



Repicturing Rural

A playbook for visual authenticity
in rural American storytelling

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Introduction

What does rural America look like today?

That's the question at the heart of this document, and the research that informs it. Visual culture is a mirror for the world. Yet our research shows that popular depictions of rural America often fail to reflect its varied reality.

This playbook will equip marketers, creatives, and the wider media with the tools to visualize a rural America that resonates with the people who call it home.

If you're responsible for telling the story of rural experience, you can use this document to navigate the nuances of authentic representation that run through subjects as diverse as healthcare, farming, veterans, and teenage life.

It will help you build stronger connections with your audiences, and play a part in moving visual culture beyond the limiting depictions that too often misrepresent rural reality across the US.

Rural Americans don't
feel represented


2 in 3

believe advertisers do not
understand them¹



Gabriel Pevide | 2199723020



**Urban America gets a
much bigger share of
the visual landscape**

Only 5% of popular US visuals
are set in rural locations

Urban settings are **4x more likely**
to be shown than rural locations

Our methodology

This playbook is part of a wider partnership between Land O’Lakes, Inc. and Getty Images with the goal of using our complementary expertise to help you repicture rural America.

Land O’Lakes brings decades of knowledge and research on rural communities. Getty Images brings over 30 years of visual insights experience and its proprietary research methodology—VisualGPS.

Throughout this document, we’ve brought unique visual insights to life through imagery that spotlights underrepresented aspects of rural experience. Many of these photographs are part of the wider [Rural US Collection](#)—a visual toolkit for change that helps you tell the full story of rural America.

All data in this document is based on the following VisualGPS analysis unless a different source is cited:

- 150,000+ US-based stills and videos downloaded by US brands, advertisers, and media in 2024
- 60,000 US-based searches on gettyimages.com (2018–2024)
- 500+ self-identified rural US consumers surveyed across four waves of quantitative research

Comprehensive data and analysis to inform authentic representation



VisualGPS

- 1 Analyzing the content searched for and licensed by the brands we work with
- 2 Consumer perspectives on the biggest visual shifts impacting our customers, their businesses, and their industries
- 3 Analyzing advertising, news, pop culture, art and design trends, and other media to contextualize visual insights

Land O’Lakes, Inc.

- 100+ years as a national cooperative working with farmers and agricultural businesses across rural America
- Long-standing commitment to serving and advocating for the communities where cooperative members live and work
- Existing research commissioned by Land O’Lakes helped contextualize the VisualGPS data



How do we define rural?

“Rural America” exists as a spectrum that cannot be fully contained in a single definition. Some of its communities are remote frontier townships of 100 residents. Others are buzzing, amenity-rich “micropolitan” areas that anchor entire rural regions.

Even researchers and other experts in the space disagree about how to define “rural” because the term has cultural meaning beyond what census data can capture.

In official statistics, rural populations that grow beyond 50,000 residents are re-classified as metropolitan. Yet research shows rural Americans themselves reject a rural-urban binary.

Instead, they typically define rurality through personal experiences like community ties, connection to the land, and a slower pace of life—regardless of how their region or population is classified by official metrics. Understanding the diversity of this lived identity forms a key part of unlocking visual authenticity for rural audiences.



This is a “typical” depiction of rural America



Vibrant lives, untold stories

The dynamism and success of rural America often go unseen in visual culture, perpetuating limited and false ideas of what life looks like.

With the goal of making data-backed visual decisions, you can use our Rural Reality Checks to anchor your own objective reflection.

These prompts will help you identify opportunity for more authentic rural storytelling when picturing the people, places, and activities that shape life in rural America today.

It's time to see the whole picture and tell the whole story. Visualizing rural America's unique value and variety will help you build trust and connection.



Fly View Productions | 2214285909



Nicholas Hunt | 2206383741



Custom Content by Getty Images | Fly View Productions



Custom Content by Getty Images | Fly View Productions | 2225910436

Three dimensions of rural experience

01 Persons of substance

Representing the many faces of rural America

Who do we see in current depictions of rural America? And—more importantly—who is missing from those stories? How does that compare to the demographics of your own target audiences?

02 Beyond the bucolic

Demonstrating an authentic sense of place

Which landscapes represent rural America? To what extent is human life shown to be interconnected with these places? Which categories of place are underrepresented in popular visuals?

