



Center  
on Rural  
Innovation



## 2025 IMPACT

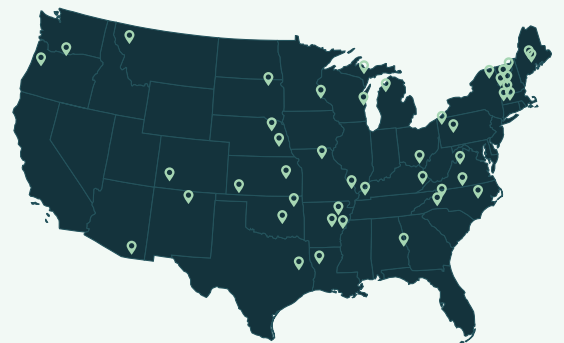
# Building What's Next for Rural America

For nearly a decade, the Center on Rural Innovation (CORI) has helped rural communities develop the infrastructure for innovation-driven growth. Our work combines research and data, ecosystem building, capital access, and national connectivity to expand economic opportunity through tech entrepreneurship.

In 2025, that work translated into significant, measurable impact. Through our Rural Innovation Network, we expanded our reach, **increasing the number of people served by 20%** and **securing \$17 million in funding for partner communities** to develop innovation-based economies. Across the Network, **more than 100 workers gained skills for careers in the tech economy, while 15 new entrepreneur support programs helped strengthen the pipeline of rural startups**. Through CORI's investment funds, we provided **\$1.3 million in direct capital investment** to rural startups, catalyzing the innovation and growth that creates high quality jobs, and prosperous communities.

## Community-led Innovation

**Thriving rural economies depend on strong ecosystems:** the relationships, resources, and support systems that make lasting economic development possible. CORI's holistic approach combines tech entrepreneurship, workforce development, and ecosystem building to help communities grow the talent, networks, and local capacity needed to expand opportunity.



Central to this work is CORI's **Rural Innovation Network**—a national member network that helps rural communities grow tech economies through programs, practical tools, resources, and ongoing engagement with peers across the country. In 2025, CORI welcomed **nine new communities** into the Network, expanding its reach to **43 communities across 26 states representing 4.4 million rural people**. Since its inception, CORI has helped Network communities create more than 1,000 tech jobs, launch 400 startups, and prepare thousands of rural learners for futures in tech.

### IN 2025:

**51%**

of our partner communities  
launched a new program supporting  
rural founders or workers

**20%**

increase in people  
within the Rural  
Innovation Network

**\$17M**

funding secured for  
Network communities  
with CORI support

**6**

new rural companies  
received investment  
through our funds

# Catalyzing Rural Innovation

## TECH ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Rural tech entrepreneurs often lack access to the networks and resources needed to launch and grow successful businesses. In 2025, CORI enabled 15 new entrepreneur support programs—including incubators, accelerators, and boot camps—across the Network, **helping communities build stronger entrepreneurship pathways and expand the pipeline of startups emerging from rural America.** In total, CORI's Network communities have launched **33 accelerators and incubators** which support hundreds of rural entrepreneurs.

## TECH WORKFORCE TRAINING

As technology and AI reshape the workforce, more rural workers need access to training that can help them build new skills to enter the tech economy. Throughout the year, **CORI supported over one hundred learners with access to training opportunities in IT, cybersecurity, data, AI, and project management.** Additionally, we supported **workforce initiatives that helped communities recruit learners, deliver relevant training, and strengthen local talent pipelines.**

## COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP

Thriving rural economies require strong partnerships, clear strategies, and organizations working toward a shared vision. Across our Network, CORI helps local leaders, employers, educators, and entrepreneurs build the networks needed for long-term economic growth. In 2025, we **facilitated dozens of strategy workshops that helped communities move from assessment to action** by aligning around shared priorities and strengthening local innovation ecosystems.

## GROWING OPPORTUNITY CLOSE TO HOME

*"The overwhelming majority of our workforce actually lives in rural, small towns. We found a way to create an above-average opportunity for good people and enabled them to stay in the communities that they [and] their families like, without having to move to a larger city."*

Dusty Birge, Fast Forward Founder & CEO  
CORI Innovation Fund portfolio company

## Rural Research and Insights

Through our original research and data tools, we help community leaders better understand the opportunities and challenges shaping rural America in order to make informed and strategic decisions. In 2025, CORI launched the **Capital Exposure Project**, a multi-year research initiative supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation that examines how access to capital shapes economic opportunity in rural America. The first report in the series, ***Rural America's Struggle to Access Private Capital***, offers an in-depth look at the barriers facing rural entrepreneurs and established a foundation for forthcoming analyses exploring the role of public and philanthropic capital. Together, the series aims to equip communities, policymakers, and investors with the insights needed to strengthen rural economies and expand opportunity.

## RURAL FOUNDER SPOTLIGHT: SARAH HINKLEY, CO-FOUNDER OF BARN OWL PRECISION ANALYTICS (BOPA)

*BOPA, a portfolio company based in La Junta, Colorado, builds advanced precision agricultural tools—including an autonomous nano tractor that weeds, sprays, and adapts with smart technology—to help small and mid-sized farms reduce costs, ease labor demands, and grow more efficiently.*



## Investing in Rural Innovation

Rural entrepreneurs play a critical role in their local economies, but too often they lack access to the capital needed to grow and scale their businesses. **Because only 1% of venture capital goes to rural businesses, expanding access to investment is essential to helping rural communities create jobs, attract talent, and build long-term economic opportunity.**

The [CORI Innovation Fund](#) invests in scalable rural tech startups across the country and has deployed **\$8.65 million in capital since 2020**. CORI also manages the [Green Mountain Accelerator Fund \(GMAF\)](#), which supports scalable entrepreneurship and tech job creation in rural Vermont by investing in early-stage tech startups.

