Institute for Rural Partnerships Consortium
Third Annual Consortium Report
November 2025

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Submitted by: The Institutes for Rural Partnerships at Auburn University, the University of Vermont, and the University of Wisconsin-Madison

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Introduction

Since 2022, the three Institutes for Rural Partnerships have developed novel and high-value opportunities for land grant institutions to bring research and faculty expertise to bear on critical needs in rural communities and economies. Through the inclusive engagement of stakeholders, the three universities are identifying, piloting, and developing collaborative solutions to rural challenges across the three regions. Institute grants are funding innovative partnerships to advance technology, increase knowledge, and provide services to support vibrant and resilient rural communities.

In this 3rd annual report of the Institutes for Rural Partnerships, we summarize our accomplishments in strengthening collaborations between these three universities and their communities in 2025. This report also outlines ongoing collaborations and partnerships between the three institutes and the programming and projects that are currently being implemented and their respective impact thanks to USDA NIFA funding. Our goal is to continue expanding these three-institute collaborations and partnerships to advance the land-grant university mission and better meet the needs of rural communities.

Consortium Collaboration

The past year has provided a multitude of opportunities for the consortium to engage across a variety of themes. The complete consortium, including representatives from Auburn University, the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and the University of Vermont met virtually on a monthly basis to share updates, troubleshoot challenges, and offer seeds for collaborative opportunities between the three RPIs. Consortium also met for its annual meeting in Auburn, AL as described in the Auburn Visit section below. We have continued to strengthen the unique and shared focus areas of the RPIs as depicted in Figure 1 on the next page. The figure also further demonstrates our collective commitment to community-engaged projects and partnership, and the amplification of the land grant mission.

Auburn Visit

The annual meeting of the RPIs was held at Auburn University on July 9-11, 2025. The meeting started with a reception at the roof top garden of Raine Culinary Center on July 9 that was attended by senior leadership at Auburn University. On July 10, in addition to the Auburn University Senior Vice President for Research who gave opening remarks, Ms. Twinkle Cavanaugh also welcomed the RPIs members to Alabama. Ms. Cavanaugh is the State Director of Alabama for USDA/Rural Development. The remaining part of the day involved presentations by researchers and graduate students that ended with a 1-hour brainstorming session (and a white paper) on RPI collaboration. On July 11, the group toured the Interdisciplinary Center for Advanced Manufacturing Solutions (ICAMS) to showcase how the center is supporting small and medium scale manufacturing by training and upskilling industry personnel and also reducing the barriers inhibiting the introduction of advanced technologies in legacy manufacturing equipment. ICAMS is involved in the Auburn University RPI. Some photographs from the annual meeting are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 1. Visualization of collaborative interactions between the Rural Partnership Institutes


Figure 2a: Two pictures from July 9 reception during the annual consortium meeting at Auburn University.


Figure 2b: Two pictures from the presentation sessions on July 10 during the annual consortium meeting at Auburn University.

Figure 2c: Two pictures from July 11 tours during the annual consortium meeting at Auburn University.

Stakeholder Engagement and Communication

A cornerstone of the work of the Institutes for Rural Partnerships is the ongoing engagement of stakeholders working to identify and solve challenges unique to their region. The following section outlines the stakeholder engagement and communications strategies employed by each Institute, and how this outreach contributes to strategic planning and program design.

Auburn University

In the past year, Auburn University Rural Partnership Institute (AURPI) engaged with the following stakeholders

1. Two sawmills in West Alabama: A cyber vulnerability assessment was completed for one of the sawmills through a written questionnaire based on the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency's (CISA) Cybersecurity Performance Goals (CPG) and an on-site walkthrough of the Information Technology (IT) and Operational Technology (OT) infrastructure on the sawmill campus. An open-source intelligence (OSINT) and attack surface analysis was conducted for the second sawmill with a report submitted to the sawmill leadership.

2. Poultry Processing Plants: An open-source intelligence (OSINT) and attack surface analysis was conducted for a processing plant in West Alabama. A report from the findings was submitted to the plant. In addition, the development of overall equipment effectiveness (OEE) best practices for this poultry processing plant is continuing with the goal of increasing operational efficiency in the plant and extending the findings to other poultry processing plants. AURPI researchers continue to collaborate with three other processing plants in Alabama to develop alternative and value-addition products from poultry processing wastewater and solids, and to generate information needed to make policy decisions by Alabama Department of Environmental Management (ADEM) regarding how to discard poultry processing wastewater.

3. Poultry Hatchery: A new project was initiated with a poultry hatchery in Southeast Alabama to develop a data-driven decision dashboard that will interface with automatic data collection of processes and operations in the hatchery. Potential impacts of this decision support tool include breeder farms being able to identify issues related to egg contamination, thus decreasing morbidity and mortality of broiler chicks that are delivered to broiler farms.

4. Citizens of Alabama and Southeast U.S. (Rural and Farm Poll): AUPRI personnel and Southern Rural Development Center (SRDC) jointly launched a rural poll for Alabama and the rest of the Southeast in Fall 2024. A farm poll for Alabama also was piloted in Spring 2025. The goal is to conduct each poll every other year. These polls will provide important feedback from farm workers, farm owners, and rural residents about important industries in Alabama. AURPI

has served as a catalyst to starting these polls in the Southeast. These datasets also provide a blueprint for future community-Land Grant Institution applied research partnerships that can provide information regarding the complex problems facing agriculture and rural communities.