03 Life well lived

Reflecting how rural Americans spend their time

What do popular visuals show rural Americans doing? Which everyday activities are underrepresented? How can you authentically depict communities in action?

01

Persons of substance

58%

of rural Americans say they feel the most joy when spending time with friends and loved ones

Yet just 16%

of popular rural American visuals include people

Draw on the data that reveals how rural America's individuals, couples, families, and friends are represented in popular imagery. Explore this topic through lenses like age and gender, unpacking the details of who we see interacting and what might be missing from their stories.

This section will guide you in accurately picturing persons of substance, helping you build audience connection by honoring rural personhood.

Family life

While prevalent in popular imagery, family life is typically seen through a narrow lens. Families are almost always shown in outdoor settings, leaving many everyday moments of connection underrepresented.

A focus on family scenes rooted in nature and farming overlooks other experiences that shape the rhythm of family life, whether at home or in other indoor environments, such as shops and restaurants.

Rural Reality Check

Are you choosing visuals that show life at home through relatable family experiences, such as eating or preparing food together, getting ready for work and school, or enjoying indoor games and hobbies?

About 1% of rural visuals that depict families are set indoors



Teenagers and young people

Communication that targets the spending power and cultural influence of Gen Z typically caters to urban audiences.

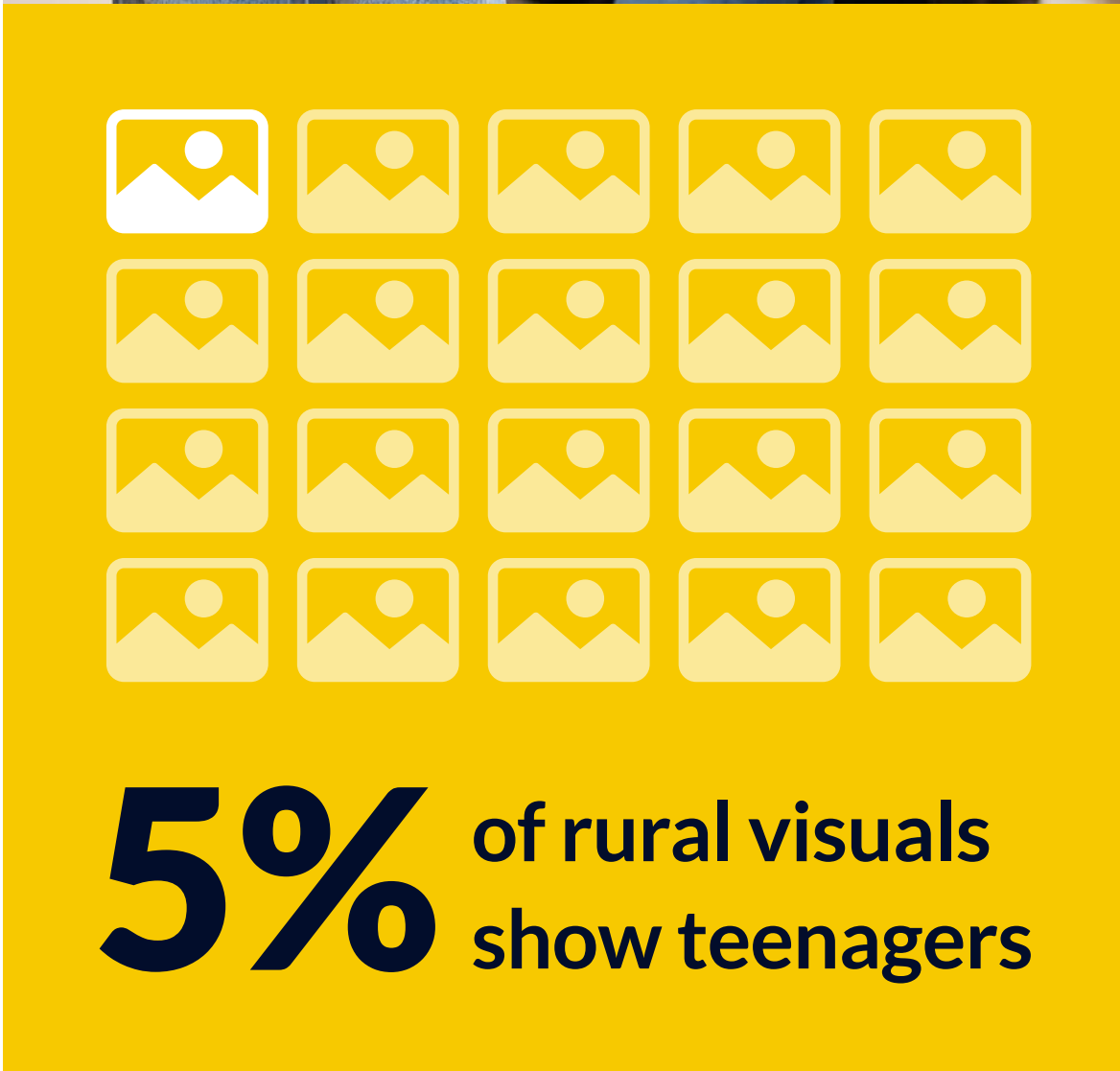
14% of Gen Z live in rural areas yet less than 7% of ‘Gen Z’ search results relate to rural Gen Z.¹ VisualGPS research revealed similar representation in visuals.

