



## REGIONAL SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT PARTNERSHIPS 20 Years of Partnership: 1997-2017



In 1997, the Minnesota Legislature established the Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships (RSDP) to foster Greater Minnesota sustainability through a two-way flow of expertise and ideas between communities and the University. As part of University of Minnesota Extension, RSDP plays a central role in fulfilling the University's land-grant mission. Over the past 20 years, RSDP has supported hundreds of community-based projects in the areas of sustainable agriculture and food systems, clean energy, natural resources, and sustainable tourism and resilient communities. RSDP has become a known and trusted partner and convener for rural communities and community members across the state.

### 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Evaluation Activities

Impacts and best practices shared here reflect findings from evaluation efforts conducted in association with RSDP's 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2017, including focus groups with RSDP's five regional boards and an online survey of lead project partners the past 10 years.

*"The RSDPs are a quiet but extremely effective and powerful force in advancing the quality of life in Minnesota."*

*"RSDP is an incredible organization of intelligent, critical, compassionate, and effective individuals. They know what is going on in Greater Minnesota and are extremely well-networked. They are grounded, yet have vision."*

— 2017 RSDP Partner Survey comments

### RSDP MAJOR IMPACTS IDENTIFIED BY BOARD MEMBERS

**1** Building communities' capacity to support their own sustainability and resilience

**2** Seeding projects that have grown to become successful, established initiatives of wider scope

**3** Pioneering innovations in Minnesota's local foods movement

**4** Advancing clean energy projects and networks statewide through the Clean Energy Resource Teams

**5** Using research to help communities remain vibrant



## OUR SEEDS ARE GROWING

### Pioneering Local Foods Issues



RSDP has been a pioneer in the local foods movement in Minnesota. Impacts include launching conversations around farm-to-school and other issues; funding innovative projects such as the book *From the Farm to the Table*; advancing season extension by coordinating some of the initial research into high tunnels and supporting Deep Winter Greenhouse technology; and contributing to creation of the Minnesota Grown brand.

### Advancing Clean Energy



RSDP began elevating clean energy issues before they were mainstream. Expanding on this early work at RSDP, the Clean Energy Resource Teams (CERTs) facilitated spaces for community members to share their vision for a clean energy future, becoming a trusted statewide partnership in its own right, and advancing clean energy work across Minnesota communities.

### Fostering Rural Grocery Resilience



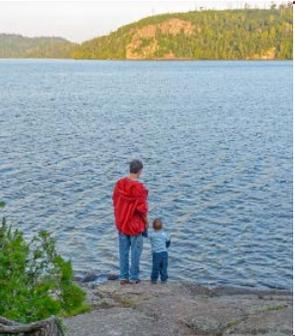
RSDP conducted Minnesota's first statewide survey of rural grocery stores. Results brought attention to struggles faced by many small-town grocery stores and have been used to offer these stores a variety of supports, including fresh produce handling guides, in-store produce handling training, and clean energy technical assistance.

### Supporting Sustainable Communities



Each year, RSDP supports approximately 150 community-driven sustainability projects across the state. These projects reflect diverse community-identified needs and solutions, such as the Main Street Project which created avenues into agricultural entrepreneurship for low-income immigrants, and projects supporting the ability of Milan's burgeoning Micronesian population to flourish.

### Protecting Our Natural Resources



Whether helping a community with sustainable tourism or piloting research on farm-to-rural-grocery techniques, all RSDP projects are undertaken in a way that safeguards Minnesota's natural resources for future generations. From local projects such as the partnership with the Zumbro River Watershed, to regional climate adaptation convenings, RSDP has helped Minnesotans understand their personal connections to and impacts on our state's natural resources.



The statewide office for the Clean Energy Resource Teams (CERTs) is part of RSDP. CERTs provides individuals and their communities the resources they need to identify and implement community-based clean energy projects. They empower communities and their members to adopt energy conservation, energy efficiency, and renewable energy technologies and practices for their homes, businesses, and local institutions.