5. Forestry Stakeholders: Several interviews and surveys have been conducted by various AURPI researchers. These interactions have enabled AURPI researchers to add to our understanding of how stakeholders perceive and make decisions about technology adoption in various aspects of the forestry industry, renumeration for third party loggers and truck drivers, and the new PM 2.5 (fine particulate matter) emission regulation.

6. Workforce Development Partners: AURPI and Southern Union Community College partnered in June 2025 to pilot a one-week Ag Technology Certificate program to students in the community college. The topics that the students were exposed to during the program were forestry technology, UAV (Unmanned Aerial Vehicle) technology, precision agriculture, and poultry technology. This partnership will continue with Southern Union and will be expanded to other strategically located community colleges in the state. AURPI is also a partner on a potential $160 million NSF ENGINE Biobased Rural Innovation for Domestic Growth and Economic Security (BRIDGES) grant with regards to workforce development. We continue to partner with other commodity-based organizations in the state (ALFA, APEA and AFA) with regards to workforce development.

University of Vermont

The Leahy Institute for Rural Partnerships and its sister organization, the UVM Office of Engagement, have established a comprehensive outreach approach to engage communities across Vermont's fourteen counties to identify community needs and build partnerships, programming, and research in response to those needs. The foundation of this approach is rooted in engagement with the regional organizations that oversee community and economic development, and planning for the state.

Our model for effective community engagement is grounded in two key objectives: 1) developing and sustaining partnerships between UVM faculty, staff, students, and program offices with community organizations across Vermont; and 2) supporting the development of partnership-based collaborations that support the creation of solutions to Vermont-based rural challenges.

Over the last 12 months, our staff has held over 90 meetings with UVM faculty, and over 150 meetings with community partners across the state. The Leahy Institute for Rural Partnerships continues to engage its statewide network through our in-person presence at gatherings and conferences, planning of and participation in state-level convenings of economic development,

community development, and community leaders, and our annual RISE summit, which consistently draws over 800 attendees both in-person and online in June. We have also engaged over 160 employers through our Green Mountain Job and Retention Program, which administers $5,000 in student loan forgiveness to recent graduates of Vermont colleges and universities who remain in Vermont to work and live. In 2024, 169 loans were administered to these recent graduates. The 2025 iteration of this program is currently underway.

We also engage with Vermonters through our monthly newsletter, which is sent to over 8,000 recipients, and our social media pages on Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn. Here we are able to amplify our grant programs, advertise convenings and events, and share and celebrate the work of our partners both on- and off-campus.

Our work is guided by a 16-member advisory board, which has representation from higher education, workforce development, philanthropy, business and industries, local and state government, and community and economic development. They enhance our capacity to engage and communicate with stakeholders through their own networks.

University of Wisconsin-Madison

UW-Madison's work consists of a group of nine different research projects designed to improve the lives of rural Wisconsinites. These projects center on measuring and communicating about weather, and preparing for extreme weather events, the economics of rural livability, community health, food resilience in indigenous communities, water quality in the Central Sands region of the state, K-12 mental health, and pre-college support for rural students.

Our *State Climatology Office* (SCO) continues to lead a weekly Agriculture Weather Outlook for Wisconsin, contributes to a biweekly UW-Madison Extension Badger Crop Connect agricultural webinar series, support Master Naturalists and Master Gardeners trainings, and hosts booths at the statewide Wisconsin Science Festival to provide stakeholders and organizations with weather and climate data and interpretation. Furthermore, the SCO participates in numerous media interviews and receives phone and email inquiries nearly every weekday from the general public, businesses, insurance agencies, law offices, and other organizations seeking weather and climate information. The SCO also has a very active presence on social media (X, Instagram, and Facebook) as another way to inform stakeholders and the public about Wisconsin's current weather and climate. In addition, the SCO has recently developed a new series of informational blogs to communicate past and present conditions to stakeholders and is creating a library of climate fact sheets covering commonly asked questions. The SCO also has greatly expanded its K-12 outreach by hosting student groups, visiting schools, and participating in science festivals.

For the Wisconsin Environmental Mesonet, called *Wisconet*, we have built and networked 78 new weather and soil environmental monitoring stations during this project. Wisconet provides real-time (5-minute) environmental (weather, soil temperature, and soil moisture) information for anyone around the state. This information helps support farmers, crop consultants, and extension agents reduce economic losses in agricultural production, helps the National Weather Service issue and forecast weather warnings, and assists in emergency planning and preparedness, improving public safety, and supporting university research and K-12 STEM education. Wisconet staff regularly interact with numerous stakeholders, including the National Weather Service through bi-annual webinars and office visits, broadcast media through annual webinars, growers within agriculture during site visits and ad-hoc meetings, and local and national partners during ad-hoc meetings and scheduled workshops. Wisconet launched an updated website in April 2025 that now provides numerous decision-support tools for growers, emergency management, and the general public.

