditions within their borders (Jones and Koester, 1989). In this study, industry development opportunities specific to northwest Louisiana were examined. The study region included the parishes of Bienville, Bossier, Caddo, Claiborne, DeSoto, Lincoln, Natchitoches, Red River, Sabine and Webster. The area chronically lags behind the rest of the country with regard to employment and other economic indicators. In addition, forest resource depletion exceeds sustainable levels for some key species. All parishes in the contiguous 10-parish region conform to Long-Term Economically Depressed (LTED) eligibility as defined by the U.S. Department of Commerce, Economic Development Administration.

Objectives

The larger study had several general objectives (see Vlosky et al., 1998a), the following of which were the focus here:

1. Determine social and economic profiles for the study region.
2. Describe the pool of eligible workers in the area to support industry development.
3. Identify labor skill needs of the value-added secondary forest products industry.
4. Generate information that can help policymakers formulate strategies for implementation of rural economic development efforts designed to capitalize on defensible market-driven opportunities in forest products industry sectors.
5. Assess the suitability of introducing value-added industries to economically depressed areas as adjuncts to welfare reform policies.

The economic development plan proposed as a result of our larger study risks becoming a house of cards without examining the communities and people who will directly affect its success or failure. Research has confirmed the importance of industry's examining the social structure of a community where jobs may be created. The social structure of a community allows for an understanding of education constraints, social stratification, economy and the knowledge base that already exists there. The decision to locate an industry in a particular location may not be based as much on the quality of the labor pool but on the natural resources within the particular area. Often, when high tech industries are introduced in a new location, the competence level of the residents is inadequate. In these instances, the industry is forced to look outside the immediate area and community for skilled workers during the early phases of development. Understanding the social and cultural aspects of the target communities helps move the proposed plan from an abstraction to reality, thus

facilitating implementation. In the long run, this plan should be designed so that it is good for the industry *and* good for the communities and residents of the region. Little is gained for the region's people if new industry must look outside the immediate area and community for skilled workers.

The major idea that guided the development of this portion of the plan was the concept of *work readiness*. Most of the literature in this area focuses on education, training, skill development and worker incentives (Cohen, 1990; Johnson and Provan, 1995; Johnson and Ray, 1993; Rieger, 1995; Wright, 1992). We took this concept and asked a different question: Before a person ever enters the labor pool, what are the forces that shape that person's commitment and attitude toward work? Skills can be taught, but a willingness to work will determine whether or not the acquired skills will be used.

The backdrop for our examination of the labor pool in this region is the "welfare reform" plan now being implemented in Louisiana and the nation. Because of the attention focused on welfare-to-work programs, we believe it is timely to investigate the suitability of introducing value-added industries to economically depressed areas as adjuncts to welfare reform policies. Women are the most common adult recipients of welfare, and many will be pushed into the labor force when their eligibility comes to an end. Jobs and workers are often scarce in rural areas, so we wanted to explore the suitability of employment in the forest products industry for (soon-to-be) former welfare recipients.

We begin with a macro-level profile of the socioeconomic characteristics of the study parishes and the region, identifying any unique characteristics in the social structure that may challenge successful implementation of the proposed plan. We also will describe the pool of eligible workers for the value-added forest products industry in the target area. Then, using a micro-level qualitative approach, we will describe the labor skill needs of existing companies in this industry.

Methods of Investigation

Descriptive Statistics

Secondary data were collected and analyzed for appropriate indicators of parish socio-economic characteristics. Descriptive statistics gathered for each of the 10 parishes in the region included poverty rates, income levels, unemployment rates and education levels. Where appropriate, means were calculated for the composite region. Data sources included the U.S. Bureau of the Census, the Current Population Survey, the Center for Business and Economic Research, the Louisiana State of the State Project and previous research.

Employer Interviews

To answer questions pertaining to the skill needs of the secondary-wood products industry, it was necessary to interview managers or owners who employ individuals in their companies or who are interested in expanding their business. We compiled a list of business owners who had participated in the earlier phase of this research. Then, with some input from an industry representative (Diana Simek, administrator for The Coordinating & Development Corporation), we identified about 24 business owners in the northwest region. A letter was mailed to the employers outlining this portion of the project and notifying them of our plans to call and schedule appointments. Employers were then contacted by phone to schedule interviews at their place of business.

Eleven employers, from six of the 10 parishes in the region, agreed to be interviewed (see Table 1). Of the 13 companies not interviewed, nine could not be located or were out of business; three employers declined to be interviewed, saying they had nothing to add to their previous comments to researchers; and one employer was not interviewed because we were unable to keep the appointment.

