



The Rural Climate Dialogues

A Community-Driven Roadmap for
Climate Action in Rural Minnesota



By Tara Ritter
November 2020



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INTRODUCTION

Rural America has a central role to play in meeting the climate crisis and rural residents have innovative ideas about how to do it. Rural America encompasses 97% of the land area in the United States¹ and is home to nearly all the nation's energy production, including wind and solar farms, oil drilling and power plants. The nation's vast agricultural and forested land, which are essential natural resources in responding to climate change, are managed by the 19% of the population that lives in rural America.² It seems obvious that rural Americans should be deeply involved in developing climate policy; yet, rural perspectives and ideas are too often not part of the discussion.

There are real challenges in engaging rural communities on climate policy, including longstanding political obstacles that run deeper than views on climate change. The divide between rural and urban is not just geographic, but also cultural and political, and here in Minnesota the gap is widening. Urban and rural Minnesotans have grown apart in many ways — age, income, educational attainment, race and culture. Ignoring these differences, or trying to ram through them, has thus far delayed action on climate change.

Climate change offers an opportunity to engage differently with rural communities in a way that focuses on solutions rather than assigning blame. Instead of trying to “sell” climate policy to rural communities, we must engage organizations and leaders rooted in rural areas in the development stage to identify solutions that work for them. As important, we need community-level engagement tools designed to overcome our current toxic political environment and map out rural-appropriate responses to climate change that feed up into policy and concrete action.

Since 2014, IATP, in partnership with the Jefferson Center, has hosted Rural Climate Dialogues (RCDs) in five Minnesota counties. This method of civic engagement emphasizes listening and empathy building; focuses on each community's distinct hopes, challenges and sense of place; and ultimately creates locally driven climate action plans. This report will discuss the context in which we have done this work, provide an overview of each community's recommendations and actions, and share what we have learned.

THE RURAL CONTEXT

Climate change is just one in a series of economic and social challenges that are hitting rural communities disproportionately hard. Between 2010 and 2018, population grew in urban areas and declined in rural areas while employment grew in all counties except for completely rural ones. Rural communities also have an older and less educated population, and poverty rates are highest in the most rural counties. According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), these gaps have grown over time.³

Rural community members have lower incomes on average, and this income discrepancy is especially acute in farming-dependent counties. Net farm income peaked in 2013, and since then, it has dramatically dropped to the point that we are now in the midst of the worst farm crisis since the 1980s. In Minnesota, farmers earned their lowest net farm income in decades in 2018.⁴ This creates ripple effects in rural agricultural communities, impacting local seed and equipment dealers and other local businesses.

Many rural communities also struggle with maintaining quality infrastructure. Transportation infrastructure such as roads and bridges are in worse shape due to strained county budgets. Despite smaller rural populations, 68% of the nation's lane-miles are in rural areas, and those roads are traversed by heavy trucks carrying large volumes of freight.⁵ Broadband access is also lacking throughout many rural areas, limiting residents' ability to get news, find jobs, access telemedicine, integrate technology on their farm and operate businesses.

Rural people also experience major challenges when it comes to physical and mental health care. Rural hospital closures hit a record high in 2019⁶ and rural communities have fewer elder care facilities and childcare options.⁷ Other public health inequities exist as well; rural Americans are more likely to die from heart disease, cancer, injury, respiratory disease and stroke than their urban counterparts.⁸

These challenges, and more, tend to be the focus of attention and resources in rural communities. Understandably, a phenomenon as seemingly distant as climate change rarely takes the front seat.

HOW CLIMATE CHANGE WILL IMPACT RURAL COMMUNITIES

Climate change will compound the inequities present in rural America. According to the 2018 National Climate Assessment, rural communities face a “climate gap,” defined by unequal impacts of climate change and extreme weather events.⁹

Data from the USDA’s Economic Research Service show that rural areas have lower housing quality with lower energy efficiency on average.¹⁰ This means that households with lower average incomes are paying a higher percentage of their income on energy.

Climate change will also increase the riskiness and volatility of agriculture, forestry and other natural resource-dependent economic sectors. Rural communities that depend on these industries for their economic well-being will suffer with an increase in extreme weather events and more unpredictable temperature and precipitation swings. In 2019, record flooding decimated corn and soybean crops and damaged farm infrastructure across the Midwest.

Rural America’s education, healthcare and infrastructure challenges will also worsen with climate change. Destinations are further apart in rural areas, and climate change will increase weather-related wear and tear on roads, as well as make roads more frequently impassable.