The *Extreme Weather Project* is advancing its objectives across three sectors: agriculture, emergency management and public health, and schools and rural youth. The dedicated project website provides updates and engagement opportunities. In the agricultural sector, project staff engaged producers at the 2024 Wisconsin Water and Soil Health Conference and conducted outreach to 38 farmers and advisors statewide, completing 14 in-depth interviews. A statewide Survey of Wisconsin Farmers on Extreme Weather Response Planning will be distributed to 3,000 farmers in winter 2025-26. In the emergency management and public health sector, project staff collaborated with the Wisconsin State Climatology Office (SCO) to share climate summaries, presented at the Wisconsin Emergency Management Conference, and engaged 19 county emergency and health officials across 12 rural counties. Partnerships in Door and Juneau Counties yielded localized preparedness tools and community trainings. Metrics for winter weather severity are being developed for use by 22 county health departments. In the schools and youth sector, our youth engagement has reached nine rural districts in the rural Wisconsin counties of Jackson, Juneau, and Adams and led to three partnerships through the Global Learning and Observations to Benefit the Environment (GLOBE) program with the New Lisbon School, Nekoosa High School, and Wonewoc-Union School, and three students participating in the Microclimate Monitoring program at Upham Woods. Training in Iron County enabled 4-H leaders and 23 youth to extend the program to northern camps in summer 2025.

In our *Rural Livability Project*, we collaborated with the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation-Office of Rural Prosperity, Wisconsin Rural Partners, the Rural Wisconsin Hospital Cooperative, and the Wisconsin Newspaper Association to develop a USDA NIFA AFRI grant focused on studying the impact of major economic disruptions on critical institutions. We have collaborated with the Wisconsin Counties Association to feature the work of The Rural Livability Project in an upcoming issue of their statewide magazine. We also supported the Wisconsin Philanthropy Network in a summer workshop to identify opportunities for

philanthropic investments in rural Wisconsin. Our team continued support of the Rural Entrepreneurial Ventures in partnership with Compeer Financial and UW-Extension. We also supported the Connecting Entrepreneurial Communities (CEC) Conference in spring 2025 in Wisconsin Rapids, with more than 200 rural economic developers, community leaders, and entrepreneurs participating. Known as a conference "about small towns, for small towns," the CEC conference offers programming, discussion, and networking for stakeholders in Wisconsin's rural business development to support rural livability.

The *Extension Rural Health Connection Project* completed four focus groups with 76 rural residents from two rural Wisconsin counties: Adams and Wood Counties. Listening sessions identified key challenges, barriers, and strengths to community health to inform community health workers' priority health education and outreach efforts. Themes from the listening sessions included limited access to health care and a high prevalence of diabetes and poor mental health. Through a previously completed strategic planning process, we identified community health priorities for the Menominee Nation, which included holistic and traditional healing approaches. In March 2025, the project convened its advisory board, which consisted of eight representatives from state and community-based health organizations. We started a landscape assessment of community health worker efforts in the State of Wisconsin, informed by conversations with the Wisconsin Department of Health Services and United Way of Wisconsin. Community health workers partnered with 85 organizations in three counties to advance health promotion activities. Community health workers engaged over 2,600 participants in health promotion education, outreach, and resource referral activities.

Our *Indigenous Food Systems Resilience Team* has engaged in over 70 community and stakeholder events from the start of this project. Our Manoomin (Wild Rice) Team focused their engagement and outreach work this year on gaining input from Tribal community members on how to share research results about contaminants in the St. Louis River Estuary affecting the health of wild rice and people who eat it. Their outreach efforts reached Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa elders and community members, the 1854 Treaty Authority Board, Great Lakes Indian Fish & Wildlife Commission, Wisconsin and Minnesota Departments of Natural Resources, and Minnesota Pollution Control Agency. This team partnered with the UW-Superior Indigenous Cultures Resources Center and 1854 Treaty Authority to host two rice camps this year for students and community members to learn how to harvest and process manoomin, reaching over 50 participants. Our Indigenous Crops & Livestock Team and Community Food Systems Team partnered with the Great Lakes Intertribal Food Coalition, Wisconsin Tribal Conservation Advisory Council, Ho-Chunk Nation Department of Agriculture, Menominee Nation Department of Agriculture and Food Systems, and Bad River Food Sovereignty Department to support Tribal partner and producer capacity building and trainings. We worked with partners to host a 4-part Introduction to Indigenous Agronomy Webinar Series reaching over 150 registrants, Foundational Indigenous Agronomy Field Training, two tractor

safety trainings reaching 40 participants, Produce Safety Alliance Training, Milwaukee Urban Indigenous Agriculture Tour, and an Intertribal Harvest Gathering. The Maple Sugaring Team hosted a When Do I Tap My Maple Trees? Webinar, Maple Syrup Season Check-in Webinar, 2-day Tribal maple operation tour, and two chainsaw safety trainings. We are continuing to expand the Tribal Maple Syrup Network facilitated by Extension to reach more Tribal producers and serve their needs. We have shared two videos created by our Communications Team highlighting our project partnerships and our 2023-2024 impact report. Our project was also featured on the UW Extension Natural Resources Institute Blog.

Our more recently initiated *Water Quality Project* focuses on improving the poor groundwater quality in Wisconsin's Central Sands region, home to the state's potato and processing vegetable industry. Our work was featured at the UW-Madison potato and vegetable growers field day for stakeholders that included a visit to a Wisconet weather station, demonstration of lysimeters in field plots, and a small group discussion of the future of crop production in the region in the face of current water quality issues. Additionally, vegetable food processors have become engaged via raw product committee meeting updates and field days at several times during the season, and the project will be featured in a presentation at the upcoming Midwest Food Products Association Processing Crops Conference. Also, the project engaged stakeholders with an article in the Badger Common'tater trade magazine on the impact of solar farms in the region.