Personal interviews were conducted with the owners or managers of the participating secondary wood products manufacturing firms. All were assured of the confidentiality of their responses. Employers were asked fixed-response and open-ended

Table 1. Participating Employers

Company	*Contact*	*Address*	*Type of Business*
AAA Woodcraft	James Vaughan Owner	4108 Metro Drive Shreveport, LA 71109 (318) 636-5817 Caddo Parish	Pallets, stakes
Allen Millwork	B. J. Wheless Owner	6505 St. Vincent Shreveport, LA 71136 (318) 868-6541 Caddo Parish	Doors, Cabinets, etc.
B and C Wood Company	Edgar Cason Owner	Rural Route 3, Box 228 Coushatta, LA 71019 (318) 935-6705 Red River Parish	Logs
Bolinger Millwork and Supply, Inc.	Coy Cooper Owner	2570 East Texas Street Bossier City, LA 71111 (318) 747-3000 Bossier Parish	Cabinets, doors assembly shop, building supplies
Cooper Chair Factory	James Cooper Owner	217 Pine Street Minden, LA 71055 (318) 377-4648 Webster Parish	Chairs, swings
Custom Components	Barbara Toliver Owner	PO Box 610 Ruston, LA 71273 (318) 255-1553 Lincoln Parish	Furniture, particle board, runners
Dura Oak Cabinets	Jeff Mills Owner	863 Texas Avenue Shreveport, LA 71101 (318) 227-9610 Caddo Parish	Cabinets
LaBorde's Custom Cabinets	Randall LaBorde Owner	1052 Pearl Drive Bossier City, LA 71111 (318) 747-0458 Bossier Parish	Cabinets
Sabine Wood Products	Ronny Broadway Owner	5340 Texas Highway Many, LA 71449 (318) 256-5951 Sabine Parish	Timber
Shreveport Pallet	Joyce Donaldson and Clint Fontenot Owners	1454 Hawn Shreveport, LA 71137 (318) 424-7218 Bossier Parish	Pallets
The Woodchuck	Patti Mitten Owner Mitch Mitten Manager	504 East Colorado Ruston, LA 71270 (318) 255-7927 Lincoln Parish	Reproduction architectural products

questions. The interview format allowed us to explain and clarify questions and to expand upon issues of relatively greater importance. The employer interviews lasted about 45 minutes, ranging from about 15 minutes to about 3 hours. At the conclusion of four employer interviews, we asked if we could conduct focus groups with a handful of employees for 45 minutes to an hour, to ask them similar questions. No employer who was asked refused our request to conduct these focus groups. The businesses selected for focus groups were diverse in size and products.

Focus Group Discussions

Focus group discussion is a useful method for gathering in-depth information from those most closely acquainted with the issue being explored. It is more efficient than one-on-one interviews and has the added advantage of stimulating a greater depth of thought as the group participants listen to one another. Focus groups were used for discussing work-related issues with employees of four of the businesses we visited. We targeted low- to mid-level skilled workers, assuming them to be most representative of the potential labor pool for this industry. We hoped to gain information that might influence recruitment and retention strategies for the industry, and reveal micro level impediments to labor force participation. We also wanted to probe for information on how to motivate and reward employee commitment to entry-level, minimum wage jobs. The focus group discussions were held on-site but without observation by the employer. Participants were asked fixed response and open-ended questions. The employee focus groups lasted from 45 minutes to an hour and involved three to four workers each.

Interviews with Non-employed Women

Eighty-four women in seven parishes participated in qualitative interviews at the sites where they were participating in GED classes or training programs (see Monroe and Tiller, 2001). All of the women we interviewed were receiving welfare payments but faced the termination of their eligibility for welfare program participation over the next 12-24 months. Participants were interviewed individually. Interview items included fixed response and open-ended questions.

Socio-economic Profile of the Study Parishes and the Region

Louisiana has 64 parishes (counties). The region under consideration is in the northwest corner of the state and includes 10 parishes (Figure 1). Table 2 provides summary information for the study region, and Table 3 compares the northwest Louisiana region to the southern region of the United States on certain socio-economic indicators.