These problems will make accessing hospitals, schools and other destinations more difficult and could increase emergency response times.

Although climate change is often perceived as a distant phenomenon — something that will happen later and elsewhere — the impacts are being felt here and now, and especially in rural areas. Yet, many of the challenges that rural communities face are precisely what prevents them from prioritizing investment in climate action.

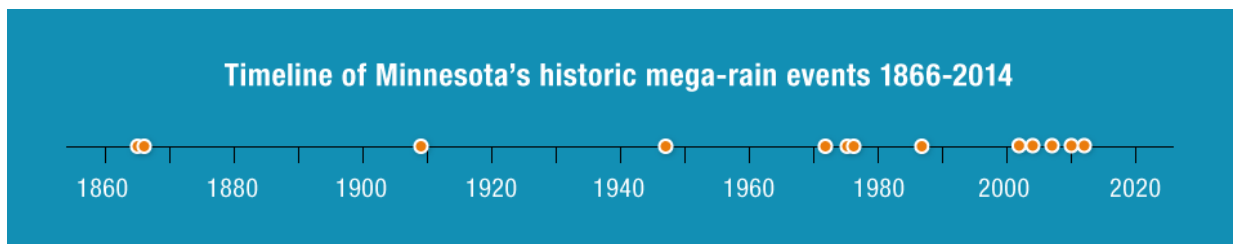
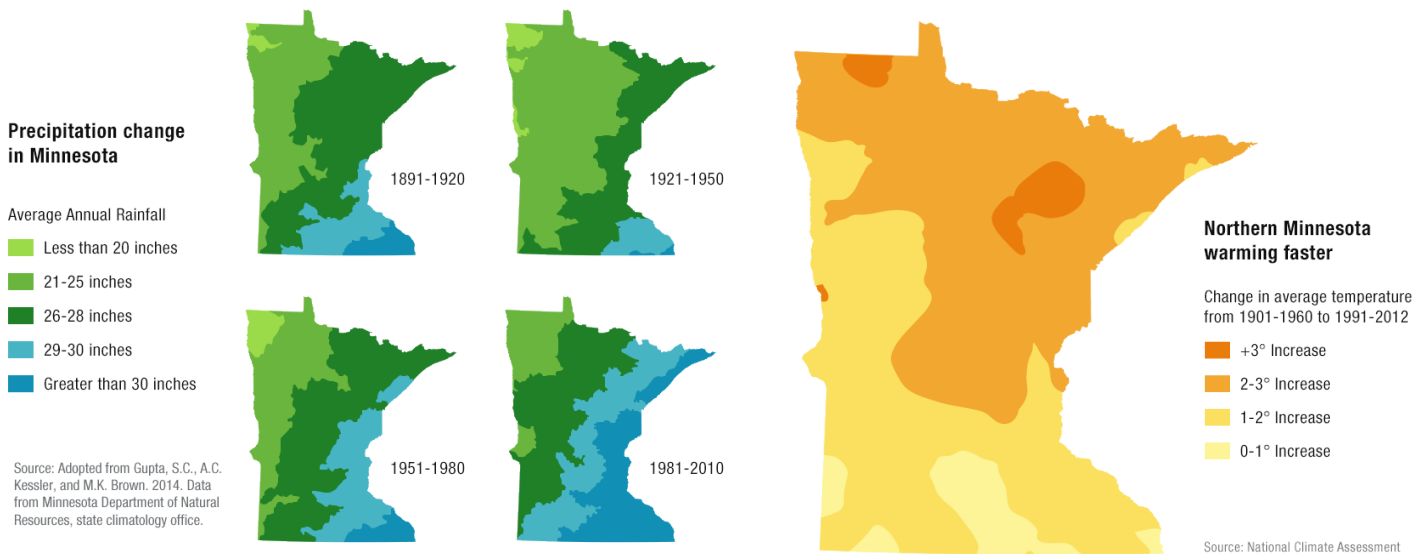
HOW CLIMATE CHANGE IS IMPACTING MINNESOTA

Climate change has impacted Minnesota noticeably already. Participants at the RCD events, many of whom have lived in their communities for decades or their whole lives, reflected on how, over the years, they had noticed less winter snowfall, hotter summers and increased flooding. There was agreement that things had changed over time, regardless of how or why these changes occurred.