Our *K-12 Mental Health* project has consistent and ongoing engagement and communication with our ten school and community partners in rural districts around the state: Abbotsford, Alma, Bayfield, Florence County, Gilmanton, Niagara, Prairie du Chein, Rio, St. Croix Falls, and Seneca. We are supporting our partners in building capacity for mental health professionals to integrate and implement family-centered assessment and intervention to promote family wellness, family-school-community connections, and child mental and behavioral health. Mental health professionals and their colleagues engage in trainings, consultation meetings, and implementation support meetings. They communicate with us regularly about their progress and we collaborate to problem solve challenges and to create action plans for next steps.

The *Wisconsin Rural Scholars Program* was launched in 2025 to provide pre-college support to rural Wisconsin students and educators. A needs assessment with district administrators, principals, high schoolers, parents, and current college students helped us better understand the challenges rural communities face for preparing students for post-secondary education. Based on what we learned, we developed and hosted a 4-day residential pre-college program for students and teachers from around rural Wisconsin. The inaugural program in June 2025 was successful and we are developing and implementing the pre- and post-program support scaffolding and expanding it for 2026 to better serve the needs of rural high school students and teachers.

Partnership Development

Each consortium institute is building partnerships to connect their university's resources with organizations addressing rural needs in their states.

Auburn University

1. Water and Water Related Professionals in Alabama: The first Water OT/IT Cyber Summit was held in September 2025. The summit was attended by 150 water and water related professionals such as wastewater operators, engineering integrators, security solution vendors, military, education, federal agencies, and consultants in the state. The major focus of the summit was to discuss cyber health and security industry challenges and collaborative solutions. The summit has resulted in discussion regarding critical infrastructure defense, discussions with other agencies such as Office of the Secretary of Defense, Alabama National Guard, EMA, County, City, engineering firms, and Utility representatives at the state and municipality levels.

2. Professionals At Auburn University with Rural Focus: AURPI initiated a research grant program in 2025. Five grants (~$50,000) were awarded to researchers that focus on a variety of topics that have potential to impact rural Alabama. In addition, AURPI started initial discussion with other institutes and centers that focus on rural issues to develop a consortium named Rural Solution Hub.

3. Forestry and Poultry Industries: AURPI has continued to strengthen partnerships with key industries in the state. Topics that AURPI researchers will continue to work on include, but are not limited to, developing best practices for Overall Equipment Effectiveness (OEE) for poultry processing and sawmill operations, value addition to wastes (water and solids) from poultry processing operations, developing reliable biosensors for Salmonella detection and other biological agents, increasing awareness for cyberhealth, continuing to engage with the main stakeholders in these industries through survey and interviews, providing science-based data on bridge infrastructure and trucking.

University of Vermont

Partnership development is the cornerstone of the Leahy Institute for Rural Partnerships. In our earlier reports, we have outlined three strategies for partnership development: 1) grantmaking; 2) engagement initiatives; and 3) convenings.

Grantmaking

Since our launch in November 2023, we awarded our first and second round of grants. We offer two types of grants. Capacity grants originally provided $10,000 to facilitate partnership development between Vermont community partners and UVM entities. We recently increased these to $20,000 to support partnership development. Partnership grants are grants for up to $250,000 that support collaborative projects addressing a rural challenge in Vermont.

In our first and second grant rounds, we received 150 and 146 letters of intent respectively, indicating the large scope of our outreach and partnership development efforts. In the last two years, we have funded 5 capacity grants and 8 partnership grants (a full list is available online). As of October 2025, we have closed our third round of grant applications. We received over 120 letters of intent for this third grant round, and plan to award roughly $2.5 million in funding, which will be administered in 2026.

Engagement Initiatives

We also develop partnerships through engagement initiatives, which seek to institutionalize university support for targeted rural challenges. We are maintaining and developing three engagement initiatives: Vermont Data Collaborative, Student Engagement for a Resilient Vermont, and Statewide Summer Internship Program.

1. Vermont Data Collaborative: The Leahy Institute for Rural Partnerships has partnered with UVM's Center for Rural Studies and Open Source Program Office to develop the Vermont Data Collaborative. This program provides community and economic development data tools, support, and reporting to communities, organizations, and local and state governments. An advisory board and team of staff and students supports this work, and a prototype of the Vermont Data Dashboard will go live by early 2026.

2. Student Engagement for a Resilient Vermont: In the last few years, the Leahy Institute for Rural Partnerships provided targeted partnership development support for faculty teaching community-engaged learning courses in Vermont, specifically around the issue of flood recovery and mitigation. In response to that experience, we identified the need to better support faculty and community partners in the development of community-engaged learning opportunities. In 2025, we began a grant to support the development of these relationships that leverage students and courses to support rural development across a variety of issue areas in Vermont.

3. Statewide Summer Internship Program: For the third year, the Leahy Institute facilitated a place-based summer internship program where UVM students were placed with organizations outside the Chittenden County area, where UVM is based. During the summer of 2025, 19 UVM undergraduate students lived in Vermont's rural Northeast Kingdom and White River Valley, worked for local organizations, and participated in a cohort where they lived and learned

together at Sterling College in Craftsbury and Vermont Technical College in Randolph. A full writeup of this story is included here.

Convenings

Our final partnership development strategy was to sponsor convenings to share knowledge, best practices, and build connections among UVM and community entities. On June 17th, 2025, the Leahy Institute held our second annual RISE summit which highlighted the way research, innovation, sustainability, and entrepreneurship contribute to rural development in Vermont and other rural communities around the country. The 2025 summit built upon the momentum of the previous year, drawing nearly 900 participants. This year, we featured keynote addresses from Dr. Mark Becker, the president of the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities, who spoke to the importance of land grant institutions in making research work for the public. Many of the Leahy Institute funded proposals participated in wide-ranging panels that spanned our thematic areas, and focused on how research can be used in community through communications, partnerships, and methodology.