Figure 1. Northwest Region

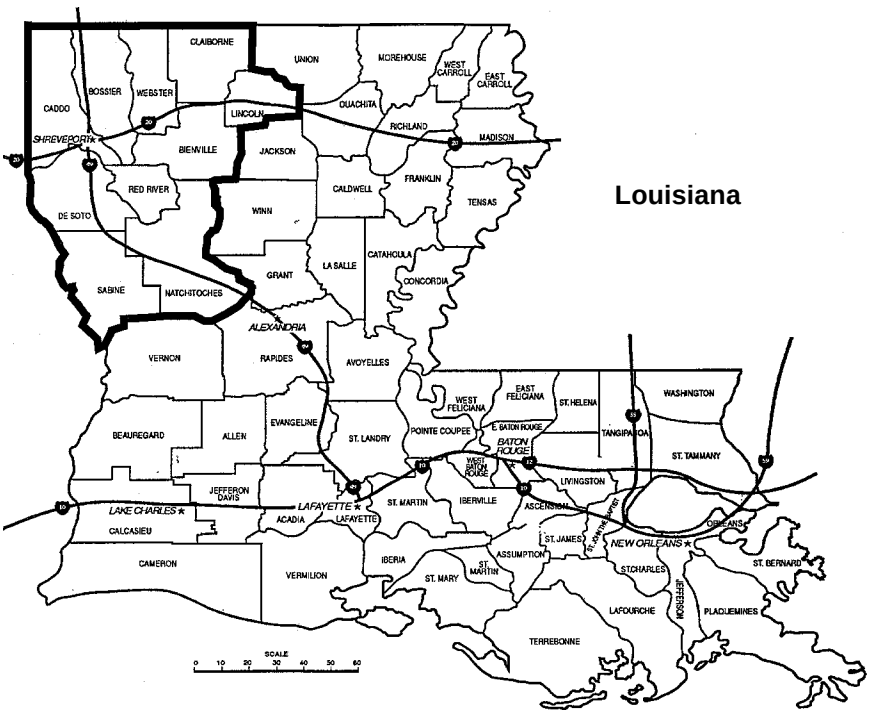

Table 2. Northwest Parishes Summary Data

Characteristic	Louisiana	Northwest Region	Bienville	Bossier	Caddo	Claiborne	De Soto	Lincoln	Natchitoches	Red River	Sabine	Webster
Total Population(1990)	**4,206,116**	**545,527 (13% of state pop.)**	**15,979**	**86,088**	**248,253**	**17,405**	**25,346**	**41,745**	**36,689**	**9,387**	**22,646**	**41,989**
Urban	2,860,159	349,419	3,079	61,829	207,541	7,006	5,389	25,511	16,609	0	3,126	19,329
% of total	68%	64%	19%	72%	84%	40%	21%	61%	45%	0%	14%	46%
Rural	1,345,957	196,108	12,900	24,259	40,712	10,399	19,957	16,234	20,080	9,387	19,520	22,660
% of total	32%	35%	81%	28%	16%	60%	79%	39%	55%	100%	86%	54%
Farm population	42,061	5,149	498	481	565	356	554	478	753	217	655	592
% of total	1%	1%	3%	1%	0.2%	2%	2%	1%	2%	2%	3%	1%
Gender (1990)												
Male	2,031,386	259,131	7,618	41,831	115,934	8,826	12,014	20,231	17,359	4,440	11,008	19,870
	48%	48%	48%	49%	47%	51%	47%	48%	47%	47%	49%	47%
Female	2,188,587	286,396	8,361	44,257	132,319	8,579	13,332	21,514	19,330	4,947	11,638	22,119
	52%	52%	52%	51%	53%	49%	53%	52%	53%	53%	51%	53%
Race (1990)												
White	2,839,138	345,130	8,986	67,030	146,580	9,313	14,003	24,620	22,357	5,752	17,939	28,550
	67%	63%	56%	78%	59%	54%	55%	59%	61%	61%	77%	68%
Black	1,229,281	194,242	6,949	17,381	99,511	8,041	11,141	16,590	13,779	3,589	3,984	13,277
	31%	36%	44%	20%	40%	46%	44%	40%	38%	38%	18%	32%

Characteristic	Louisiana	Northwest Region	Bienville	Bossier	Caddo	Claiborne	De Soto	Lincoln	Natchitoches	Red River	Sabine	Webster
Hispanic	93,044	7,081	81	1,799	2,595	40	377	381	487	61	1,031	229
	2%	1%	0.5%	2%	1%	0.2%	1.5%	1%	1%	1%	5%	0.5%
Age (1990)												
Median	31 years	32 years	35 years	31 years	33 years	35 years	32 years	25 years	29 years	32 years	35 years	35 years
Under 18	1,227,269	156,014	4,513	25,184	70,899	4,446	7,550	9,594	10,976	2,925	6,454	13,473
	29%	28%	28%	29%	29%	26%	30%	23%	30%	31%	29%	27%
Labor Force (1995)												
Civilian	1,939,000	249,670	6,240	43,000	115,700	5,930	11,890	18,250	16,900	3,880	8,880	19,000
Unemployment rate	8.0%	8.3%	9.7%	6.6%	6.0%	10.7%	7.7%	3.1%	8.2%	12.5%	8.3%	9.8%
Education Level Persons 25+ (1990)												
<high school	803,872	95,678	3,753	11,004	41,011	4,424	5,571	5,239	7,127	2,395	5,443	9,711
diploma	32%	34%	37%	21%	27%	39%	36%	26%	35%	43%	38%	36%
High school	1,708,228	232,306	6,390	41,167	110,882	6,896	9,895	14,911	13,244	2,844	8,854	17,223
diploma	68%	67%	63%	79%	73%	61%	64%	74%	65%	57%	62%	67%
Some college	520,671	72,365	1,574	15,689	34,365	1,882	2,536	5,123	3,585	706	1,964	4,941
or Associate degree	20%	19%	16%	30%	25%	16%	16%	24%	18%	13%	14%	18%
Bachelor's degree	267,055	34,377	650	5,647	18,600	777	977	2,880	1,894	352	710	1,890
	11%	8%	6%	11%	12%	7%	6%	14%	9%	6%	5%	7%
Graduate or	142,068	18,478	287	2,449	9,482	371	496	2,520	1,441	136	483	813
professional degree	6%	5%	3%	5%	6%	3%	3%	12%	7%	2%	3%	3%