From 1951 to 2012, statewide temperatures increased up to three degrees in some areas. Temperatures increased the fastest in the northern part of the state.¹¹ These temperature differentials impact Minnesota’s natural resource-based economies. Even a one-degree temperature difference can determine whether a waterway is habitable for a walleye, agricultural crops and animals are sensitive to heat, and the trees grown for the forestry industry are shifting from these seemingly small temperature fluctuations.

Minnesota has also gotten wetter, with precipitation increasing by up to 20% in some parts of the state from 1951 to 2012. Much of the increase occurs in the spring and fall, leading to flooding and crop and property damage. Instead of smaller rainfalls spread out over time, Minnesota is getting less frequent but more intense rain events.¹² The spring of 2019 caused immense damage; in addition to washed out roads and property damage, farmers suffered the latest planting on record and over one million acres of corn could not be planted at all.¹³

Animals and plants are more sensitive to weather changes than humans. In addition to phenomenon like shifting tree, crop



Graphics used with permission from Minnesota Public Radio. <https://www.mprnews.org/story/2015/02/02/climate-change-primer>

and fish species, Minnesota is also seeing an increase in mosquitoes and ticks. Warmer and wetter winters lend themselves to more of these pests in the summer — and accordingly, more of the diseases they carry.¹⁴ In addition, migratory birds are arriving earlier and animals are breeding sooner, causing a mismatch between the food needs of these populations and when plants bloom.¹⁵

Although the climate has always changed, it is changing more rapidly now than it ever has in our measurement history. These impacts are felt at home; Minnesota is not immune to these changes that will affect economic livelihoods, health, energy use, infrastructure and many other aspects of our lives.

I knew of climate change, but I really had no idea just how much it affected me personally.

— Itasca County Climate Dialogue participant

CREATING EQUITABLE CLIMATE POLICY

Rural residents frequently oppose government regulation, oftentimes because government outreach and engagement strategies are inadequate and seek little, if any, meaningful input from rural constituents. This creates a deep distrust and surfaces feelings that environmental policies are thrust upon them as an attack on their way of life and already-vulnerable economy.

As long as rural engagement is limited in environmental policymaking, so is our ability to create a clean energy future and communities that are well-equipped to handle climate challenges. We desperately need a new approach to build policy that reduces climate-related risks and increases opportunities for better livelihoods — and in a way that rural residents can see and feel the benefits for themselves.

The good news is that rural-based climate solutions are already happening. We are seeing massive expansions of solar and wind energy and local food production. Cities and counties are building out energy efficiency programs to lower energy bills. Soil and Water Conservation

Districts are investing in cost-share programs for farmers to implement conservation practices, and there is growing interest among farmers in implementing practices to boost soil health. The growth in these areas is often not due to climate change, but rather to boost economic development. For climate solutions to work, they must be connected to community solutions.

Community-based responses to climate change must be integrated into state and federal policymaking. Listening to communities about what they need is the only way to create policies that work on the ground and bring people together.

At times I feel completely victimized because we see all these bad things happening that you can't do anything about individually. It's really refreshing to sit down with a bunch of community members and realize you share the same core values and are united.

— Winona County Climate Dialogue participant

THE RURAL CLIMATE DIALOGUES

IATP and the Jefferson Center partnered in 2014 to devise a new approach to engage rural communities on climate change. Over the past six years, the Rural Climate Dialogues have reached five counties in Minnesota, over 10 state agencies and a multitude of partners across the country interested in this model of community engagement.

The RCDs use the Citizens Jury method for community problem solving and leadership development. This approach brings together a microcosm of the community over multiple days to study an issue in-depth and generate a shared community response. These events provide a productive, educational and inclusive way to address complex or divisive challenges. Each RCD focuses on a specific rural community and gathers a randomly selected, demographically representative group of residents (ranging from 15-21 individuals). They are tasked

with creating a collective and place-based response to the topic at hand. The facilitated events are completely participant-driven; no one tells them what to do or what to think. The participants ultimately produce their own recommendations based on community needs, priorities, concerns and values.

The RCDs are unique as an organizing tool because they focus on building empathy and deep listening. Helping people feel heard is an important first step in creating solutions. We do this by setting up a space of respectful conversation where different viewpoints and opinions are encouraged. Participants are given ample time to get to know one another and spend time in small groups sharing their perspectives and personal stories. As participants move through the RCD process, deeper thoughts and feelings come to the surface that often center around care for their community and a fear of change that is out of their control.