#### CERTS IMPACT:

*Awarded over **\$1 million** in Seed Grants to more than **270** energy projects since 2006*

*Impacted **270,000** people through grants, events, and programs since 2009*

*Helped Minnesotans save over **347 billion BTUs** of energy and avoid **\$4.2 million** in energy costs since 2010*



From supporting development of hoop houses to research on growing deep winter greens, RSDP has contributed to significant advancements in farmers' ability to grow produce year-round in ways that limit use of fossil fuels. Several years of research and outreach have led to RSDP's statewide Deep Winter Greenhouse (DWG) initiative in which a prototype DWG is being built in each of RSDP's five regions for research and outreach. This work has garnered international attention.

### Building Supply Chains



Through its supply chain work, RSDP makes the connections that bring emerging crops such as hazelnuts, edible dry beans, and Kernza® from research to farm to store to table. These crops protect water, sequester carbon, and hold soil in place, benefiting the environment, farmers, and communities. In 2017, RSDP convened a forum bringing together farmers, processors, and other food professionals to learn about University of Minnesota agricultural innovation.

## PARTNERSHIP BEST PRACTICES IDENTIFIED BY RSDP BOARD MEMBERS

Results from five focus groups with RSDP regional board members conducted in spring-summer 2017.

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| <p><b>1</b> Bring players with different expertise, roles, and perspectives to the table to discuss and overcome challenges.</p>             | <p><b>2</b> Engage board members who are passionate about the work and committed to developing trusting, collaborative relationships with partners.</p>  |
| <p><b>3</b> Hold meetings in the places where partners work to foster understanding and connections within the regions.</p>                 | <p><b>4</b> Recruit board and work group members from the very regions they serve.</p>    |
| <p><b>5</b> Lay the groundwork for success before projects and partnerships formally launch.</p>    | <p><b>6</b> Address regional issues with a holistic approach, building connections across bodies of work.</p>   |
| <p><b>7</b> Build confidence in RSDP's ability to affect regional sustainability by highlighting its portfolio of successful projects.</p>  | <p><b>8</b> Listen to partners regardless of their position or perceived power.</p>   |
| <p><b>9</b> Identify tangible outcomes for community-based projects.</p>    | <p><b>10</b> Offer an accessible proposal process to invite diverse project applicants.</p>   |

## RSDP PARTNERS' PERCEPTIONS

Results from a fall 2017 survey of RSDP lead project partners from 2007-2017. 55 of 186 eligible respondents completed the survey, for a response rate of 30 percent.

**98%** Agree that RSDP produces tangible outcomes for communities (N=53)

**96%** Agree that RSDP enables community members to access University resources (N=53)

**96%** Agree that RSDP has an accessible proposal process (N=50)

**92%** Agree that RSDP positively impacts the perception of the University in communities (N=48)

**92%** Agree that RSDP is an important presence in rural Minnesota (N=53)

**90%** Agree their community is stronger because of projects supported by RSDP (N=49)

### A YEAR AT A GLANCE (2017)

*In fiscal year 2017, RSDP brought together **364** partners on **127** community-driven sustainability projects across Minnesota working on issues ranging from water quality, to local foods, to sustainable tourism development.*

*"I have always appreciated the deep conversations and special attention given to each topic that is brought forward to the RSDP. You feel your concerns and voice are being heard and welcomed and considered."*

*—2017 RSDP Partner Survey comment*

## 20 YEARS OF PARTNERSHIP



*Over the past 20 years, RSDP has nurtured sustainability through partnership. This work would not have been possible without the voluntary work of dedicated community leaders with a passion for sustainability. In 2016 alone, RSDP board and work group members contributed approximately **8,500 hours in volunteer time**. As we look to the future, RSDP will continue working hand-in-hand with dedicated Minnesotans to strive for a resilient, sustainable Greater Minnesota for all.*

*Thank you for your partnership!*



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