When they do appear in rural imagery, teenagers and young people are often shown with family, rather than living their own lives. Typical experiences such as spending time with friends, using technology, and pursuing their own interests are rarely shown.

Missing these key aspects of identity is significant as the majority of rural Gen Zers report wanting to live in a way that’s unique to their own wants and needs.²

Rural Reality Check

Does your visual storytelling show rural young people with emerging independence and a life outside the family home?



Women

The role of women in powering rural communities through paid work, volunteering, and domestic labor is minimally represented in the current visual landscape.

In fact, only 15% of rural visuals that include women show them working.

For storytelling that resonates more deeply with both men and women, brands can use imagery that shifts the gender balance of these depictions.

Rural Reality Check

Do your depictions of women give them agency in their community and visualize them working outside of the home?



Only 35% of popular rural visuals include women

7 in 10 of those depict relaxation and leisure time

Men

The social capital that comes through relationships plays a heightened role in rural areas.¹ Friendship is a key part of this story but is predominantly visualized as a female experience.

When shown with other people, men are typically depicted with their partners, with their families, or at work.

This overlooks the existence and importance of community relationships between rural men, and identifies opportunity to build connection by depicting their social conversations and shared leisure time.

Rural Reality Check

Do your visuals show men spending time with friends and others in their wider community?



16% of rural visuals depict friendships
but most of these only show women

FlyView Productions | 2148761516

People of color

Almost a quarter of rural Americans are people of color.

The idea that only white people live in rural America is a myth.

Of the total rural population across the US, 4.9% identify as Native, 8.6% as Black or African American, and 10.3% as Latine or Hispanic. People who identify as Asian currently make up a much smaller proportion of rural populations (1.7%) but this community is growing almost universally across all regions.¹

Our research highlights the visual nuances to consider when depicting the different facets of life for each of these communities.

Your decisions have the power to influence felt and perceived identity for communities of color across the US—many of whom will be part of your target audiences.



Custom Content by Getty Images | Nicholas Hunt



Just four states make up 70% of rural
Native representation in popular visuals



PEOPLE OF COLOR

Native representation

A current visual focus on Utah, Arizona, Idaho, and Oregon does not accurately reflect the presence and diversity of Native peoples across the country.

In reality, Native people make up 4.9% of the total rural population in the US. This includes the many members of federally recognized sovereign Native nations covering 35 different states, as well as those who identify as part of the wider community of Pacific Islanders.¹

With numerous unique tribal cultures currently invisible in contemporary storytelling, brands have an opportunity to tell a much wider range of visual stories that more authentically represent the 2.7 million Native people living in rural areas across the US.

Rural Reality Check

Are you redressing the balance of representation by looking beyond current “go-to” geographies and tribal nations?





PEOPLE OF COLOR

Black or African American representation

Popular imagery does not fully communicate the significance of the relationship between the Black community and the rural South.

80% of Black rural residents live in the South.¹ Yet, only 28% of visuals depict them in Southern rural areas.

Southern states are also where the majority of Black producers and farmers live and work.¹ Yet, rural Black Americans are much less likely than other racial or ethnic groups to be featured in visual stories focused on agriculture or farming, minimizing their known presence and contributions.

Rural Reality Check

Are your visual choices reflecting key, enduring elements of this community's experience, such as life in the rural South or agricultural work?



