In 1965 Congress passed Economic Development legislation setting up autonomous multi-state economic development authorities called regional commissions. The new economic development effort was not intended to be an extension of “divine” federalism nor was it to be a type of revenue sharing for local economic programs. Rather, it embraced a recognition that certain multi-state units had regional development problems or opportunities that needed to be managed on a regional multi-state—but not national—basis. The Old West Regional Commission, comprised of the states of Nebraska, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota and Wyoming, was one of nine commissions, and operated until 1981 when President Reagan eliminated the regional commission program. The regional commissions were a frightening creation to many because they were beyond normal systems of control. The leadership of each commission was held jointly by one governor, designated by the other governors in the region, and a federal co-chairperson, a political appointment of the President of the United States. No department of the federal government held any direct authority over the commissions. As all of the actors were political, the fear was that funds channeled through the commissions would be used entirely for “pork barrel” purposes.
In retrospect, regional commissions are remembered more by some observers for what they didn't do rather than what they did do. Groups of governors with joint federal funds were prone to be like kids in a candy store with a jointly found $5 bill. It was difficult to make a decision that would please everybody equally. Great caution was exercised with behind-the-scenes intrigue to make certain the others didn't get more than their fair share. The result for the regional commissions frequently was a painfully prolonged decision-making process, and often no decision at all on programming of significant regional value.

One of the economic needs the regional commissions were encouraged to consider was the development of international trade and inward investment. While most regional commissions procrastinated or rejected significant international programming, the Old West Regional Commission became a leader in operating international trade and investment programs.

It is the intent of this article to evaluate the international trade programming of the Old West Regional Commission. Consideration is given to the program development process, and to the effectiveness and impact of four years of activity.

Basis for Evaluation

As implied by the title, this evaluation is not entirely independent and unbiased. In fact, it is not at all independent, and the writer is filled with biases resulting from very considerable time involvement as a project director under a University of Nebraska contract with the Old West Regional Commission International Program that was regularly renewed.

Prior to becoming a project director, as well as thereafter, this writer had the opportunity to observe and sometimes advise commission officials on International Trade considerations. This was done as a director and officer of a sub-regional exporters association. I was the only Professor of International Marketing in the region, and as a member of the District Export Council—a federally-appointed export advisory group. As a program director, I evaluated my own programs at the University of Nebraska regularly and, in the process, usually was able to evaluate a portion of the impact of the Old West International activities.