

## Center 2027 Research Grant Program Request for Proposals



The Center for Rural Pennsylvania is excited to announce the 2027 Research Grant Program Request for Proposals. The Center's new grant cycle is open and accepting applications from eligible faculty members of The Pennsylvania State University, Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE) universities, and the regional campuses of the University

of Pittsburgh. A qualified faculty member must serve as the primary project director (or PI), and each university is responsible for determining that an applicant is an eligible member of the faculty. Letters of intent are due on June 1, 2026.

For the 2027 grant cycle, the Center strongly encourages submissions that demonstrate meaningful collaboration across disciplines and, where feasible, across eligible institutions. Rural policy challenges are inherently interdisciplinary and often cross regional and institutional boundaries. Research designs that include cross-campus or cross-institutional partnerships, as well as collaboration with community stakeholders, public agencies, or industry partners, may be viewed favorably during the review process when such collaboration strengthens the research design and enhances policy relevance.

One-year grants are awarded for applied policy research or to identify local strategies that can result in legislative or program policy considerations or recommendations. For the 2027 grant cycle, the anticipated maximum award amount is \$60,000.

Mini grants are awarded to projects that are shorter and more limited in scope; for example, they may focus on time-sensitive issues or case studies. Projects supported as mini grants are typically nine months in duration and will receive approximately \$18,000 in Center support. As with projects that receive full awards, mini grants should

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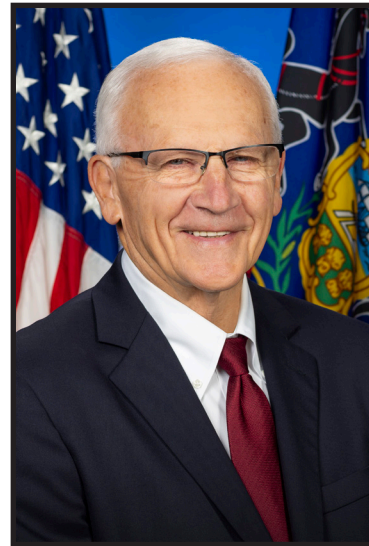
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## Chairman's Message



As Chairman of the Center for Rural Pennsylvania Board of Directors, I am pleased to share the latest edition of our newsletter, which highlights important updates affecting rural communities in the Commonwealth.

First, the Center is excited to announce the launch of its 2027 Research Grant Program Request for Proposals (RFP). This year's grant program is organized around three thematic focus areas: economic development, health and wellness, and agriculture and the

environment. Within these areas, targeted topics address issues such as workforce development, aging services, school-based health resources, agricultural innovation, and environmental sustainability. These priorities reflect the interconnected nature of rural policy challenges and the importance of data-driven research.

The Center encourages interested faculty members at our partner institutions to apply and share the RFP opportunity with their networks. The application process begins with a required Letter of Intent, due June 1, 2026.

In addition to grant opportunities, this edition highlights new data and research findings. Recent population estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau show modest population growth in the Commonwealth, driven largely by international migration, while broader demographic trends continue to present both opportunities and challenges for rural areas.

We also feature a recent student research project examining trace metal contamination in waterways in McKean County. The study provides valuable insight into environmental conditions and potential public health considerations and emphasizes the importance of ongoing monitoring, targeted data collection, and informed resource management strategies.

Additional updates include information on Pennsylvania's industrial hemp industry, as well as funding opportunities such as the Rural Communities Opioid Response Program (RCORP) Planning Grants and the Pennsylvania State Grant Program.

Thank you for your continued support as we work together to empower rural communities throughout the Commonwealth. Together, we can make a meaningful impact and improve the quality of life for all Pennsylvanians.

Senator Gene Yaw

result in a report that includes policy considerations or recommendations.

Starting with the 2027 RFP, applicants requesting a maximum award are also asked to submit a research design that could be completed at a lower level of funding (i.e., as a mini grant). This allows the Center flexibility in awarding grants and increases the possibility of funding a higher number of projects across eligible institutions.

### 2027 Thematic Focus and Targeted Topics

The Center has three thematic focuses and six targeted topics for 2027. For each of the Center's thematic areas, two targeted topics are listed.

#### Thematic Focus I: Economic Development

Exploring strategies to support the long-term economic competitiveness and fiscal stability of rural Pennsylvania communities.

Rural economic vitality depends on strategic public investments, workforce alignment, land-use decisions, and private sector engagement. Research under this theme should examine how state and local policy choices shape long-term growth, labor force participation, business development, and community investment.

1. Investigate Public Sector Interventions and Rural Development Outcomes
2. Understand the Extent and Impact of Private Investment in Workforce Development, Including Short-Term Workforce Training and Apprenticeship

#### Thematic Focus II: Health and Wellness

Understanding rural access to healthcare, student well-being, and aging services to support residents across the lifespan.