PEOPLE OF COLOR

Latine or Hispanic representation

Members of Latine or Hispanic communities often live in rural areas specifically for employment,¹ meaning their sense of place is closely tied to their economic contribution.

Omitting this from visual narratives leaves out an essential aspect of their lived experience in rural America.

Life at home is another area of visual opportunity. Spending time with loved ones is when the majority of rural residents report the most joy, yet only a small proportion of imagery depicting Latine or Hispanic people show them in this context.

Rural Reality Check

Are you visualizing the role of people from Latine or Hispanic communities in maintaining thriving rural economies?

Only 2% of visuals of Latine or Hispanic communities focus on work





PEOPLE OF COLOR

Asian representation

Visual representation of Asian Americans and Asian immigrants currently outsizes their proportion of the actual rural population. Opportunity to tell more authentic stories lies in which specific communities you depict and what you show them doing.

Most of today's rural Asian population were born outside of the US. Compared to non-rural areas, a higher percentage of Asian immigrants to rural places (44%) come from countries in Southeast Asia.¹ However, only 11% of Asian people featured in rural visuals are Southeast Asian.

Similarly, just 9% of rural images that include Asian people show them at work, yet economic opportunity is often the driving force behind their decision to settle in rural places.

Rural Reality Check

Are you depicting key rural Asian communities such as those from Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, and the Philippines?



Disabilities

Only four of the 150,000 rural visuals we analyzed featured someone with a disability.

Real-world comparisons confirm the extent of this underrepresentation. National analysis found that 1 in 4 adults in the total American population lives with some form of disability.¹

The proportion of the total population living with disabilities is also higher in rural areas than in urban ones (17.7% vs 11.7%). This is true regardless of gender, race, the type of impairment, or age group.²

Choosing visuals that depict these experiences will help you build authentic connection with those who see themselves, family, friends, and colleagues reflected in your imagery.

Rural Reality Check

Does your imagery show people with disabilities in everyday scenarios at home, at work, and in the community?



Nathan Blouw | 2169521473

02

Beyond the bucolic

Only 1 in 4

rural visuals depict human settlements, such as towns

Explore rural America's physical environments—from its networks of townships to its farms, coastal communities, and unique regional terrains. More than passive backdrops, rural places power a wealth of industry and shape the experiences of vast populations.

These insights into authentic rural scenes will help you look beyond the bucolic to the agriculture, urban outposts, and seasonal diversity that will resonate with rural audiences.



Agriculture

Passive, sweeping scenes that exclude people and production from the narrative are the norm.

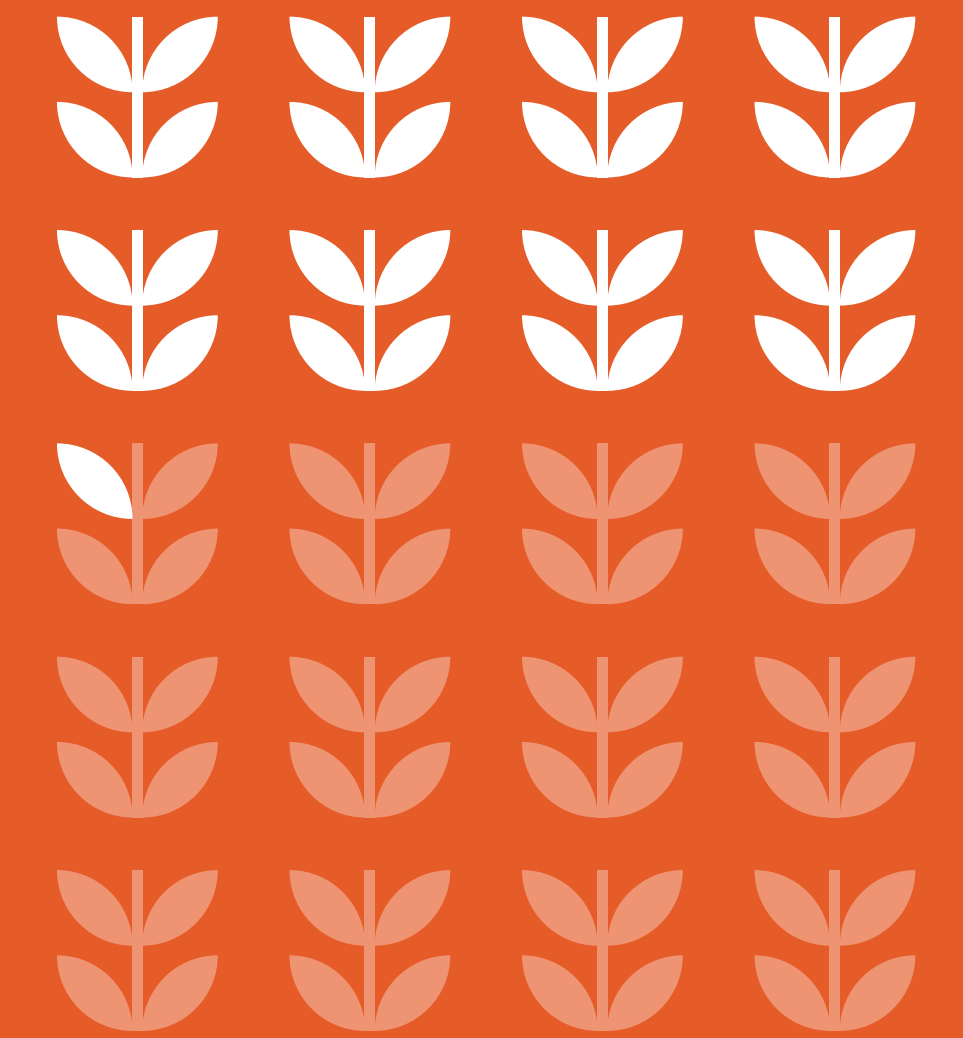
There are 4x more rural visuals without people than with them, and most of these focus on naturally occurring features or landscapes rather than human interaction with the land.

