

RURAL DEFINITIONS

Federal and state analysts have various measures to determine what is “rural.” While some rely on the density of population or the degree to which jobs are concentrated in just a few industries, most are based on some population threshold. Below that level, counties are considered rural. Above it, they are urban.

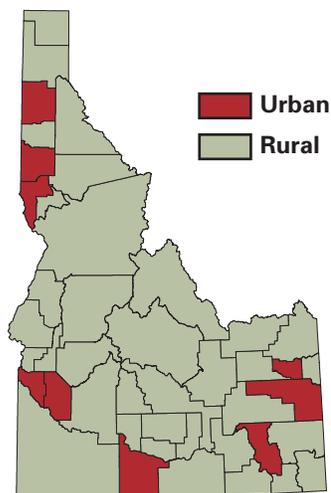
Authors of past editions of the Profile concluded that the definition most commonly used by federal analysts fails to capture the reality of Idaho. Instead, they defined rural counties as those in which the largest town or city had less than 20,000 residents. To be consistent, the definition we use here is the same as the one used in previous Profiles. Thus, as of 2005, 35 of Idaho’s 44 counties are rural. Because our definition is different from that used by other analysts, comparisons between rural Idaho and the rural U.S. as a whole are general and not exact.

As in the rest of the nation, Idaho’s rural areas differ demographically, economically and in other dimensions. To better describe this diversity, we consider three groups of rural counties in the Profile:

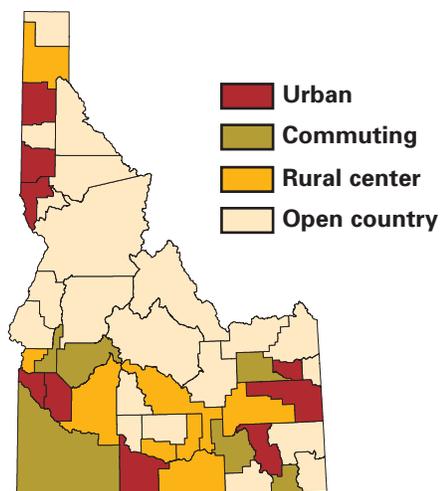
- **Commuting** – counties in which at least 25 percent of the workforce commutes to a metro county.¹ An example is Owyhee County, where 31 percent of the workforce commutes to Canyon County.
- **Rural centers** – counties with an urban cluster² of at least 7,500 but without a central city of 20,000 or more, and with no strong commuting ties to a metro county. An example is Blaine County, where the Hailey / Ketchum urban cluster has a population of over 12,000.
- **Open country** – counties with no urban cluster that meets the 7,500 population threshold and with no strong commuting ties to a metro county. An example is Shoshone County, in which the largest urban cluster around Kellogg has about 3,400 people.

Our classification is useful for exploring conditions across a wide range of rural Idaho communities from those with rapidly growing cities to those that are more remote and less densely settled. Understanding the diversity of these communities better equips local officials, policy makers and development specialists to build on Idaho’s valuable rural assets.

Urban and rural counties, 2005



Urban and three types of rural counties, 2005



¹ A metro county has an urbanized area of at least 50,000 people.

² An urban cluster is a densely settled area that has a population of 2,500 to 49,999.