

Why are federal agencies completely funding this private nonprofit group?

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In this age of investigative journalists exposing front groups, digging out a nonprofit organization totally funded by federal agencies is a big red flag. When it has a name like Rural Community Assistance Partnership, it sounds like a cabal of radical urbanites trying to boutique the rednecks.

What's going on here? Something unthinkably nefarious lurking deep within the Obama agriculture department? A sneak attack against locals by the Environmental Protection Agency? Health and Human Services' smiling mask chanting, "I'm from the government and I'm here to help?"

None of the above, as I found while researching RCAP, the Rural Community Assistance Partnership, Inc., a 501c3 nonprofit group based in Washington, D.C. and operating on \$7.2 million of federal money, according to its most recent Internal Revenue Service Form 990.

RCAP's "partnership" is actually a network made up of six autonomous regional partners with their own names that together cover rural America, with a national office on K Street in the District of Columbia. The regional partners do all the program work with their own governance, staff, and other sources of funding. Each of the partners received about \$1 million of the national's \$7.2 million all-federal revenue in 2011.

RCAP's website says its region-specific services include loans for water and wastewater infrastructure, as well as housing and business development; community and economic development; job training and placement; and community-based education programs.

That doesn't sound very radical — the projects lean heavily to practical help with the basic need for water — getting it, using it, and returning it as good as new with the best technology and training available. Most of the training is for small-town council members, utility commissioners, and their work crews, getting them up to speed on financing, technical expertise, and compliance with various codes and regulations.

I spoke to RCAP communications director, Steven Padre, and he said that's essentially what they do, mostly in towns of 3,000 or under and in need of help with water issues.

But why is RCAP a private nonprofit group funded entirely by the Department of Agriculture, the EPA, and the Department of Health and Human Services? Why isn't RCAP a federal agency itself?

Padre said, "It's a long and unusual story, but it's something like why the United States government doesn't build its own airplanes and missiles: they could, but it makes more sense to contract them out."

Padre then told me the RCAP story. It began near Roanoke, Virginia, in the late 1960s as a direct beneficiary of President Johnson's War on Poverty and its Office of Economic Opportunity. The key OEO institution was the Community Action Program, whose Roanoke Valley agency, Total Action Against Poverty, designed and organized a local rural installation called the Demonstration Water Project. Its combination of capable locals, paid water experts and government money successfully brought affordable water services to poor communities.

The DWP was so successful that it grew into a coalition called the National Demonstration Water Project, a unique experiment in helping rural areas nation-wide for the benefit of low-income families and communities. In 1972, the Rural Community Assistance Partnership was incorporated and its network began to grow. In 1979, the last of its six regional partners was incorporated and authorized to operate a rural water/wastewater assistance program.

RCAP's focus remains on water infrastructure but partners are adding a foundation-funded comprehensive approach, including expanded loans for healthcare facility acquisition, construction and renovation, and financing for housing projects for agricultural workers.

Sometimes my research comes up with pleasant surprises. RCAP is one. I don't recommend being blindly opposed to government, even the feds, doing common sense things to help people help themselves.

Washington Examiner columnist Ron Arnold is executive vice president of the Center for the Defense of Free Enterprise.