Characteristic	Louisiana	Northwest Region	Bienville	Bossier	Caddo	Claiborne	De Soto	Lincoln	Natchitoches	Red River	Sabine	Webster
Households	**1,499,269**	**198,886**	**5,852**	**30,718**	**93,248**	**6,065**	**9,129**	**13,669**	**12,644**	**3,321**	**8,361**	**15,879**
Family households	1,089,882	142,208	4,219	23,334	65,122	4,314	6,819	9019	9,095	2,505	6,225	11,556
	73%	72%	72%	76%	70%	71%	75%	66%	72%	75%	74%	73%
Single male head of household	52,471	6,318	200	924	2,949	225	346	395	424	127	244	484
	5%	4%	5%	4%	5%	5%	5%	4%	5%	5%	4%	4%
Single female head of household	234,129	32,525	907	3,923	17,049	910	1,644	1,869	2,288	552	1,007	2,376
	21%	23%	21%	17%	26%	15%	24%	21%	25%	22%	16%	21%
Income												
Per capita income (1995)	$18,997	$14,766	$14,418	$18,886	$21,420	$14,617	$17,829	$17,736	$14,687	$15,092	$15,470	$16,165
Household income (1990 Census)												
< $5,000	188,156	25,980	1,058	2,533	10,951	972	1,683	2,330	2,185	643	1,369	2,256
	13%	16%	18%	8%	12%	16%	18%	17%	17%	19%	16%	14%
$5,000-14,999	355,175	51,349	1,745	6,044	22,064	1,909	2,625	3,464	5,601	1,041	2,444	4,412
	23%	29%	30%	20%	24%	32%	29%	25%	44%	31%	29%	28%
$15,000-24,999	282,504	37,900	1,194	6,224	17,484	1,142	1,740	2,277	2,276	649	1,728	3,186
	19%	19%	20%	20%	19%	19%	19%	16%	18%	19%	21%	20%
$25,000-49,999	441,182	57,813	1,347	10,940	27,695	1,484	2,212	3,761	2,966	811	2,141	4,456
	30%	27%	23%	35%	30%	25%	24%	28%	24%	24%	26%	28%
$50,000-74,999	153,865	18,799	395	3,879	9,497	422	659	1,236	851	148	519	1,193
	10%	8%	7%	13%	10%	7%	7%	9%	7%	4%	6%	8%
$75,000 and up	77,489	8,655	160	1,228	5,267	111	246	625	439	49	174	356
	5%	3%	3%	4%	6%	1.5%	3%	5%	3%	1.5%	2%	2%

Characteristic	Louisiana	Northwest Region	Bienville	Bossier	Caddo	Claiborne	De Soto	Lincoln	Natchitoches	Red River	Sabine	Webster
Poverty (1990)												
Total in poverty	967,002	130,002	4,824	13,592	58,539	5,096	7,454	9,310	11,594	3,216	6,041	10,336
	24%	28%	31%	16%	24%	32%	30%	27%	34%	35%	27%	25%
18 and over	586,060	79,178	3,037	8,115	34,260	3,393	4,635	6,608	6,815	1,961	3,743	6,611
	20%	26%	28%	14%	20%	29%	26%	26%	39%	31%	24%	22%
Children < 18	377,143	50,282	1,768	5,415	23,986	1,703	2,795	2,688	4,755	1,250	2,256	3,666
	31%	36%	40%	22%	34%	40%	38%	28%	45%	44%	36%	33%
Families	213,030	28,219	1,102	2,987	12,505	1,119	1,691	1,818	2,556	743	1,343	2,355
	19%	23%	26%	13%	19%	26%	25%	20%	28%	29%	21%	20%
W/child < 18	162,199	21,160	767	2,379	9,578	752	1,232	1,251	1,986	564	960	1,691
	26%	31%	36%	17%	27%	33%	32%	25%	38%	40%	30%	28%
W/child < 5	79,191	10,618	349	1,282	4,746	357	625	652	1,033	314	487	773
	30%	37%	38%	22%	33%	42%	41%	32%	46%	50%	34%	33%
Female headed households	114,006	16,416	455	1,645	8,168	519	934	1,023	1,363	377	596	1,336
	50%	56%	58%	43%	49%	56%	58%	54%	63%	65%	62%	54%
W/child < 18	98,525	13,981	384	1,435	6,967	444	787	802	1,195	348	510	1,109
	60%	66%	70%	50%	59%	66%	68%	60%	75%	78%	74%	63%
W/child < 5	47,330	7,053	171	791	3,382	226	426	398	652	202	268	537
	73%	78%	74%	64%	74%	78%	85%	74%	84%	87%	79%	76%

