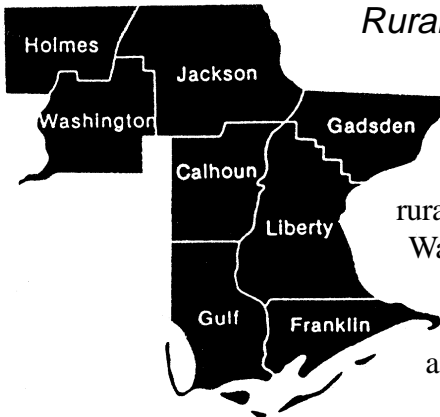


## One voice, countless opportunities

*Rural Florida counties combine efforts to develop*



**WFEC's service area lies within an eight-county region that will benefit from state designation as a Rural Area of Critical Economic Concern.**

**E**ight northwest Florida counties, including the four West Florida Electric Cooperative serves, are joining forces to improve the quality of life for rural Panhandle residents. Calhoun, Holmes, Jackson and Washington Counties, as well as Franklin, Gadsden, Gulf and Liberty Counties, have formed Opportunity Florida to market, promote and provide economic development assistance within the area.

During Florida's 1999 legislative session, the Legislature and Gov. Jeb Bush declared each of these counties a Rural Area of Critical Economic Concern. The designation allows the waiver of certain development requirements and ensures projects benefitting the eight counties receive first consideration for state support. Economic incentives traditionally available only to manufacturing and distribution now extend to any state-approved business that creates jobs and strengthens the economy within the region.

The designation opens economic development opportunities for the eight counties and enables them to streamline the development process and work as a team. Special funding for the region is also a benefit.

WFEC, with Rep. Bev Kilmer, the Chipola Regional Workforce Development Board, the St. Joe Company and other local business leaders, was instrumental in creating Opportunity Florida, the non-profit corporation that will coordinate the counties' endeavors to take advantage of the designation. The organization's 15-member board is unusual in its direction and control almost exclusively by the business community; Kilmer is its sole governmental member. With each board member actively participating in the organization's efforts, a two- or-three-person staff will be sufficient to oversee its day-to-day operations.



**Tommy McDonald**

Joining forces invests the counties in the coalition with greater influence and leverage in the legislative and business arenas, giving them an equal footing with their more urban neighbors. For example, the population Opportunity Florida represents is 20 percent greater than that of Bay County, 50 percent larger than that of Houston County and two-thirds the size of Leon County's. "This program has the potential to be the most exciting thing that's happened to northwest Florida in a long time," said Chipley Mayor Tommy McDonald, Opportunity Florida board chairman and representative for the region's economic development organizations. "It's going to pull a lot of communities together, and it will help the ones that aren't doing well by providing the expertise to evaluate their economic development programs."

Opportunity Florida will serve as a sort of "brand name"

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for marketing the region; however, its purpose isn't merely to attract industries and residents, McDonald emphasized. "We don't really want growth -- What's important is development, not growth. We need controlled development. We've got to be able to develop in the right frame to enhance the quality of life in the counties."

One of the board's first steps will be the hiring of a staff. The state has offered five yearly staffing grants of \$100,000 each, provided each grant is matched with contributions from the private sector; the required money has already been raised for this year. Independent economic development consultant Tucson Roberts, who had a key role in Opportunity Florida's creation, temporarily heads the organization.

In addition to McDonald, Opportunity Florida board members from WFEC's service area include Jed Hiers, for Calhoun County; Tom Jenkins, for Holmes County; Kim Ellis, for Washington County, also serving as treasurer; Harold Donaldson, for Jackson County, also serving as secretary; and Vince Andry, of Gulf Power, representing the area's utilities.



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