Human presence is primarily seen, or implied, through farming. Nearly two thirds of those visuals show agricultural land, but they fail to represent it accurately.

Pasture and woodland are underrepresented, linking to other notable visual gaps, such as livestock. The pasture which sustains these animals—and represents 45% of US agricultural land use¹—appears in just 7% of visuals.

Rural Reality Check

Are you showing a variety of agricultural land uses in your visuals, including cultivated land for crop production and pastureland for the rearing of livestock?



**44% of
agricultural
land is
cultivated
cropland¹**

**but it
features
in just 11%
of visuals**

AJ_Watt | 1895289853

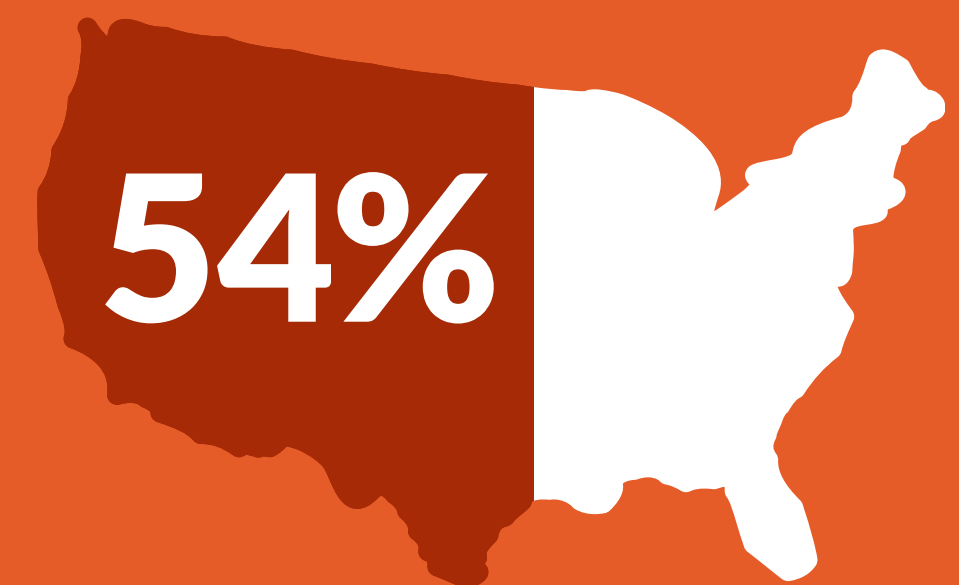
Animals

Whether wild or domesticated, animals native to the rural US are overlooked in rural imagery. Even cattle and other livestock—the most populous animals in rural America—are minimally represented in popular visuals.