From 2014-2020, IATP and the Jefferson Center completed three phases of RCDs:

1. The first phase worked in Stevens, Itasca and Winona Counties. The focus of these events was community resilience in the face of climate change and extreme weather. Participants were tasked with identifying the top priorities for local climate action to maximize community benefits.
2. The second phase worked in the same three counties. In each of the initial RCDs, renewable energy emerged as a main theme. Therefore, the second phase of the RCDs zeroed in on local energy systems.
3. The third phase worked in Redwood and Murray Counties in southwestern Minnesota. The focus of these events was wind energy siting. Participants were tasked with identifying challenges and opportunities around hosting wind energy in their communities and how development could maximize community benefits.

COUNTY SELECTION

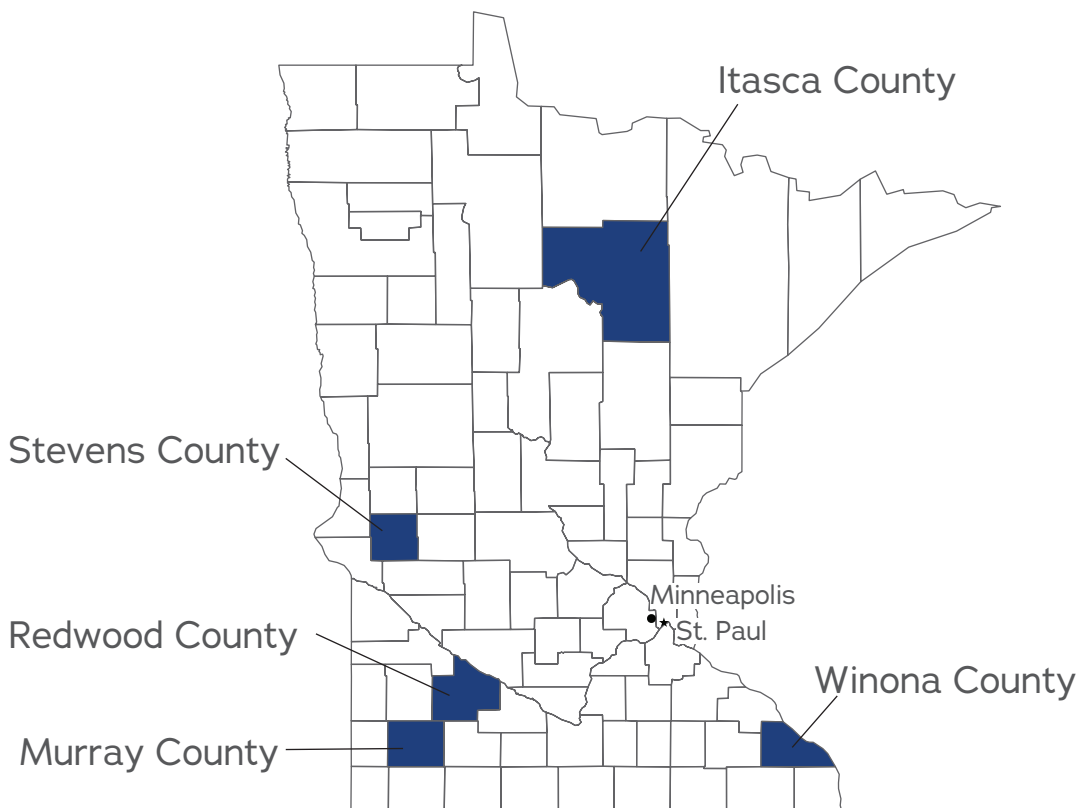
The county selection process was intentional and based on multiple factors. For the initial round of RCDs, we targeted three counties in different geographical areas of the state with different primary economic drivers and in different Congressional districts.

- Stevens County is in west-central Minnesota. The county has a population of just under 10,000 people with over half living in the county seat of Morris. It is a largely agricultural community situated on the prairie. Morris is home to the University of Minnesota, Morris, which has a student population of about 1,500 students. Politically, Stevens County has been a swing district for the past several decades, but the area's current State Senator and State Representative are both Republican.
- Itasca County is in northern Minnesota. The county has a population of 45,000 with 11,000 living in the county seat of Grand Rapids. Forestry is a primary economic driver in Itasca County, but the area also has a robust mining industry and the lakes and forests attract tourists year-round. Itasca County voters have tended to vote Democratic in the past, yet Donald Trump was the first Republican

presidential candidate to win the county since the 1920s. The area's current State Senator and State Representative are both Republican.