Characteristic	Louisiana	Northwest Region	Bienville	Bossier	Caddo	Claiborne	De Soto	Lincoln	Natchitoches	Red River	Sabine	Webster
Transfer payments (thousands of dollars 1994)												
Medical payments	$4,695,477	$824,752	$33,869	$125,902	$387,530	$30,927	$41,353	$58,298	$61,469	$19,176	$44,298	$21,930
AFDC	$194,397	$18,915	$703	$1,786	$10,224	$697	$1,208	$1,215	$1,712	$372	$675	$323
Food Stamps	$676,979	$79,408	$2,858	$8,827	$41,572	$3,126	$5,333	$4,840	$6,737	$1,542	$2,984	$1,589
# of food stamp	779,149	103,959	3,669	10,944	49,357	4,147	6,913	5,780	8,954	2,389	4,297	7,509
participants (1993)	18%	21%	23%	13%	20%	24%	27%	14%	24%	25%	19%	18%
Vital Statistics												
Migration (1989-90)	-59,201	-12,472	-241	-2,178	-5,957	-190	-594	-363	-1,241	-364	-788	-556
Births (1994)	67,802	8,069	216	1,291	3,753	227	405	575	542	162	304	594
Infant deaths/1,000 births (1993)	11	9.2	9.1	6.7	12.7	4.8	12.2	12.8	10.5	14.4	3.4	5.3
Out-of-wedlock Births	28,893	3,483	100	377	1,820	116	208	262	167	76	115	242
(1994)	43%	43%	46%	29%	48%	51%	51%	46%	31%	47%	38%	41%

Table 3. Southern Region: Comparison of States with Value-added Secondary Wood Products Industries

Characteristic	U.S.	Louisiana	Texas	Oklahoma	Arkansas	Tennessee	Mississippi	Alabama	Florida
Population (1995)	262,755,270	4,342,334	18,723,991	3,277,687	2,483,769	5,256,051	2,697,243	4,252,982	14,165,570
Births and Deaths (1993)									
Births per 1,000 residents	15.50%	16.20%	17.80%	14.30%	14.10%	14.30%	16.00%	14.80%	14.00%
Births to women < 20	12.80%	18.70%	16.10%	17.20%	19.40%	16.90%	21.70%	17.90%	13.40%
Infant deaths per 1,000 live births	8.40	10.80	7.50	8.80	10.00	9.40	11.50	10.30	8.60
Education (1990)									
% < high school diploma	4.50%	15.60%	7.60%	7.60%	20.40%	16.90%	21.00%	17.40%	7.30%
% high school graduates	75.20%	68.30%	72.10%	74.60%	66.30%	67.10%	64.30%	66.90%	74.40%
% college graduates	20.30%	16.10%	20.30%	17.80%	13.30%	16.00%	14.70%	15.70%	18.30%
Labor Force (1994)									
Civilian labor force	131,056,000	1,939,000	9,384,000	1,540,000	1,207,000	2,665,000	1,255,000	2,031,000	6,824,000
% unemployed	6.10%	8.00%	6.40%	5.80%	5.30%	4.80%	6.60%	6.00%	6.60%
Per Capita Income	$20,800	$16,612	$19,145	$17,026	$15,995	$18,439	$14,745	$17,129	$20,650

One standard metropolitan area is located in the region, the Shreveport-Bossier City Metropolitan Area. It includes Caddo and Bossier parishes. Socio-economic indicators for this area (especially Bossier) tended to be better than the regional averages, but since the difference was only 2 percent, the area was included in the regional figures. Note that several gaming establishments are based in the area.

The northwest region is home to 13 percent (545,527) of the state's total population. Approximately two-thirds of the residents live in urban areas, with the remaining one-third residing in rural areas. This region mirrors the state for most socio-economic indicators. Some items, though, are noteworthy for divergence. The race figures for this area are slightly different from the state's percentages, with the region reporting 63 percent of the residents as white and 36 percent black and the state reporting a 67 percent/31 percent split. In general, income and poverty measures indicate the region has 5 percent to 7 percent more of its residents below the poverty level than the state as a whole. The 1993 per capita income figure for the northwest region was $14,766, 88 percent of the state per capita of $16,612. Only the Bossier/Caddo area reported higher per capita income than the state.

