

Program Promotes Rural Leadership



Farmer Claire Owen of Willcox is one member of the statewide governing board for CENTRL.

Next fall, about 30 Arizona men and women who have shown leadership qualities in their rural communities will be meeting for 2 or 3 days every couple of months to learn more about public issues and the systems that resolve them.

They will be starting a 2-year program aimed at developing their leadership skills and their understanding of government, economics, education and culture.

The project is called CENTRL. The non-profit corporation organizing it plans for the first group of leadership interns to be followed by other groups of about 30 potential rural leaders every year, said CENTRL coordinator Eldon E. Moore. He is a UA Cooperative Extension Service agent in Maricopa County.

Robert Beard, recent manager of the Bar-T-Bar Ranch near Flagstaff, completed a similar rural leadership development program in California when he ran a feedlot there in the 1970s.

"It seems like people in agriculture tend to get set in their own groups and own ways of doing things, and don't see the outside world as much as we should," said Beard. "This program really gave us a chance to get a wider perspective on things."

The workshops and 2 out-of-state tours taught participants about connections between rural and urban problems, and about the links among local, national and world economies. One 3-day program focused on appreciation of the arts. Other experiences helped Beard feel comfortable about contacting legislators personally, he said.

Arizona's CENTRL will be selecting first-year participants this summer, said Moore. Their internship program will include a dozen 2-to-3-day workshops at different Arizona locations during the next 2 years, culminating in an educational tour to a different region of the country. CENTRL, funded by grants and contributions, will cover most or all of the costs for participants.

Keith West, a member of CENTRL's 22-member governing board and president of Mohave Community College in Kingman, explained that the project grew out of a survey of rural Arizona's needs. West has served on the University of Arizona's State Rural Development Advisory Board, which ran the survey about 4 years ago.

"That extensive survey pointed out that the one factor that has stood in the way of rural development in Arizona has been lack of leadership," said West. "Rural areas have had potential leaders, but many of these leaders have lacked some important skills and experience."

He expects the training to improve leaders' abilities to identify the needs and resources of their communities, and to work effectively through government systems. As the number of effective rural leaders increases, West looks for "more cross-pollination of ideas between leaders in the rural and urban areas of the state."

Robert Beard predicts, "The people funding this program will see the benefits of it in a big way." Several members of his class in the California program are now in institutional leadership positions in the legislature and in agricultural organizations.

Candidates for the Arizona program must be at least 25 years old, have demonstrated leadership qualities, and be able to commit time for the training. Nominations and applications are being taken by Moore, West and other board members.