

Opinion: Leaders must listen to rural voices on clean energy, environment

March 7, 2024



I grew up less than a mile from the Mason-Dixon Line in south-central Pennsylvania, where small towns lack stoplights but have an abundance of cows. Culture is dominated by the local high school's sports teams and extracurricular activities like Girl Scouts and 4H. It was an incredibly peaceful and safe place to grow up, surrounded by community and the beauty of Pennsylvania's underrated natural environment.

Although I no longer live in my small hometown, my childhood instilled a deep appreciation for small-town life and our nation's heartland. Having spent the first 18 years of my life in a rural community and now living in our nation's capital, I know there are many misunderstandings about rural communities and the distinct, crucial value they provide our country.

With that said, the last few decades have been tough on rural America. Despite brief population growth during the pandemic lockdowns, the youth rural exodus continues, and economic opportunities are often few and far between.

Rural communities also often lack critical infrastructure and access to seemingly basic services like healthcare and broadband. For instance, reaching the nearest hospital from my hometown takes half an hour by car, and this isn't atypical for rural communities. The heart of our nation needs a boost.

Yet, rural Americans decidedly do not like is being told how to live by city dwellers who could not be bothered to understand the rural way of life. This is especially evident within the environmental movement. Environmental activists, often from big cities, tend to push for all-or-nothing policies that completely disregard rural life. For example, policies that penalize gas-powered cars or mandate electric vehicles fail to acknowledge that rural communities rely far more on driving than their urban counterparts.

Hesitance to embrace the more radical side of environmentalism doesn't mean that rural Americans don't care about our environment or haven't noticed the effects of climate change. In fact, rural communities are home to the original conservationists — farmers, ranchers, hunters and anglers who feed our country and steward the surrounding environment. Farmers and ranchers, in particular, are on the front lines of environmental issues — seeing the effects of a changing climate daily in their operations.

It makes sense, then, that the next generation of rural Americans — according to a recent poll conducted by my organization — believes in these ideals even more than their older counterparts as the effects of climate change are more and more visible. Seventy-one percent of young rural conservatives from the same poll supported shifting to clean energy to secure American energy independence and address the causes and effects of climate change.

With historic clean energy and sustainable agriculture investment flooding into these communities over the last few years, rural America is where environmentalism can and will thrive.

Unfortunately, though, only 39 percent of young rural conservatives in that poll think their elected leaders are listening to them on the issues of energy and the environment. These are the folks I grew up with, many involved with agriculture or other organizations focused on the great outdoors. Not only do these folks' opinions inherently matter, but they also bring unique expertise to the environmental conversation that must be valued.

There are often national headlines lamenting rural Americans' hesitations on clean energy or a desire to prioritize only fossil fuels, but the numbers don't back those narratives up. Rural Americans support clean energy and recognize that it comes with better local environmental quality and economic opportunities for the places they call home.

In a crucial election year, elected officials must listen to our nation's routinely unheard voices, including those from rural communities.

ABOUT THE WRITER

Karly Matthews is the vice president of communications at the American Conservation Coalition. She wrote this for InsideSources.com.