The northwest region is bisected by three interstate systems and numerous U.S. and state highways. The region supports four rail lines and is serviced by up to 50 motor freight carriers. A commercial airport is located in Caddo Parish (Shreveport), and all parishes have local airports. The nearest deepwater port is at Lake Charles, 222 miles from the furthest point in the northwest region. All parishes support financial institutions such as banks and/or credit unions. All parishes except Bienville have at least one general hospital, and all parishes have print newspapers and television stations. All parishes are within an hour's commuting distance of vocation-technical schools and colleges or universities (Center for Business and Economic Research, 1995).

Pool of Eligible Workers

Based on these macro-level data, we can describe residents of the region as poorer and less educated than the state's population as a whole. This should not be interpreted to mean the region is in some way substandard, but rather that the socio-economic indicators reflect certain areas that are problematic throughout the state. In some parishes, up to 43 percent of the potential labor force lacks a high school diploma. It is difficult to know for certain the extent that substance abuse or gambling is a problem for significant numbers of potential workers. Anecdotal evidence, though, suggests that concerns in these areas may be valid. Women comprise 50 percent or more of the available labor pool in each parish. Women also are the head of household for an average of 23 percent of all families in the region, and, of these, up to 78 percent include children these women must support. Given the low wages paid to entry level unskilled workers, and the low per capita income rates for the region in general, it is not surprising that government assistance (welfare) has been an option for a significant portion of the pool of workers (Stephenson, 1997).

Industry Labor Skill Needs

The Views of Employers: Personal Interviews

Most business owners indicated they employed a primarily male work force with little formal education or skill training, some of whom had a "spotty" work history of job turnover, unemployment, substance abuse and/or incarceration. We detected that most of the employee turnover occurred at the outer fringe. If a worker lasted more than a month or two, he was likely to stay with the job for a relatively long period of time. Many of these business owners told us it was very difficult for them to keep all of their positions filled, especially entry-level, low-skill positions, despite the fact that they often paid a little better than minimum-wage for this work. Employers indicated zero tolerance for substance abuse and indicated that employees had few problems with drugs or alcohol at this time. Given the history of many the workers, however, it is reasonable to think substance use or abuse might continue to crop up as a problem. Most employers

had little contact with migrant workers. The migrant workers they hired in the past worked well for a short period, then left town. There was little indication that migrant workers would become a substantial, reliable part of the labor pool for this industry.

Education and training

Most employers interviewed did not have specific education or training requirements for their entry-level positions. Employees were not required to have a high school degree or GED certificate; neither was vocational training a prerequisite for employment. Some employers even suggested generalized vo-tech training could be something of a hindrance for many of these positions, at least in part, because most shops have their own assembly and finishing methods. All emphasized that a "willing" attitude was more important than formal education or training.

Technical skills

We asked the employers to identify the skills someone might need for an entry-level position in their workplace. Surprisingly, the employers did not emphasize the moderate to high level of skills we might have expected. A common theme throughout the interviews was that a beginning employee needed basic math skills and the ability to read a tape measure. Few employers mentioned basic reading ability as a required skill, and few mentioned even basic cabinetry or carpentry skills as required for an entry-level position. Most employers expect to train workers on the job or to assign a beginning worker to a senior worker to learn the various tasks required.

Work readiness

We cannot overemphasize, however, a refrain repeated throughout these interviews with employers in the wood products industry. More important than any skill is a person's willingness to work. This attitude, more than a set of skills, defined *work readiness* to these business men and women. Employers consistently emphasized that the "right person" — that is, someone with a positive attitude — could be taught the jobs and skills required in their workplace. Employers described such a person with phrases like "willing to work from the bottom up," "willing to learn," "tough-minded," "self-motivated" and possessing a

"work ethic." They also admitted how often they were fooled by a person whom they thought possessed this quality of work readiness, only to discover that they had been duped!

The employers also indicated that a negative attitude could not be overcome with training and education, that some people simply were "quitters." One employer who was particularly sensitive to this lack of work ethic said his workers knew they could either "haul wood or haul ass." We surmised that work readiness is an elusive concept, recognizable when seen but hard to predict.

The Views of Workers: Focus Group Discussions

Education and skills

Many of the comments from the employee focus groups confirmed the reports of their employers. The education level of participants generally ranged from second grade to high school or GED. One man indicated he had some college level education, and another described his education as "sorry." Most of the men had performed a wide variety of jobs, almost always involving heavy physical labor. Very few had vocational training, and, for those who had participated in a vocational education program (with the exception of the truck drivers), their training was in a field other than carpentry/cabinetry. Almost without exception the men had no previous wood-working experience. They had learned their current skills on the job.

