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New River Gorge Regional Development Authority

Leads Six-State Build Back Better Grant Proposal for Outdoor Economy Growth

Beckley, W.Va. (Nov. 16, 2021) – The New River Gorge Regional Development Authority (NRGRDA) has submitted a \$500,000 grant proposal for Phase 1 of the U.S. Department of Commerce’s Build Back Better Regional Challenge that, if funded, would coordinate a six-state collaboration to further grow the outdoor economy.

NRGRDA executive director Jina Belcher worked alongside the WVU Brad and Alys Smith Outdoor Economic Development Collaborative’s (OEDC) Assistant Dean, Dr. Danny Twilley, to lead the regional collaboration for the Outdoor Recreation Industry and Vibrant Economies Strategies (Outdoor RIVERS) project to leverage the assets within the Central Appalachian region's most rural and coal-impacted communities to advance the growing outdoor industry cluster.

Belcher said the Outdoor RIVERS project is one of 10 submitted by West Virginia organizations (529 grants were submitted from all 50 states and five territories). “The NRGRDA initiative is the only West Virginia-led project that includes other state economic development organizations,” said Belcher. “Our advocacy strategy focuses on ensuring that the Outdoor RIVERS proposal is considered by the U.S. Commerce Department as a regional collaborative grant and not simply as a competitor to the other West Virginia proposals also being considered,” she said. “This robust proposal is well positioned to broadly support the grass-roots state-focused proposals across Central Appalachia. Ideally, our six-state outdoor economy collaborative would be funded as well as one or more West Virginia-specific proposals.”

The NRGRDA-led proposal was cultivated from an Appalachian Regional Commission-initiated stakeholder conversation that includes successful organizations in Central Appalachia's most critically distressed states of West Virginia, North Carolina, Kentucky, Ohio, Virginia, and Tennessee. Over the next five years, the project will result in advancing a collaborative industry cluster through the development of a ready workforce, investment into critical infrastructure, leveraging of the area's cultural and natural assets, and an increase in capacity of the local communities. The success of this project will be measured by quantifying new job creation, new capital investment, new businesses created, technical assistance deployed, and a database of existing and new shovel-ready projects impacting the outdoor economy. The project will also leverage the recent redesignation of the New River Gorge National River to a National Park and Preserve as the nation's newest outdoor asset, located in the heart of Central Appalachia. Working together, the coalition members are committed to creating an outdoor economy that leverages Appalachia's assets and creates the outdoor capital of the East Coast.

Belcher said the Outdoor RIVERS initiative has the potential to create 45,000 new jobs; retain 150,000 jobs; create 1,000 new businesses; retain 1,000 existing businesses; and encourage capital investments of \$500 million in the six-state region.

The Commerce Department will award \$500,000 in technical assistance funds to 50-60 regional coalitions (out of the 529 proposals received) to develop and support three to eight feasible projects in each regional growth cluster. Belcher said the reward for a productive regional strategy in Phase 1 is significant: in phase 2, EDA will award 20-30 regional coalitions \$25 million to \$75 million, and up to \$100 million, to implement those projects.

The Build Back Better Regional Challenge is designed to assist communities nationwide in their efforts to build back better by accelerating the economic recovery from the coronavirus pandemic and building local economies that will be resilient to future economic shocks.

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About New River Gorge Regional Development Authority: The New River Gorge Regional Development Authority's (NRGRDA) mission is to initiate, facilitate and support the economic and community development efforts within the counties of Fayette, Nicholas, Raleigh, and Summers located in this region of southern West Virginia. NRGRDA stimulates the regional economy through business expansion and retention efforts, including an extensive portfolio of financial services; the management of sites for new companies locating to our region; and serving as a point of access for local service providers which offer a variety of technical assistance for business owners.

The West Virginia Hive is the entrepreneurship program of the NRGRDA and the administrator of the Country Roads Angel Network (CRAN). CRAN serves all 55 counties of the Mountain State, offering emerging businesses early stage, seed funding to bring their creations to market. The Hive has served 331 businesses and helped launch 44 businesses in its 12-county service area. It is currently assisting 74 clients with business advising and technical assistance support on business modeling, financing, human resources, marketing, and other services.