Rural communities face workforce shortages in health care, aging populations, and disparities in school-based health resources. Research should evaluate service delivery capacity, funding structures, and

sustainability of rural health-related systems.

1. Examine Successful Aging-In-Place Models for Health Services in Rural Communities
2. Evaluate Public School Health-Related Service Delivery in Rural Districts

#### Thematic Focus III: Agriculture and the Environment

Identifying how land, water, and natural resources support livelihoods, food systems, and rural communities.

1. Explore the Possibility and Benefits of Incentivizing New Farming Producers in New and Specialty Crops and Areas of Growth
2. Examine the Economies of Conservation and Environmental Policies and Their Impact on Agriculture, Ecosystem Services, and Rural Communities

#### 2027 Open Topics

In addition, research may be proposed on an open topic; any open topic must show a clear relationship to one or more of the Center's mandated research areas:

- Rural people and communities
- Economic development
- Local government finance and administration
- Community services
- Natural resources and the environment
- Rural values and social change
- Educational outreach
- Agriculture
- Health and welfare concerns

Visit the Center's RFP page at [www.rural.pa.gov/research-grants/request-for-proposals](http://www.rural.pa.gov/research-grants/request-for-proposals).

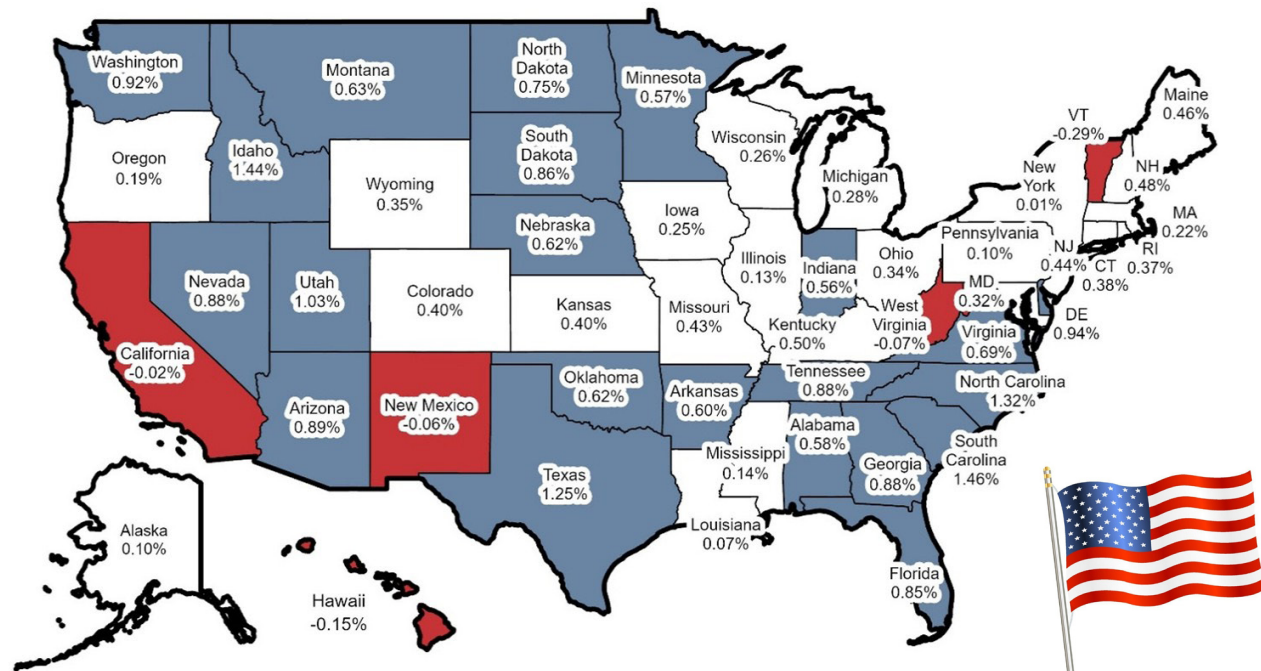
In January 2026, the U.S. Census Bureau released its 2025 population estimates for all 50 states, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia. This fact sheet analyzes these data to inform policymakers about general population trends occurring at the national and state levels that may impact Pennsylvania population trends.