Less than 9% of visuals feature animals yet the majority of agricultural land is designated for their habitats.

Rural Reality Check

Do your visual narratives represent the diversity of life in rural America beyond its people by including the animals that shape experiences in many rural regions?



of American
farmland
is dedicated
to animals¹



Peopleless places

Barns remain the default visual cue for farmland. Though a powerful symbol of rural America, they stand as passive landmarks in peopleless landscapes, negating human stories.

Using barns as a default device to communicate human interaction with the landscape could offer an antiquated view of rural living.

Overlooking other rural settings, such as siloes, power stations, lighthouses or human settlements (with the latter only featured in 25% of rural imagery), excludes narratives of innovation, industry, and infrastructure.

Rural Reality Check

Are you depicting a variety of built structures in your non-people visuals to emphasize the active industries and networks in rural America?



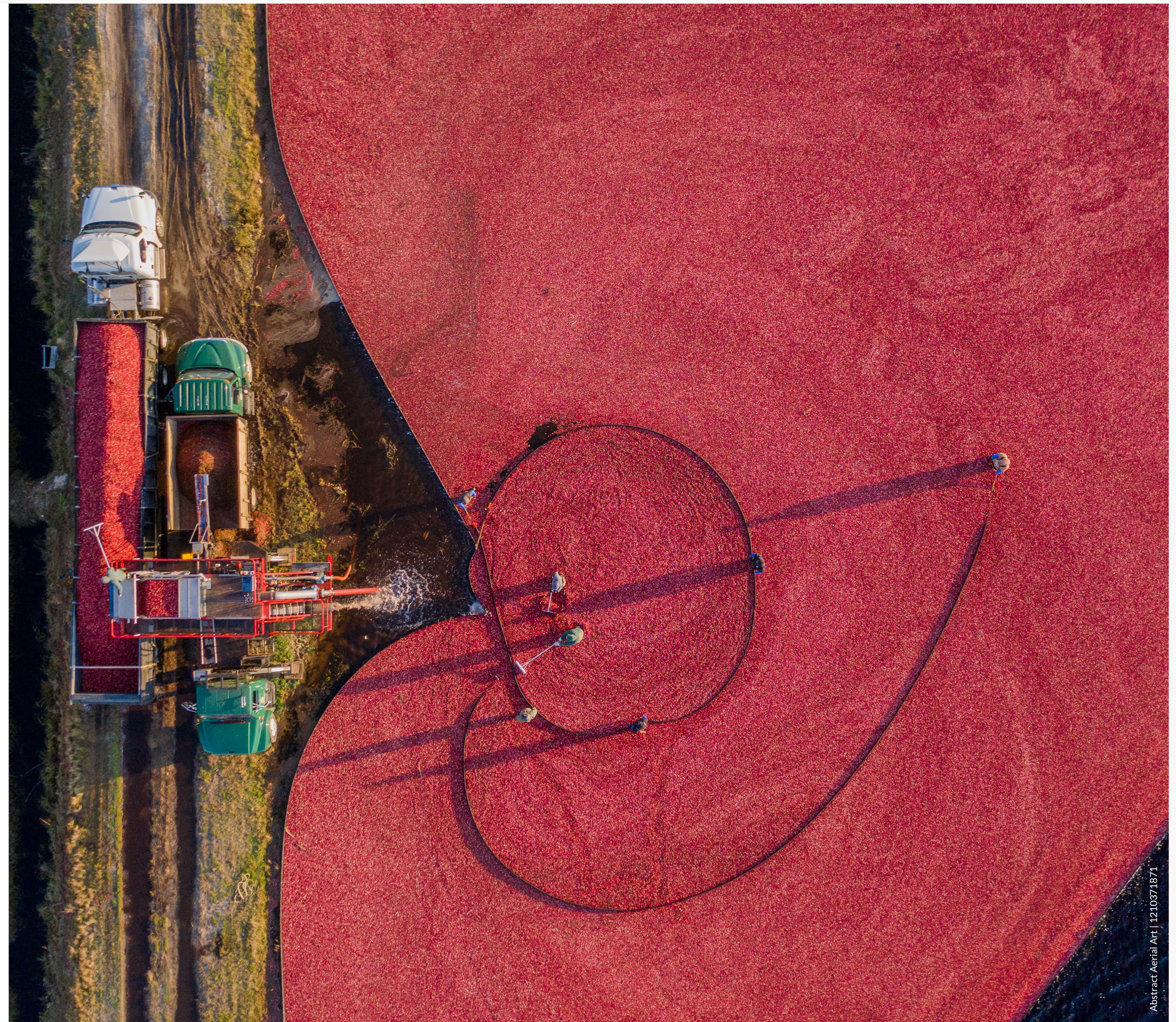
Regional absences

New England, Appalachia, and the Pacific Northwest each appear in less than 10% of rural imagery.