Additionally, we hosted convenings of relevance for different interest groups from both UVM and community organizations to facilitate knowledge sharing and partnership development. This included support for early educators in Vermont, representatives from the corrections and recovery communities, and entities focusing on housing development in the state. We also sponsor and support numerous rural and community development focused conferences and summits throughout the year, which displays our continued commitment to collaboration and the role of UVM in statewide and local endeavors.

University of Wisconsin-Madison

The various subdomains of the WRPI have been very successful in growing our partnerships during this past year. The *State Climatology Office* (SCO) has strengthened connections with the American Association of State Climatologists, Midwestern Regional Climate Center, USDA's Midwest Climate Hub, National Drought Mitigation Center, Wisconsin Emergency Management, and the grassroots Tribal Maple Syrup Producers network. Within Wisconsin, the SCO works closely with the UW Division of Extension and agricultural representatives from the Wisconsin Drought Task Force, including the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and the Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection (DATCP). The SCO has also enhanced its partnership with the National Weather Service's Wisconsin offices to increase collaboration, support their outreach, and develop a new online frost/freeze forecast guidance tool to benefit farmers and gardeners.

We have also maintained several partnerships to support *Wisconet* and our stakeholders, including: several broadcast partners, like CBS58 and WISN in Milwaukee to test broadcast

products and WKOW and WISC in Madison to engage in outreach; the National Park Service to install one Wisconet station on Michigan Island and assume operation of their existing Remote Automatic Weather Station on Sand Island; the National Weather Service to incorporate our data into a daily hydromet data report. We hosted the first Wisconsin Weather Festival in October 2024 and hosted the second Wisconsin Weather Festival in October 2025. The University of Vermont sent their new Mesonet team to Madison to learn from the Wisconet team.

Our *Extreme Weather Project* has developed robust multi-level partnerships to advance its objectives across agriculture, emergency management and public health, and youth education. In the agricultural sector, we continue close collaboration with the Division of Extension's Ag Water Quality Program, whose outreach specialists provide expert guidance and networks to project staff. We are also working with faculty in the Department of Plant and Agroecosystem Sciences to refine research methods supporting Wisconsin's cranberry industry (about half of the world's cranberries are grown in the state). In the emergency management and public health sector, we are co-developing tools with Wisconsin Emergency Management to integrate climate and weather data into Hazard Mitigation Plans, in partnership with the Association of Regional Planning Commissions and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. We serve on the Wisconsin Silver Jackets Hazard Mitigation Team and advise local partners in Vernon and Door Counties on flood resilience and climate readiness planning. In the public health sector, we are also collaborating with the Department of Health Services on the Heat Vulnerability Index, with the Western Wisconsin Public Health Readiness Consortium on winter weather dashboards for 22 counties, and with Adams, Juneau, and Wood Counties to pilot a cyanobacteria forecasting tool for Castle Rock and Petenwell Lakes.

In the schools and youth sector, our *Extreme Weather Project* partners with Upham Woods, 4-H Youth Development, and the Center for Climatic Research to deliver climate education programs, and with UW-Stevens Point to expand statewide access to Microclimate Monitoring Kits for educators across the state. We are working closely with K-12 schools across rural communities in Wisconsin through the NASA environmental education and youth citizen science program, GLOBE (Global Learning and Observations to Benefit the Environment). We led in-person GLOBE educator professional development works for the New Lisbon School in November 2024, Nekoosa High School in February 2025, and Wonewoc-Union School District in May 2025. The workshops focused on the atmosphere, hydrosphere, biosphere, and pedosphere protocols of GLOBE, along with data collection and upload to the GLOBE website, instrument use and calibration, connections to the NGSS federal science standards, and opportunities for students to present their GLOBE-based research projects through the Midwest GLOBE Student Research Symposium. Schools were provided free scientific equipment and teachers received stipends for developing GLOBE classroom implementation plans. Dr. Michael Notaro received the Bassam Z Shakhashiri Public Science Engagement Award in 2025 for his STEM work with K-12 youth in Wisconsin. Our team has contributed our environmental

education expertise through the formation of an Education Working Group for the Wisconsin Initiative on Climate Change Impacts (WICCI).

With respect to the *Rural Livability Project*, the stakeholders are also often project partners. For example, Wisconsin Rural Partners, the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation-Office of Rural Prosperity, the Rural Wisconsin Hospital Cooperative, and the Wisconsin Newspapers are stakeholders and collaborators on a new USDA NIFA AFRI grant proposal. The Rural Entrepreneurial Ventures program continues to be delivered in partnership with Compeer Financial and UW-Extension. Compeer Financial (part of the Farm Credit System) is deeply interested in rural development and has become a key partner and funder of several initiatives. The Connecting Entrepreneurial Communities conference was supported by our team members in partnership with the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation-Office of Rural Prosperity, Institute for Business & Entrepreneurship, Wisconsin Community Action Program, Southwestern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission, City of Platteville, Platteville Main Street, Platteville Incubator, Platteville Area Industrial Development Corporation, Platteville Regional Chamber, Huff Innovation Center at University of Wisconsin-Platteville, Small Business Development Corporation, Grant County Economic Development Corporation, Iowa County, Prosperity Southwest, WiSys, Wood County, City of Wisconsin Rapids, Central Wisconsin Alliance for Economic Development, Wisconsin Rapids Area Convention and Visitors Bureau, Heart of Wisconsin Chamber of Commerce, Sentry School of Business & Economics at University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, Mid-State Technical College, and Central Wisconsin Economic Development Fund.