By pairing capital with strategic support and national connections, CORI helps founders accelerate growth, attract follow-on funding, and strengthen the communities where they choose to build.

# 19

tech companies across  
our portfolios

IN 2025:

# 6

new companies received  
investment through our funds

# \$1.3M

direct capital investment in  
portfolio companies

# \$22M

total capital raised by our  
portfolio companies



## Impact in Action

Whether investing in a high-growth company or empowering a community to build its innovation ecosystem, CORI's work is grounded in the belief that rural places can create lasting prosperity when they have access to the right capital, connections, and support.

### Company Spotlight: Agile Space Industries | Durango, Colorado

Agile Space Industries, based in the Rural Innovation Network community of Durango, Colorado, shows what is possible when rural companies have access to the capital, networks, and local support needed to grow. A portfolio company of the CORI Innovation Fund, Agile designs and manufactures advanced in-space propulsion systems for commercial, civil, and national defense missions. Founded by aerospace veteran Daudi Barnes after relocating from Los Angeles, Agile now serves customers including NASA, Lockheed Martin, and the U.S. Air Force—demonstrating that world-class innovation can thrive in rural America. Barnes has cited the close support of Durango's business community as a key reason the company has been able to grow and thrive there.

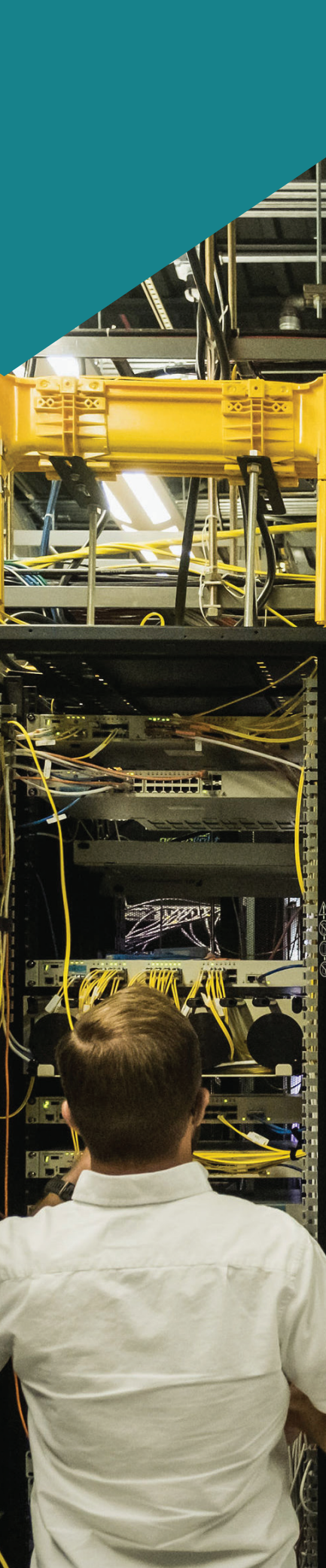
Over the past several years, Agile has scaled at an impressive pace. Recently, **the company closed a \$19 million Series A round**, bringing total capital raised to approximately \$40 million and building a contracted revenue backlog of roughly \$60 million. Since 2020, **Agile has grown from 17 employees to more than 130**, expanding engineering, manufacturing, and technical jobs in rural Colorado. Agile's continued growth reflects what is possible when entrepreneurial ingenuity is matched with the capital, networks, and community support needed to build nationally competitive companies in rural America.

### Community Spotlight: Waterville, Maine

In 2020, CORI partnered with Waterville, Maine, a historic mill-town that had been hit by decades of deindustrialization. As part of a broader revitalization effort, CORI brought together local leaders to chart a course for developing an innovation-based economy.

With CORI's support, the community was able to secure \$1.2 million in public and private funding to launch Dirigo Labs, a regional accelerator. They connect startup founders to mentors, capital, academic resources, and talent—helping Waterville retain entrepreneurs, support new businesses, create quality jobs, and build a more diverse and resilient economy. To date, Dirigo Labs has supported the creation of over 190 jobs and 18 Maine-based inventions, and **startups from their accelerator have generated over \$17.3 million in revenue, and raised more than \$35 million in capital.**

*Above left: Agile Space Industries. Above right: Waterville, Maine*



# The Future is Rural

Looking ahead, we're continuing to build a foundation for rural innovation that expands opportunity more broadly. Here's where we're focused in 2026 and beyond:

## Scaling the Rural Innovation Network

By 2027, CORI aims to grow the [Rural Innovation Network](#) to 90 communities, doubling our reach and expanding our impact to nearly 20% of the total rural population.

## Launching CORI Innovation Fund III

CORI is raising its [largest venture fund](#) to date. We plan to deploy more than \$40 million in capital to rural startups and help catalyze additional investment and job creation in communities across the country.

## Empowering Rural America in the Age of AI

AI is changing the way people learn, work, and scale their businesses. [We're equipping local leaders](#) with the insights, data, and the peer network they need to bring AI-driven opportunities home; preparing the rural workforce for AI-native jobs; and supporting entrepreneurs with best-in-class AI tools and startup frameworks.

## The Rural Insights Hub

CORI is developing the Rural Insights Hub—an AI-powered platform that combines research, mapping, data analytics, and storytelling to provide rural leaders with actionable insights and tools to shape the economies of the future.

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**CORI's work would not be possible without the generosity, partnership, and shared commitment of the individuals, organizations, and communities that support our mission. Thank you for helping expand opportunity and build a more prosperous future for rural America.**

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