- Winona County is in southeastern Minnesota. The county has a population of about 50,000 with roughly half living in the county seat of Winona. Located along the Mississippi River, the county has a significant manufacturing industry. The county is situated in the karst region, and the distinct bluffs and vibrant art scene lend themselves to a bustling tourism industry. The area is home to Winona State University, with a student population of about 8,000 students. Politically, the county has selected the Democratic candidate in 64% of national elections. The area's State Representative is Democrat, and the State Senator is Republican.

For the third phase of RCDs we turned our sights to southwestern Minnesota. This area of the state has some of the best wind resource in the country and has already experienced extensive wind development over the past 20 years. Wind energy siting has become increasingly contentious, and we used the RCD model to work through community tensions.



Research over the last 30 years has found that public acceptance of wind development can be predicted by the quality of the community engagement surrounding the development. A lack of opportunity for community participation can reduce support and increase conflicts, whereas planning processes that are perceived as fair and inclusive can boost support for projects.¹⁶ The goal of this phase of RCDs was to empower community members to articulate their opinions and weigh in on the developments that would affect their communities.

For this phase of RCDs, we selected two neighboring counties with different levels of development. Each county provided differing perspectives on the challenges and opportunities created by wind development for rural communities.

- Redwood County, a heavily agricultural region in the southwestern part of the state, has a population of 15,000. There are over 1,000 farms in the county, growing primarily corn and soybeans. It is a reliably Republican area. The county has not yet hosted any wind development, but future development is planned.
- Murray County, also a heavily agricultural county in the southwestern part of the state, has a population of 8,000. There are over 800 farms in the county, growing primarily corn and soybeans. The county has become more Republican over the past decade, though historically has been a swing area. Situated on the Buffalo Ridge, the county is one of the top wind producing counties in the state with 255 operational turbines.

Most people don't like change, especially in their own neighborhood. And especially if they don't feel like they have a say over it, that can be a challenge.

— Murray County Energy Dialogue participant

THE PRE-ORGANIZING PHASE

In the lead-up to an RCD event, we spend months building relationships in the community. This pre-organizing is critical to understand the community context, build trust and rapport with local leaders and help inform event design. We meet with people from many areas of the community, including:

- Staff and elected officials at the city and county levels, including county administrators, city managers, county commissioners and city council members.
- Teachers and students at local high schools, community colleges and universities.
- Community artists and place-makers.
- Media outlets including local newspapers, radio stations and TV stations.
- Local business leaders and chambers of commerce. This group also includes farmers, foresters and other natural resource managers.
- Civic engagement organizations including Rotary Clubs and Kiwanis Clubs.

The goal of these pre-organizing meetings is to identify which issues are at the top of community members' minds. We repeatedly hear concerns about depopulation and wanting to create welcoming communities where young people and families return. Another frequent priority is maintaining roads and infrastructure with lean county budgets. People also want to ensure that farmers and other natural resource managers can make a stable living. Other community-specific concerns emerge as well. In one community, a large nursing home was shutting down with no alternatives for elder care. In another, memories of a major 2009 flood were still front-of-mind. In yet another, a renovation of the county courthouse had the community split.

For climate change and energy solutions to work in a community, they must yield benefits that also address larger community concerns. This can include generating revenue or saving money, increasing resilience to extreme weather events to mitigate the impacts of flooding or creating jobs that could compel young families to return to

THE RCD EVENT

the area. On the contrary, if climate and energy solutions increase costs or put additional burdens on a community, they will not be accepted or sustainable.

Based on our conversations in the pre-organizing phase, we identify key issues to feature as event presentations. We invite local community members to present on these issues. Featuring local speakers helps build trust and keeps the event grounded in community perspectives. Some examples of presentations include: a local insurance agent discussing how extreme weather is causing insurance premiums to increase, a city engineer presenting on how flooding is stressing the area's stormwater infrastructure, and a DNR employee sharing how fish and tree species are shifting as temperatures warm. The selected presentations for each event are tailored to that community's economy and interests.

The people we meet and the relationships we build during the pre-event organizing phase are critical for the long-term success of the RCDs. As leaders in their community, the community members we meet with are motivated to create positive community change. After the event, these people are generally the ones who bring the recommendations from the event to fruition.