Employee attitudes/motivation toward work

We asked the men to tell us what motivated them to come to work every day or to come to work at all. They almost always mentioned responsibility for family and children. Some mentioned that they enjoyed their co-workers or "boss," or that they simply liked the work they performed. A couple of workers made reference to spiritual or religious motivations.

This issue of internal motivation was important to us, so we probed more deeply. We particularly wanted to know what set these men apart from others who had similar responsibilities but did not respond by becoming steadily employed. In other words, why are these men different from their friends and neighbors who don't work? The workers in these focus groups expressed great

disdain for people who did not meet their obligations; they described such people as “lazy,” “crybabies” or unwilling to carry their share of a load. These workers said, “I got to work. I can’t just sit around.” They wanted to take care of themselves and their families without becoming dependent “on a welfare check” or “living off the government.”

Almost to a man, the employees mentioned that the values of work and responsibility had been instilled in them while they were young. They had “chores” when they were “small” and their parents were “role models” who had worked throughout their lives. One man mentioned that his mother “worked two and three jobs” to provide for their children. Another responded that his parents taught him that it was “right” to work.

Attitudes Toward Working With Women

Finally, we were interested in whether work in the forest products industry might be suitable for the small army of women who are about to be eliminated from the welfare rolls in Louisiana. Employers indicated they were perfectly willing to hire women; few, however, actually had any women working for them at the present time or in the recent past. Some employers described their shops as noisy, smelly, dirty, hot-in-the-summer, cold-in-the-winter kinds of places and indicated they just didn’t think women would be comfortable there. A few employers frankly expressed reservations about hiring women, describing their workplace as “manly” and their workers as “sniffing around” any time a woman came on the shop floor.

As for the workers themselves, there were mixed opinions about working with women. Most workers indicated they had no problem whatsoever with women in the workplace as long as they did their jobs. The men in our focus groups seemed equally disdainful of a man who would slack off as of a woman who did the same; they indicated they would make such a man as uncomfortable working there as they would make a woman. They understood that a woman “has children to support and provide for” and that women need jobs, too. Some employees expressed reservations about a woman’s ability to handle the strenuous physical aspects of the job, but indicated that some men wouldn’t be able to do the work either! Reflecting their employers’ com-

ments about a somewhat crude workplace, a few men indicated they would have to clean up their language and stories or that a woman would just have to get used to their talk. One man indicated that he just didn't think men and women could work together, saying "you can't make honey and money in the same place!"

In a separate but related study (Monroe and Tiller, 2001), when we asked welfare-reliant women if they would accept employment in a place like a secondary forest products business, the overwhelming response was that they would do whatever they had to do to exit welfare and to take care of themselves and their children. In the past, many of these women had worked at traditionally male jobs involving physical labor, including some women who had worked in forest industry jobs. We believe, then, that in rural areas where jobs and workers may be just about equally scarce, no labor pool should be discounted and no job source should be ignored.

Recommendations

Improve basic education and reorient existing post-secondary training.

The employers we interviewed were critical of existing training programs because they believed the skills necessary for their workplace are best taught on the job. According to these businessmen and women, there are few generic secondary wood products skills. This opinion notwithstanding, we did hear a common refrain indicating the need for better basic education. Basic math skills and, to some extent basic reading skills, are important to these employers. Training that emphasizes the application of these skills could be of critical importance. For example, employers talked about the need for workers to be able to read and follow plans, instructions or guidelines and to meet the specs of printed plans. There also is a need for workers to be able to complete reports or inventories of the products they have prepared and materials they have consumed.

We were surprised to hear many employers refer to their use of temporary agencies not only as a source of temporary assis-

tance, but as a screening mechanism for new permanent employees. They found the temporary agencies to be a better source than the area vocational-technical schools for potential employees with certain skills. Such training centers might partner with temporary agencies to gain placement and much-needed real world work experience for the students.

We do believe specialized training could be useful to employees who move beyond entry-level positions and that the owners of secondary wood products businesses should be consulted as to the nature of this training. For example, reliable employees could be trained as forklift operators and in the loading and management of inventory. Other workers could be trained to operate and maintain heavy equipment, such as saws. In summary, basic education should be enhanced and advanced training for specific skills should be enhanced but, in the opinions of the men and women we interviewed, generic carpentry and cabinet skills training are not particularly useful.

Create a workplace that is flexible, supportive and predictable.