Despite unique regional features, certain areas are most likely to be pictured in one season or through one lens, risking disengagement from audiences who have seen the same framing repeatedly.

A focus on generic daytime scenes in the rural West also risks alienating some of the largest rural American communities—all of whom reside in states or territories in the Northeast, Midwest or South.¹

Explore specific visual considerations for three of the rural regions that are minimally represented in contemporary storytelling.



Abstract Aerial Art | 1210371871



REGIONAL ABSENCES

New England

New England is the region most likely to feature townships, residential buildings, public houses and famous coastal places. Its absence from imagery belies the unique network of small towns and coastal communities within the rural populace.

Notably, New England is home to the most rurally populated state in the US, Vermont, with 64.9% of its inhabitants residing in rural areas.¹

Rural Reality Check

Are you showcasing the vibrancy of rural townships in your visuals and picturing these places through imagery that looks beyond traditional “Main Street” scenes?



REGIONAL ABSENCES

Appalachia

Depictions of this region include the highest proportion of visuals set in the fall season (57%), while 48% of Appalachian imagery shows the region's national park.

Our research also revealed that 99% of Appalachian imagery currently features a mountain or mountain range, highlighting significant opportunity to increase depictions of the varied natural and built environments that shape life in the region.

Rural Reality Check

Are you looking beyond fall foliage and mountain scenes to tell the story of Appalachia through places such as its farms and townships?





REGIONAL ABSENCES

The Pacific Northwest

Despite being the most seen hiking destination in popular visuals, the Pacific Northwest has some of the lowest overall representation of any rural region. From one activity to one season, imagery of this region is most likely to be set in winter and include evergreen trees.

Natural features such as coastal plains and riverbanks—unique to this part of rural America—go largely unseen in popular visualizations.

Rural Reality Check

Do your depictions of this region include settings shaped by its waterways and built environments?

03

Life well lived

Explore visual representations of rural life through topics like education, healthcare, and leisure. The varied experiences of learning, working, relaxing, and socializing—in both indoor and outdoor settings—come together in rounded lives that form the heart of rural community and culture.

These insights will guide you towards visual storytelling that represents every aspect of life well lived across rural America.



Work

Thriving rural economies are powered by variety—including a higher proportion of entrepreneurship than metropolitan areas (as much as 23% vs 13%).¹

Yet 62% of rural imagery depicts agriculture, leaving many forms of work underrepresented. The least visible types based on the proportion of rural visuals showing these experiences are:

<1% General office work

9% Service work

18% Entrepreneurship

These visibility gaps undermine the diverse skills and scope of economic opportunity present in rural communities today.

Rural Reality Check

Do your depictions of work in rural communities look beyond agriculture to include environments like offices, cafes, shops, and community spaces?



Custom Content by Getty Images | Lisa5201

Healthcare

Current visualizations of health in rural America often focus on abstract wellness concepts, such as disconnecting or escaping the bustle of city life. This overlooks more grounded scenarios reflecting real-world rural communities.

The patients, workers, and locations that represent everyday healthcare experiences for millions are largely absent.

By choosing imagery that helps fill these visual gaps, you have an opportunity to connect with audiences through themes such as care, community, and quality of life.

Rural Reality Check

Are you depicting common healthcare interactions—such as medical consultations—that include men and children seeking care?

Less than 1% of rural visuals show formal healthcare scenarios in medical buildings



Thomas Barwick | 1978620802



Education

Depictions of education in rural communities are lacking in general. When learning *is* shown, classroom education gets less focus than practical, home-based learning.

A reliance on young, white pupils and the daily commute overlooks interactions that take place throughout the day at education settings across rural America.

Rural Reality Check

Who: Are you visualizing the contributions of those on the ground, including teachers, security workers, and cafeteria staff?

