Lyons, NE – Today, the Center for Rural Affairs announced that the sixth annual MarketPlace rural entrepreneurship conference will be held on Wednesday, February 22, 2012 at the Ramada Inn and Conference Center in Kearney, Nebraska.

“Entrepreneurship and small businesses are the economic backbone of Nebraska's rural economy and especially important during times of economic hardship,” said Chuck Hassebrook, Executive Director of the Center for Rural Affairs and the conference’s luncheon keynote. “MarketPlace is focused on creating jobs and building the rural economy and anyone who is committed to creating their own opportunities and shaping their own destiny through entrepreneurship should attend.”

According to Hassebrook, the conference offers a space to share ideas and learn from other attendees and it features strong, hands-on learning opportunities for potential and existing farm, ranch, home-based and mainstreet business owners as well as community leaders and young people interested in entrepreneurship.

“Entrepreneurs who attend MarketPlace tell us it is making a difference. Fifty two percent of small business participants have started, expanded, or made changes to their business because of the conferences; and nearly 88% of small businesses who made changes or expanded their business as a result of Marketplace sought financing to do so,” explained Hassebrook. “They borrowed money from banks, USDA Rural Development and often from personal resources like saving and credit cards were the most common sources of capital. And 79% of attending small businesses reported using new resources because of their participation in MarketPlace and their networking there.”

The bottom-line is that MarketPlace has produced dramatic results for those rural entrepreneurs who have been able to attend, and it just keeps getting better, declared Hassebrook.**

Joanne Steele, CEO/Owner of the Rural Tourism Marketing Group in Dunsmuir, California will kick off the conference as the opening keynote speaker. She will start off the day sharing the kind of knowledge and enthusiasm each up-and-coming entrepreneur, as well as established entrepreneurs, needs to succeed.

Steele, has worked for over 15 years helping rural small businesses, and rural communities learn effective marketing strategies, and community development techniques that utilize local resources. She worked as Director of Tourism for a rural California county for 10 years utilizing a small operating budget to generate over $4 million equivalent press coverage for rural businesses.

Through workshops, presentations and her blog, RuralTourismMarketing.com, she teaches state of the art marketing strategies retooled for the small local business owner. Her dedication to rural culture and
values has helped her work effectively with small towns and locally owned businesses, assisting them in building and marketing a tourism industry that serves their needs while welcoming visitors. She has worked with rural development organizations in Oregon, Kansas, California and Arkansas and consults through her blog with rural development specialists throughout the U.S.

“For rural based businesses the road to success involves creating and nurturing relationships to help you get what you need to be successful, from your town, your support organizations and even yourself,” said Steele.

When you decide to start a new business in a small town, you have a whole community pulling for you. Knowing how to access and use all that local good will could mean the difference between success and failure,” Steele added.

The addition of Steele rounds out the impressive lineup for the full day event which includes high quality educational sessions and exhibitor booths with abundant networking opportunities. The dynamic combination of expert presenters, essential service providers, individuals already engaged in entrepreneurial activities, and daylong opportunities for all to mix and share ideas and solutions have proven very successful in assisting Nebraska's up and coming entrepreneurs to innovate and develop.

Businesses and organizations have a chance to tap into many outstanding marketing opportunities by having an exhibit booth or through a sponsorship to MarketPlace. The diverse sponsorship levels offer opportunities for organizations and businesses to choose the level which best fits their marketing budget. Those interested in sponsorship information should contact Shawnna Silvius, shawnnas@cfra.org or 402-873-4027. For more on MarketPlace visit: www.cfra.org/marketplace/home.** A recent survey conducted by the Center for Rural Affairs found that since the inception of MarketPlace in 2007, a total of 342 jobs (full-time, part-time or seasonal) have been created each year with the help of MarketPlace attendance and participation (visit: http://files.cfra.org/pdf/MarketPlace-Effects-2010.pdf to view the survey analysis). The Center for Rural Affairs and the USDA Rural Development are Equal Opportunity Providers, Employers, and Lenders.###

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Established in 1973, the Center for Rural Affairs is a private, non-profit organization working to strengthen small businesses, family farms and ranches, and rural communities through action oriented programs addressing social, economic, and environmental issues.