In asking employees in our focus groups about the factors that motivated their labor force participation, we hoped to gain insight into variables in the workplace environment that could be manipulated to increase employee loyalty and performance. If we listen to the responses of these workers, we learn that employers can make small changes to make the workplace more attractive for employees. Employees praised employers who "treat us like family." Employees made this statement about employers who are flexible, caring, helpful with personal problems or emergencies, and who provide them a basic level of support. Where some employers periodically lay off part of their work force, other employers structure their businesses to guarantee workers 40 hours of work year-round. When a worker knows he will be able to have a steady income and meet his personal obligations, he is more likely to feel loyalty and respect for the employer.

Another common theme from our focus groups is that employees like knowing what their work will be from day to day. They like knowing what the owner expects and they like being given full responsibility for a task without an owner "looking

over their shoulder." Employers may be reluctant to give over responsibilities for tasks, but it appears the more often they make "partners" of their employees, the more personal responsibility and pride the employees will take in the finished product.

Finally, many of the employers we interviewed offer few or no benefits to employees, instead paying slightly above minimum wage for entry level jobs. Some workers were satisfied with this arrangement and did not desire additional benefits — typically those with access to the charity hospital system. But many workers indicated they valued the benefits they had or that they desired a few benefits such as a week's paid vacation, basic health insurance or a retirement plan.

Identify on-site mentors for new employees.

We asked unemployed women to describe the motivations and impediments to their labor force participation. These women expressed a deep desire to make a better life for themselves and their children, and many viewed welfare reform as a way to jump-start that goal. They want continuing education and training opportunities and flexibility in the scheduling of such classes. The women expressed concern over lack of reliable transportation and child-care facilities, two factors that loom large in their potential to undermine women's success in the workplace. From our interviews with these women and their instructors, we detected the presence of a strong support network that functioned to help the women complete their GED studies or the training program in which they were currently enrolled. We believe it is critical to continue a similar support network at least in the first several months of employment.

We recommend that employers identify job coaches or mentors for new employees. Our own research indicates this approach is not far-fetched (Monroe, Blalock, and Vlosky, 1999). Recall that many employers indicated that they expected to train new employees on the job, that they often assigned a more senior employee to supervise a new worker, and that workers indicated some willingness to help bring a new employee up to speed. Thus, while this recommendation may be particularly useful for employers of women moving off of welfare, we believe it has broad application for any new entry-level employee.

Summary:

Introducing Value-Added Industries to Economically Depressed Areas as Adjuncts to Welfare Reform Policies.

The forest products business owners we interviewed indicated that they have a difficult time keeping entry-level jobs filled. These employers told us that they expect to train new employees and that they do not expect an entry-level person to possess highly specialized skills. They indicated that a *positive attitude* and *work ethic* were the most important factors for employee success.

Many of the people who will apply for low skill jobs in the forest products industry will have a tenuous attachment to the labor force. Workers who feel little commitment to the labor force are likely to bolt the first time they fail at a task or the first time the boss or a co-worker criticizes them. But the reality for many employers is that the labor pool is shallow, and these are the people with whom the employers will have to work. To give these work relationships a chance to succeed, employers can approach such people from their points of view and from outside of the employers' own middle class values about work ethic, responsibility and commitment.

Many job training programs for the chronically unemployed include a work readiness component with, we believe, a misplaced emphasis on things like resumé writing or dressing for success. These programs instead need to help unemployed people develop coping strategies for things like isolation in the workplace, for being called upon to do repetitive or menial tasks and for accepting criticism from a boss. Workers also need to learn how to create their own support network if none is offered or to find their own mentor if one is not assigned to them (Figure 2). These are innovative work readiness components that emerge from our research and that deserve a trial in job training programs.

Figure 2.

The Transition from Welfare to Work
Welfare dependent adult
Individual impediments to initial employment
Community impediments to initial employment
Individual impediments to long-term employment
Community impediments to long-term employment
Long-term employed adult
Personal comfort zone
Job skills
Education
Transportation
Single parent
Job availability
Vocational education
Public transportation
Quality child care
Work readiness
Support
Rewards
Coping strategies
Sustainable economic development
Continuing education & training
24 months

There is a ready pool of labor about to be made available in rural communities around the state – women who will be eliminated from welfare program eligibility. Some have a good work history, but circumstances conspired to leave them unemployed and dependent on welfare. Many of the women with a work history had been employed at nontraditional jobs in the past and expressed a willingness to work at nontraditional jobs in the future. Other women with little or no work experience still expressed a willingness to work and move away from welfare dependence. Finally, employers and employees told us women could do the work typical of many secondary wood products industries.

In summary, the equation seems perfectly balanced. Employers in small rural communities need workers, rural communities often have limited job opportunities and women whose welfare eligibility is about to expire need jobs. To the rural employer, no segment of the labor pool is expendable. To the woman coming off welfare, no job source can be overlooked. We see this as a win-win situation for rural employers, residents and communities, as well as for anyone interested in economic revitalization in this area.

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