Key findings include:

- From 2024 to 2025, Pennsylvania's population grew by 13,600 people, an increase of 0.10 percent from the prior year.
- In 2023, the Center's population projections forecasted Pennsylvania's total population to be 13.11 million in 2025, which is 0.38 percent lower than these recent Census estimates. This suggests the statewide population is growing slower than anticipated.
- International migration again drove the increase in Pennsylvania's population, more than offsetting net population declines due to natural change (births minus deaths) and net domestic out-migration. Despite this trend, these recent data show a significant decline (54 percent) in Pennsylvania's net international migration compared to the previous year, in line with national trends, which showed an almost 54-percent decline in net international migration to the U.S. from 2024 to 2025.
- Pennsylvania remains the fifth most populous state in the U.S. with over 13 million residents. California (39 million residents), Texas (32 million residents), Florida (23 million residents), and New York (20 million residents) were the only states to have larger populations than Pennsylvania.
- Five states (California, Hawaii, New Mexico, Vermont, and West Virginia) and Puerto Rico experienced population declines from 2024 to 2025, while strong growth (above 1 percent year over year) occurred in Idaho, North Carolina, South Carolina, Texas, and Utah.

Access the full fact sheet at [www.rural.pa.gov](http://www.rural.pa.gov).

### Percent Change in Population by U.S. State, 2024 to 2025



# Center Student Research Grant Report Assesses McKean County Waterways

The Center's student research grant report, *An Assessment of Trace Metal Contamination and Associated Human Health Risks in the Waterways of McKean County, Pennsylvania*, by Dr. Femi Frances Oloye and Madhav Mohan Ellini of the University of Pittsburgh at Bradford, evaluates surface water quality across 10 sites in McKean County by analyzing concentrations of iron, copper, chromium, lead, and nickel and assessing potential human health risks associated with recreational exposure. Using laboratory analysis and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) risk assessment methods, the study examines how both historical and ongoing human activities, including legacy industrial activity and municipal influences, may affect water quality in the region.



The study finds that overall water quality is generally good, with lead and nickel below detection limits and most copper and iron levels within acceptable ranges for aquatic life and drinking water. However, elevated iron concentrations downstream of Bradford exceeded environmental guidelines for aquatic organisms, suggesting localized impacts potentially linked to wastewater discharge. Chromium was detected at all sampling sites, with the highest concentration along Tuna Creek. This value approaches the EPA's maximum contaminant level for total chromium in drinking water. While non-carcinogenic health risks were found to be low across all locations, a measure of incremental lifetime cancer risk for total chromium indicates that it is higher than the EPA's acceptable risk level (assuming that chromium is in the carcinogenic hexavalent form). These findings indicate the presence of potential contamination hotspots and highlight the importance of continued monitoring and more detailed investigation into the sources and forms of contaminants.

Policy considerations from the study emphasize the importance of enhanced, targeted monitoring and place-based management strategies to address localized water quality concerns. Recommendations include implementing a county-wide monitoring program using more advanced analytical techniques, such as methods capable of detecting lower concentrations of metals like lead and nickel, and conducting chromium speciation analysis to distinguish between its more harmful and less harmful forms.

The report also suggests the need for targeted source identification efforts, particularly near wastewater treatment facilities and areas with historical industrial activity, to better understand and mitigate contamination pathways. Additional considerations include improving data collection and public communication to ensure communities and stakeholders are informed of potential risks, issuing precautionary guidance for vulnerable populations where appropriate, and developing contingency strategies for remediation if contamination levels increase. Overall, the study suggests policy considerations that balance environmental protection with public health and long-term water resource management in McKean County.