The Community Economic Analysis for Rural Wisconsin Communities (CEA-RWC) program is supported by the *Rural Livability Project* in partnership with UW Division of Extension and the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation. Within each community we engage with a team of partners/stakeholders that include school superintendents, economic development professionals, business owners, elected officials and concerned citizens. We partnered with public health professionals and 15 nonprofit organizations across 17 Wisconsin counties to explore how housing financial stress affects community well-being. Key collaborators included The Road Home Dane County, Embrace Wisconsin, Northwest Wisconsin Community Services Agency, and Southwestern Wisconsin Community Action Program. Lastly, the Rural Livability Project team supported the Wisconsin Philanthropy Network, and the Schlecht Family Foundation specifically, in identifying opportunities for philanthropic investment in rural Wisconsin.

The *Extension Rural Health Connection* project has built and maintained partnerships with state, regional, and local partners to achieve project objectives. Partners reflect state and local health departments, K-12 education, community and non-profit organizations, health care systems, and institutions of higher education. In the current reporting period, community health workers

partnered with 85 organizations in three counties to advance health promotion activities. Examples of collaboration included coordinating health education programs, working with emergency food providers to connect families to food, and collaborating with a local school district to create youth support groups focused on mental health, belonging, and resilience.

Our *Indigenous Food Systems Resilience* team has several partnerships. The Indigenous Crops & Livestock Team is expanding our partnership with the Ho-Chunk Department of Agriculture to assist with harvesting Indigenous corn, supporting the establishment of cover crop demonstration gardens, coordinating learning and capacity building opportunities such as a Foundational Indigenous Agronomy Field Training and equipment safety workshops at the Intertribal Harvest Gathering hosted by Ho-Chunk. We continue to develop our partnership with the Menominee Department of Agriculture and Food Systems by supporting corn production and a cover crop demonstration and working to support equipment needs and purchasing through their subaward. We partner with the Wisconsin Tribal Conservation Advisory Council to host maple sugaring knowledge sharing events, equipment and chainsaw safety trainings, and more. We partner with the Great Lakes Intertribal Food Coalition to determine and support Tribal producer needs, attend quarterly Coordinating Committee meetings in Tribal communities, and support their events such as a Train-the-Trainer event.

Within our *Water Quality Project*, we are partnering with grower stakeholders, key supply chain partners, and food retailers with the objective of creating market pull for on-the-ground improved water quality practice adoption for the surrounding rural communities. These have included the Wisconsin Potato and Vegetable Growers Association and the Midwest Food Products Association with members that farm and process crops in the Central Sands.

In our *K-12 Mental Health Project*, we have developed partnerships with school and community professionals in ten rural Wisconsin communities: Abbotsford, Alma, Bayfield, Florence County, Gilmanton, Niagara, Prairie du Chein, Rio, St. Croix Falls. Our partnerships within these communities have primarily included school leaders, school and community mental health professionals, and Extension Educators. Within each partnership we emphasize consistent and ongoing communication, two-way (back-and-forth) communication, and developing and implementing shared goals that emphasize tailoring family-centered assessment and intervention for each community. We also have clarified our distinct and shared roles and return to our processes and procedures to promote continual improvement.

The *Wisconsin Rural Scholars Program* relies on partnerships with school districts around the state as well as cooperation with campus partners to deliver high-quality college planning support to students and educators. We partnered with school districts in Mayville, Necedah, Nekoosa, Sauk Prairie, Seymour, Waterford, and Wisconsin Dells. Each community sent a cohort of students and teachers (33 total participants) to our pilot summer residential program in June 2024. During the program, participants had the opportunity to learn about the research

and outreach happening across our college and the resources and opportunities available to students. Over 50 faculty and staff shared their time and expertise, hosting lab tours, serving on panels and listening sessions, and connecting with participants during a student poster session. The UW Office of Student Financial Aid and the STARS College Network also provided information and support to participants through sessions related to college financing and admissions. Our 2024 pilot program and the media coverage it received sparked a number of new pre-college programming partnerships around the state that will take place in 2025. These new initiatives will focus on regional programming, earlier student engagement, and a greater focus on career education.

Impact Measurement and Evaluation

Each Institute for Rural Partnerships is developing metrics and measures of success related to their funded programming, partnerships, and impact on rural communities. While this is an ongoing and iterative process, each Institute outlines its methodology and progress below.

Auburn University

Our overarching measure of success is the sustainability and longevity of our programs, research, and outcomes—ensuring that the knowledge and initiatives developed continue to benefit rural Alabama beyond the lifespan of the project and institute. More specifically, the Auburn University Rural Partnership Institute outlines success by these five categories.

1. Workforce Development Outreach: The primary goal of the Agricultural Technology Certificate Program is to raise awareness of career opportunities within the poultry, forestry, and agricultural industries across rural Alabama. Impact is measured by the number of students reached and by workshop effectiveness as reflected in participant feedback and engagement metrics.