I work with children, and when you're talking about families who are living in poverty already... who are already living paycheck to paycheck, or barely making it, and then something comes along like a flood or high winds, trees down, and they don't have the resources to be able to deal with that — from a mental health perspective, that's an added stressor in terms of how people cope.

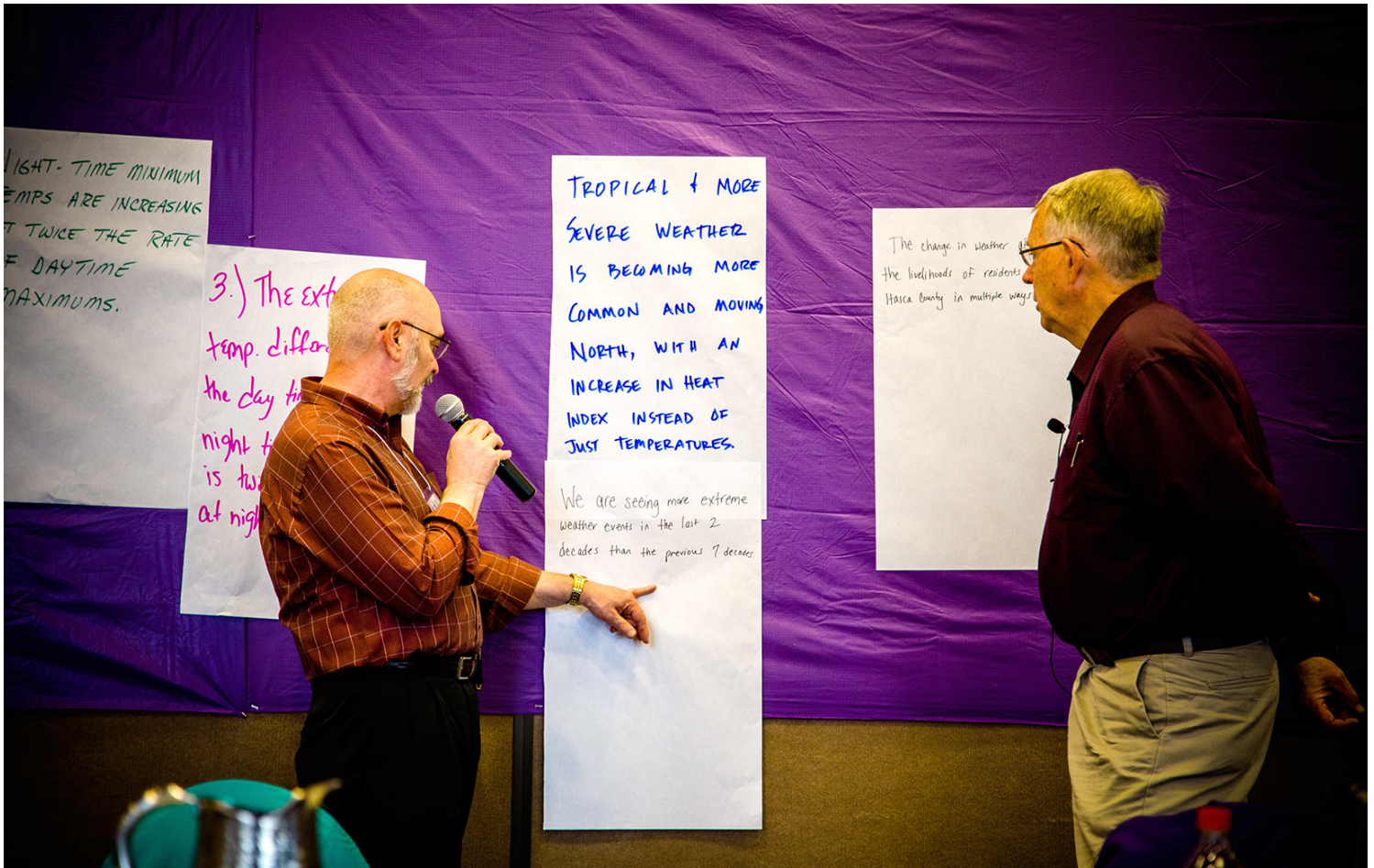
— Itasca County Climate Dialogue participant

The Citizens Jury model brings together 15 to 21 individuals from the county who are selected through an application process. We invite community members to apply to participate in several ways: we mail postcards to thousands of households in the county, place ads in the newspaper and other local media outlets, run targeted ads on social media and invite community partners to share the opportunity with their networks. The invitations emphasize that participants do not need any expertise in the topic at hand.