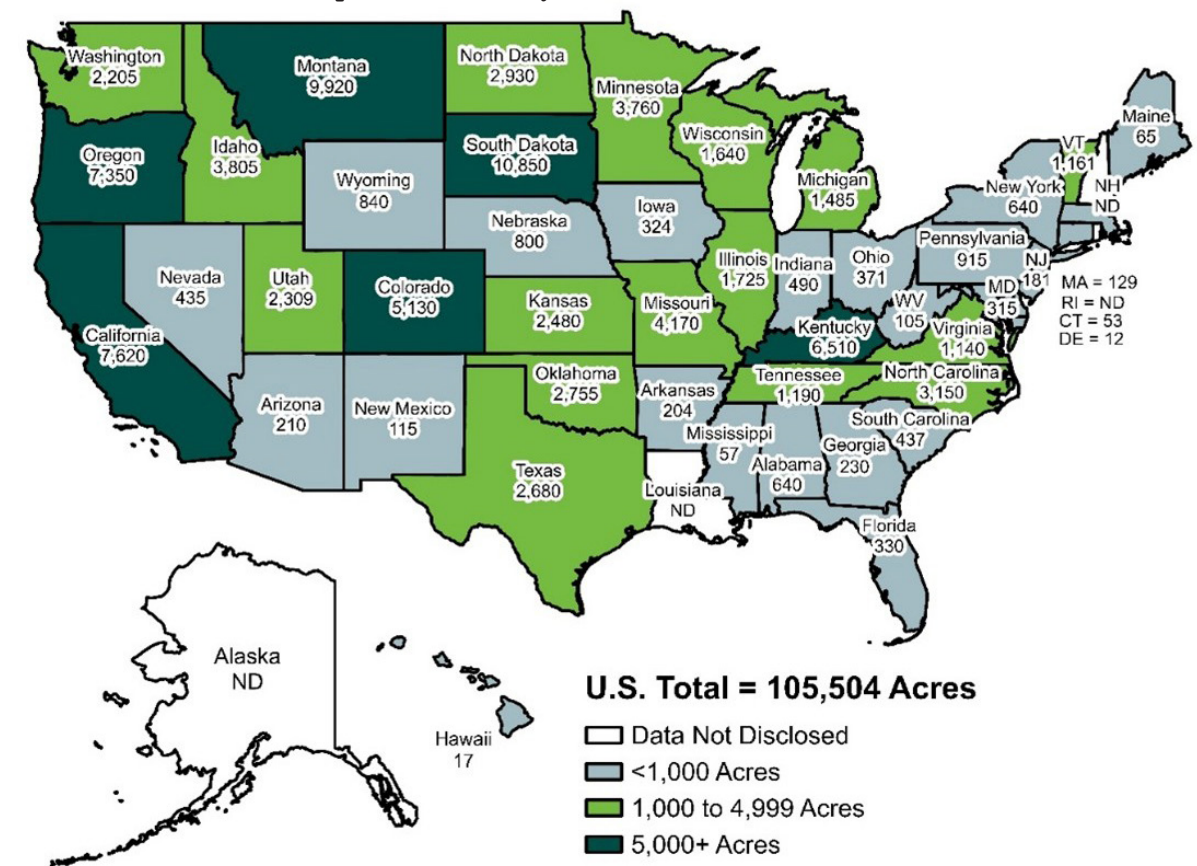
# JUST THE FACTS: Industrial Hemp in Pennsylvania

In 2016, Pennsylvania authorized hemp cultivation through the Industrial Hemp Research Act of July 20, 2016 (P.L. 822, No. 92), and the Commonwealth's first registered hemp grower began farming hemp in 2017. Hemp is a type of cannabis plant that, by law, must contain 0.3 percent tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) or less, including all parts of the plant, such as seeds, oils, and extracts. Hemp is not only used as a cannabinoid or for medicinal uses, but various parts of the hemp plant can be used for textiles (such as rope and apparel), paper, building materials, foods, and industrial products as well as personal hygiene products like soaps, cosmetics, and lotions.

In 2022, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) National Agriculture Statistics Service (NASS) published the first National Hemp Report, providing data on hemp acreage, yield, production, price, and value in the United States beginning in 2021.

Between 2021 and 2024, Pennsylvania planted a total of 1,155 acres of industrial hemp grown in open areas and harvested 915 acres, on average harvesting 229 acres of hemp out of 289 acres planted (79 percent) per year. Nationwide, during the same period, a total of 155,440 acres of industrial hemp grown in open areas were planted and 105,504 acres were harvested. The top three states by total acres harvested between 2021 and 2024 were South Dakota (10,850 acres), Montana (9,920 acres), and California (7,620 acres). Pennsylvania ranks 23rd nationally in total harvested acres since 2021.

**Total Acres of Industrial Hemp Harvested in  
Open Areas by State, 2021 to 2024**



Note: (ND) Withheld to avoid disclosing individual operations.  
Data Source: 2021 – 2024 National Hemp Report, NASS, USDA.



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## Resources

### **Rural Communities Opioid Response Program (RCORP) Planning Grants**

The Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) is now offering Rural Communities Opioid Response Program (RCORP) Planning Grants to help rural communities develop coordinated strategies to address opioid use disorder and expand access to prevention, treatment, and recovery services. Funding supports partnership-building, community needs assessments, and the development of comprehensive plans to strengthen local behavioral health systems. Awards are expected to be approximately \$100,000 each, with no cost-sharing requirement. Eligible applicants include state and local governments, nonprofit organizations, and tribal entities. Applications are due April 27, 2026. For more information, visit [www.hrsa.gov/rural-health/opioid-response](http://www.hrsa.gov/rural-health/opioid-response).

### **Pennsylvania State Grant Program for Higher Education**

Administered by the Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency (PHEAA), the Pennsylvania State Grant Program helps offset tuition costs for students enrolled in approved postsecondary institutions across the Commonwealth. Funding is awarded based on financial need and supports students attending colleges, universities, and career schools, helping to make higher education more accessible and affordable. Applicants must complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), which is used to determine eligibility for state grant funding. Students are encouraged to apply early to maximize aid opportunities and ensure timely consideration. The FAFSA priority deadline is May 1, 2026. Learn more at [www.pheaa.org/grants/state-grant-program](http://www.pheaa.org/grants/state-grant-program).