Who: Do your depictions include older adult learners, students of color, and those with disabilities?

Where: Is higher education represented in your rural storytelling?

Education visuals are 10x more likely to show urban settings than rural ones



Fly View Productions | 1868474897

Veterans and military life

Women make up about 18% of the armed forces¹ but only appear in rural military visuals as military wives.

According to popular visuals, the typical service member is male, white, and middle-aged or older. He is frequently shown as serious and alone, or among male friends.

Young adults serving in the armed forces are rarely seen in rural visuals (14%), despite making up 43% of the US military.²

By showing scenes beyond arriving home from deployment, you can connect with audiences through visual stories that recognize the fullness of military lives—before and after active duty.

Rural Reality Check

Who: Are you visualizing underrepresented service members, such as women, young adults, and people from Black, Latine, and Asian communities?

Where: Are you including underrepresented scenarios like setting off for active duty or day-to-day socializing?



MoMo Productions | 1670270879



Leisure

Rural leisure is mainly depicted as a solo, outdoor experience. Visuals showing more than one person are 4x more likely to depict family members than friend groups.

Locations that support hobbies and leisure in rural towns are largely absent, as are winter-specific activities, like skiing or sledding.

Rural Reality Check

Who: Are you depicting shared leisure time between friends as well as family?

Where: Are you visualizing town-based leisure settings, such as bars, restaurants, and arts venues?

When: Are you showing rural leisure across the seasons, particularly in colder temperatures?

Rural Americans are 2x more likely to be seen enjoying outdoor recreation activities than their urban counterparts



Thomas Barwick | 12915892.17

Integrity through visual identity

The Rural Reality Checks you’ve seen so far relate to specific aspects of rural experience. The questions on this page invite you to reflect on threads that run throughout. You can use them to kick off a high-level review of your images and video, or as final authenticity checks when signing off your latest project.

Are you showing an authentic mix of rural people and relationships?



Are your visual stories set in a variety of private and communal spaces?



Are you visualizing work, life, and play unfolding indoors as well as out?



Are you depicting examples of technology, innovation, and human endeavor?



About VisualGPS

VisualGPS shares our expertise widely, providing timely visual insights on industries, regions, and demographics to brands, marketers, and creatives.

Drawing on data from 2.7 billion annual website searches and millions of customer downloads, this exclusive data-backed research and reporting keeps you close to ongoing shifts in consumer sentiment, global customer usage, and the visual landscape—enabling you to tell stories with authenticity and impact.

By understanding what consumers care about—and what’s happening across the world of visuals in real time—you can select imagery that reflects those priorities. This ensures your content resonates with your audience, strengthens brand relevance, and builds trust in an increasingly values-driven marketplace.

The Rural US Collection

To license imagery for your own projects, you can explore the Rural US Collection, which includes many of the photographs in this playbook.

Curated by our visual experts, the Collection will help you tell stories rooted in authenticity. See the full curation by searching on [gettyimages.com](https://www.gettyimages.com) using the term **ruraluscollection**.

As you explore the Collection, you’ll discover hundreds of visuals that reflect rural America as it is today. Some represent the best of the existing Getty Images creative library. Many others were created jointly with Land O’Lakes, Inc. through Getty Images Custom Content, directly addressing underrepresented aspects of rural experience highlighted by our research.





Glowimages | 57354971

About Getty Images

A leading global visual content creator and marketplace, Getty Images offers a full range of content solutions to meet the needs of any customer—no matter their size. Through our [**Getty Images**](#), [**iStock**](#) and [**Unsplash**](#) brands, websites and APIs, we serve customers in almost every country in the world. People turn to us first, to discover, license, and share powerful visual content from the world's best photographers and videographers. Through our [**best-in-class creative library**](#) and [**Custom Content**](#) solutions, we help customers elevate their creativity and entire creative process to find the right visual, every time.

gettyimages®

About Land O'Lakes, Inc.

Land O'Lakes, Inc. is a member-owned cooperative with industry-leading operations that span the spectrum from agricultural production to consumer foods. Land O'Lakes is one of the largest farmer-owned cooperative in America, operating in all 50 states and more than 60 countries. Many of these businesses are family-owned and have been committed for generations to not only producing high-quality products but also to bettering the land and their communities.

LAND  **LAKES INC.**