

RURAL IMMERSION

The Rural Immersion Opportunity is a three-day professional development experience in Southern Utah designed to deepen Extension faculty's understanding of rural contexts and strengthen their capacity for place-based, experiential programming. Through guided field visits, hands-on learning in national parks and local communities, and structured reflection, participants explore rural strengths, challenges, and systems, including tourism and workforce development, youth programming, natural resources, and community resilience. This immersive post-conference tour connects theory to practice, encourages nationwide collaboration, and equips educators with actionable strategies to enhance rural-relevant Extension work.

EXTENSION Professional Development Tour



Extension
UtahStateUniversity



THURSDAY- MAY 14TH - SATURDAY MAY 16TH, 2026

MINIMUM: 15 PARTICIPANTS

**COST: \$495 SHARED ROOM | \$725 PRIVATE ROOM
INCLUDES TRANSPORTATION, 2 NIGHTS LODGING,
2 DINNERS, 2 BREAKFASTS, AND 1 LUNCH**

DAY 1 - Thursday, May 14

Depart St. George - 1:00 PM

Zion National Park Field Experience

Trail Foods & On-the-Go Nutrition Activity

Ranch/Bison Dinner & local producer insights

DAY 2 - Friday, May 15

Bryce Canyon National Park - Tourism & Natural Resources

Ruby's Inn Tourism Operations Tour

NICA Bike Track - Economic & Healthy-Living Impacts

Youth Development & After-School Systems Session

Lunch & Prevention Partnerships

Dutch Oven Dinner (on the Rim)

Dark Sky Experience at Bryce - Mental Health & Engagement

DAY 3 - Saturday, May 16

Farm-Based Breakfast

High-Elevation Agriculture Tour (High Tunnel at 6,600 ft)

Brian Head Peak & Cedar Breaks

Return to St. George by 12:00 PM

This Professional Development includes periods of extended travel; participants should expect to be seated in a vehicle for over an hour at a time during some transitions. Field experiences may involve moderate hikes on uneven terrain, though none are classified as strenuous.

This experience includes significant elevation changes, from St. George (~2,530 ft) through Zion (3,600-8,700 ft) and Bryce Canyon (~8,000-9,100 ft), up to the high-altitude environment of Brian Head (9,700 ft to ~11,316 ft). Participants should be aware of potential altitude-related discomfort.

**QUESTIONS?
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Zion National Park – Rural Landscape & Community Context

Experience one of Utah’s most iconic landscapes while examining how geography, natural resources, and visitor use shape the daily realities of rural communities. Participants will explore how outdoor spaces serve as living classrooms, how rural infrastructure must adapt to heavy tourism, and how natural-resource stewardship connects to community identity and resilience.

Trail Foods & On-the-Go Nutrition

In this hands-on micro-session, participants test practical strategies for fueling active lifestyles. The activity demonstrates how nutrition education can be adapted for youth, families, and volunteers who spend time outdoors, travel long distances, or have limited access to food outlets. It highlights simple, sustainable, and culturally relevant approaches to teaching healthy habits.

Bryce Canyon National Park – Tourism, Workforce & Place-Based Learning

This immersive experience explores the relationship between natural wonders, tourism-driven economies, and the pressures these systems place on rural communities. Participants gain insight into how local governments, small businesses, and families navigate seasonal employment, housing shortages, and visitor surges.

Ruby’s Inn Tourism Operations Tour – International Employee Exchange

This behind-the-scenes tour showcases a rural business model reliant on multicultural, international staffing. Learn how workforce shortages, housing demands, and global recruitment influence local service industries. Participants observe how community relationships and business partnerships shape the rural economy and contribute to year-round tourism viability.

NICA Bike Track – Healthy Living, Youth Engagement & Economic Boost

At the National Interscholastic Cycling Association (NICA) track, participants explore how outdoor recreation infrastructure supports youth development, physical activity, and local economic growth. This stop illustrates how small towns leverage recreation assets. It highlights cross-sector collaboration among schools, clubs, health organizations, and city planners.

After-School System Tour – Youth Development, Health & Behavior

Participants will see firsthand how rural after-school programs address social-emotional learning, mental health, academic support, and positive behavior. The tour emphasizes the unique challenges rural families face—transportation, staffing, and access to specialists. Insights gained will help Extension faculty strengthen their own youth programming and networks.

Prevention Partnerships – Rural Coalitions in Action

This session highlights the powerful role community coalitions play in addressing substance misuse, mental health, safety, and family well-being. Participants learn how prevention organizations braid resources, share data, and design programming that reflects rural culture and values.

Bryce Canyon Dark Sky Experience – Mental Health & Engagement

Under some of the darkest skies in the world, participants engage in a guided exploration of astronomy, reflection, and the science-based benefits of natural darkness. This experience connects dark-sky stewardship with mental-health research, demonstrating how it supports emotional regulation. It offers a powerful example of integrating environmental education.

High-Elevation Agriculture & High Tunnel Tour (6,600 ft)

Participants explore the realities of farming in short-season, high-altitude environments, including weather extremes, soil limitations, and innovation in controlled-environment agriculture. This tour demonstrates how high tunnels and adaptive practices help rural producers extend seasons, diversify crops, and increase food security.

Brian Head Peak & Cedar Breaks – Mindfulness, Environmental Health & Rural Access

Travel to the top of Brian Head Peak and into Cedar Breaks National Monument to experience how altitude, climate, and rural geography influence community life. This stop also highlights the role of public lands in economic vitality, recreation access, and stewardship education.

******The itinerary may be modified in response to environmental conditions, operational limitations, or other extraneous circumstances to ensure participant safety and program quality.***