2. Informative Publications: Another key measure of our program's impact is the number of surveys completed by our social science team. The resulting data guide future initiatives and provide valuable insights to policymakers. In addition, we are publishing findings from our own survey datasets and making several datasets publicly available to other scholars. Since April 2025, the four datasets we have released collectively have been viewed 3,057 times and downloaded 506 times, reflecting strong interest and engagement from the broader research community.

3. Cybersecurity Outreach: Success in this area is evaluated by the number of companies and critical infrastructure utilities in rural Alabama that receive cybersecurity education, as well as the number of organizations that undergo penetration testing and related assessments.

4. Internal Funding Projects: Impact for these projects is determined by the number of practical, implementable solutions developed over the two-year project period that produce tangible benefits for rural Alabama communities.

5. Operational Excellence: This initiative measures success through the delivery of operational excellence reports and targeted assistance to poultry companies, resulting in direct, measurable improvements for rural workers within these industries.

University of Vermont

Impact measurement and evaluation is a critical component of our work, particularly throughout the lifecycle of the grantmaking process. For example, in the selection of our grants, we seek to support projects and collaborations that span our thematic areas and that engage communities across Vermont's fourteen counties. This is reflected in our first and second round of grants, which supported multiple statewide projects, programming rooted in both southern and northern Vermont, and summer internship cohorts in rural parts of the state.

As we concluded our first year of programming, we began developing and implementing measurement and evaluation protocols to help us monitor our projects, to quantify the impact of our work, and to amplify the success stories that come from our partnership-based projects. In an effort to capture the diverse and interdisciplinary impacts of our funded projects, we developed a monitoring and evaluation system rooted in the PEARS platform. PEARS (Performance Evaluation and Reporting System) is widely used by University of Vermont Extension offices to track progress on grants. The value of PEARS lies in the mixed-methods approach to impact evaluation.

Over the last two years, we have administered 29 grants to collaborative partnerships spanning eight thematic areas that span all 14 of Vermont's counties. Our grants also have place-based impact at 38 individual sites. Thematic areas include: 1) regenerative agriculture; 2) community schools; 3) transit and housing solutions; 4) remote and co-working practices; 5) resilient energy systems; 6) healthy ecosystems; 7) access to rural healthcare; and 8) policy and governance.

For each project, we had partners develop quantitative and qualitative metrics of success across short (6-month), medium (12-month), and long (beyond 12 month) time horizons. At the 6- and 12-month marks, we have projects report out on their progress, both with respect to their selected metrics, and around success stories that exemplify the impact of their work.

We use a variety of common criteria to assess the impact of our grants, including the novelty of the proposed solution and its alignment with community-identified need, the number of students engaged through the collaboration, the strength of the proposed partnership, the impact directly

on community, and the capacity for the partnership to produce a sustainable program that outlasts funding from the Leahy Institute. Across the 29 projects funded to date, over $4 million have been administered across Vermont organizations, with 36 summer interns supported.

Selected examples of projects funded by the Leahy Institute are provided below:

- Farmer-Led Research Collaboration: The growing use of technology and data to run more efficient and sustainable farms can add complexity to farmer's modes of operation, and are often not tailed to the unique needs of Vermont farmers. UVM Extension is working with the Vermont Farmer's Watershed Alliance to develop their own goals related to research and data needs that will support best practice integration on their farms. This network, led by farmers, is also collaborating with UVM's Food Systems Research Institute to create an accessible and user-friendly data clearinghouse for farmers.
- Rural Wastewater Systems Mapping: If Vermont wants to maintain its historic settlement patterns, which includes compact village centers, water and wastewater infrastructure capacity challenges must be addressed. Without a clear picture of the extent of that need, housing and conservation goals will be difficult to achieve. UVM's Open Source Program Office (VERSO) partnered with the Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation and Windham Regional Commission to systematically map wastewater infrastructure data in Vermont. The new map is helping Vermonters better understand and plan for new directions for housing development and economic activity.
- Connecting Community Schools: When the Vermont Agency of Education adopted a new model for K-12 education, called the Community Schools Model, it needed research support to determine how it could best serve Vermont schools, students, and their communities. A new research partnership was formed between the Agency of Education, local community schools, and UVM's College of Education and Social Services that provides on-sight research and evaluation support to help rural schools support students and families.
- Maple Syrup Quality Testing Lab: Vermont's maple syrup is prized for its high quality. However, Vermont sugarmakers have nowhere to test their syrup for proper grading. Inconsistency across the syrup grading system can undermine Vermont maple in the marketplace. UVM Extension's Maple Program at the Proctor Maple Research Lab, in partnership with the Vermont Maple Sugarmakers Association, has opened a new lab to test syrup and offer workshops for producers. This lab will provide sugarmakers with the knowledge and assurance needed to confidently grade and market their syrup.

University of Wisconsin-Madison

UW-Madison is using two overall evaluation strategies to measure our impacts. The first approach uses various efforts including UW-Extension program evaluation experts to formally evaluate all overarching project goals, objectives, and impacts. This first approach involves utilizing a storytelling approach to share out impacts. We have also developed an External Advisory Board that formally convenes in November each year. Members of this board include: Julie Lassa, Wisconsin State Director, USDA Rural Development; Mark O'Connell, President & CEO, Wisconsin Counties Association; Jerry Deschane, Executive Director, League of Wisconsin Municipalities; Beth Haskovec, Director, Wisconsin Office of Rural Prosperity; Julie Keown-Bomar, Executive Director, Wisconsin Farmers Union; Hinu Smith, Executive Director, Ho-Chunk Nation Department of Agriculture; Mike Koles, Executive Director, Wisconsin Towns Association, Prof. Chris Kucharik, Plant and Agroecosystems Science, UW-Madison.

Our second approach of program evaluation makes use of personnel on our individual projects to measure impacts at a more detailed level. For example, the *State Climatology Office* and *Wisconet* combined have measured the following impacts during this past year:

- Wisconsin Agriculture Climate Outlooks: 296 on email list and over 100 viewings of posts per week
- Badger Crop Connect presentations: 50-100 attendees per webinar
- Public inquiries to SCO (email, phone calls): around 25 per month
- Presentations: around 60 per year, reaching approximately 10,000 people annually
- Monthly climate summaries: 500 subscribers on our mailing list
- Media stories and interviews: 60-80 per year, reaching 16 million people based on circulation rates
- Website views: 20,000 per month
- Social media reach: around 182,000 views per month (X, Facebook and Instagram)
- Synoptic Data's dashboard shows an ever-increasing number of measurements received from Wisconet (now over 700,000 measurements per month) and 300 users per day.

The *Rural Livability Project* tracks evidence of informed decision making that utilizes their work. For example, their research on rural prosperity was used extensively in a document commissioned by the Schlect Family Foundation to guide their rural philanthropic investment. In addition, their research on how housing financial stress affects community well-being directly informed strategic community initiatives for organizations like Wisconsin's CAP Services. The study's insights were also featured by Wisconsin Public Radio, leading to an invitation from the Badger State Housing Alliance to present to housing and community development practitioners from across the state.

Impacts of the *Extreme Weather Project* include:

- Long-form interviews with agricultural stakeholders conducted for research analysis: 14
- Counties/Communities engaged for direct Hazard Mitigation Plan and climate resilience data support: 3
- Participation in Microclimate Monitoring Program at Upham Woods: 14 adults, 128 youth
- Microclimate Monitoring Program training in Northern Wisconsin: 2 adults, 23 youth
- Juneau County Weather Spotter Training: 30 adults
- Participation in the GLOBE Program: 3 school districts, representing approximately 2,000 students

The *Extension Rural Health Connection's* community health workers engaged over 2,600 participants in health promotion education, outreach, and resource referral activities. As a result of community health promotion efforts, participants received information and resource support to navigate health care, employment, housing, and other social services. They also received coaching to manage chronic health conditions and participated in educational programs where they learned skills to better manage stress, improve mental health, and adopt healthy eating and physical activity behaviors.

Evaluators for the *Indigenous Food Systems Resilience Project* worked collaboratively with other project sub-teams to develop an evaluation framework grounded in indigenous perspectives and to measure impacts at a variety of trainings, workshops, and webinars delivered by the project. Primarily through online and paper surveys administered during and after trainings and webinars, we have gathered feedback from over 125 participants over the past 9 months. Some of the impacts measured include: 95% of participants in a Milwaukee Indigenous Urban Agriculture Tour reporting new or strengthened relationships with Tribal partners, and 100% are more interested in subsistence farming or gardening. 100% of the August 2025 tractor safety training participants know about more farm safety resources and how to access them, and 92% are more likely to do a safety inspection of equipment and feel safer operating tractors and related implements. Across several events, an average of 67% of participants planned to make a change to how they farm or garden based on the training or webinar. Evaluation and feedback surveys have also guided training topics and approaches as the project has progressed.

Our *K-12 Mental Health Project* addresses impact measurement and evaluation in three primary ways. First, we examine parent and teacher reports on our primary outcomes: child mental and behavioral health, family wellness, and family-school-community connections. Second, we are examining systems-level support across school and community settings for family-centered assessment and intervention. Third, we examine family engagement in assessment and intervention activities. These three approaches allow us to tailor the support we provide for

capacity building as well as to identify ways to refine and enhance strategies with families. In addition to this formative information, we will capture this information within a summary evaluation.

In our pilot year, 33 students and teachers from 7 communities participated in the *Wisconsin Rural Scholars Program*. Over the course of this four-day residential program, participants learned about academic programs, cutting-edge research, student services and the undergraduate experience. They used the insights they gained to develop a roadmap for their first-year of college and left with a campus network to help them reach their goals.

During the program, we collected feedback from students and teachers about their experiences and needs related to college planning. We also conducted an evaluation at the end of the residential program to assess its impact. 94% of participants (31/33) completed this exit evaluation; 100% of respondents reported the program was a valuable experience and use of their time, either supporting their own college planning or that of their students. After the program concluded, we received several unsolicited notes from parents who shared the positive impact participation had on their child.

As part of our evaluation, we also asked participants to share more about their college planning needs to inform our development of future programming. Providing pre- and post-program scaffolding support was a common theme, as well as incorporating additional career education. We are using this feedback as we plan programming for the upcoming year and build partnerships with more school districts and community partners.

Future Endeavors

In the coming year, the three Rural Partnership Institutes plan to continue to build upon the work they have been doing over the last three years, and continue to support collaborative, partnership-based programming that impacts rural communities across their respective states.

In June 2026, UVM's Leahy Institute for Rural Partnerships will host its fourth annual RISE Summit adjacent to the 2026 Agriculture and Human Values Society Annual Conference held at UVM, at which the Institutes for Rural Partnerships are planning a presence.

The Institute for Rural Partnership Consortium will gather at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in the summer of 2026, which will provide an opportunity for the consortium members to present their respective work and discuss collaborative opportunities.