The application process is brief; community members indicate their ability to attend the event in its entirety and provide basic demographic information. The Citizens Jury is designed so that the demographic makeup of the participants mirrors the demographics of the county as a whole. The demographics considered are gender, race/ethnicity, political party affiliation, age and education level. Once the application deadline is passed, we randomly select participants to match the demographics of the county.

To reduce barriers to participation, participants are paid a daily stipend, and we cover childcare and transportation costs. This broadens the number of community members willing and able to participate. Paying participants helps us reach people who are not typically engaged in public processes, including people who may need to take a day off work and people who have limited knowledge of the topic at hand.

The RCD events last two to three days. The beginning of the first day focuses on getting to know one another. Building a strong, shared foundation is necessary for participants to feel comfortable engaging in the event fully and expressing their diverse points of view. We start by asking participants to share why they love their community. In every event we have hosted, people have expressed appreciation for the natural environment, the tight-knit sense of community that forms in rural areas and how people show up to help one another. This simple question builds a common bond among participants — they all want the best for their community, and they are at the RCD to create solutions that are in the community's best interest.



Then, we agree upon ground rules for conversation and engagement. These include listening fully before responding, assuming positive intent and disagreeing respectfully. Throughout the event, we invite participants to share their own perspectives, and given the range of people and worldviews in the room we acknowledge that those perspectives will not always be the same. It is essential to define shared norms before leaning into conversations where people are encouraged to disagree.

The next part of the event moves into presentations and information gathering. We feature anywhere from four to seven presentations from local experts, and the presentation topics are based on the conversations we had in the community before the event. We coach presenters to ensure continuity between the event's presentations. They are also asked to remain objective; participants have the opportunity to reject information if they deem it biased.

Each presentation ranges from 15 to 30 minutes with ample time for questions. Participants are tasked with identifying the most relevant information and assessing opportunities and challenges for their communities based on the information presented.

After every presentation, participants break into small groups to deliberate and distill their thoughts into shared takeaways from the presentation. First, participants are asked to think about and write down key information from the presentation individually. Then, each member of the small group shares their individual impressions with one another. The small group works to find common ground and identifies top takeaways as a group. The small groups then share with one another, identifying the full group's collective takeaways. This small group deliberation is repeated to identify how the community might maximize opportunities and address challenges related to the presentation topic.

After all the presentations and associated small group discussions, participants come together on the final day to collectively draft a statement to their neighbors and vote on main challenges for their community to address

and top opportunities for their community to pursue. The result is a final report that comprehensively shares the group's agreed-upon recommendations.

A critical part of every RCD is evaluation. We partnered with an evaluator at the University of Minnesota to administer pre- and post-surveys at every event and conduct interviews with selected people about their experience. This evaluation data allowed us to amend each event and assess whether the RCDs were having their intended impact. In every community, we saw increases in the belief that major shifts in local climate patterns are likely. There were also marked increases in the conviction that individuals and the community can take action to address these shifts. Perhaps most notably, we saw significant increases in the willingness of participants to talk with their neighbors about climate change. In rural communities, local change is highly interpersonal and individual conversations can shape community action. The willingness of RCD participants to be vocal about climate change after the event was one of the most impactful outcomes.

It was good to see all the different sides of the issue and I learned a lot, too. I've got to hand it to you guys — taking 18 people and trying to get all these opinions, balanced opinions, and facilitate this and channel this group to come up with a product in three short days, you did a great job.

— Itasca County Climate Dialogue participant



THE POST-ORGANIZING PHASE

Our goal after the event is to help bring the jury's vision to life. Not every participant will be interested in staying involved long-term, but their recommendations provide a foundation for community leaders to build from when engaging in climate or energy planning. It is rare for community decisionmakers to have a roadmap designed by a representative cross section of their community, and this information can inspire and inform community action.

We disseminate the event recommendations as widely as possible. The most effective messengers of this information are participants themselves. Participants have presented their recommendations to their county commissions and city councils, state agency staff, the Rural Minnesota Energy Board and other local

CONNECTING TO POLICY

collaboratives. In every community, we have also worked with the news media to write and broadcast follow-up articles and interviews about the event, and in some cases, to place opinion editorials from event participants and organizers. This ensures that RCD results are transparent and fully available to the public.

A critical element of long-term community change is identifying the community leaders who will step up and lead the charge. Implementing any project or planning initiative takes capacity and willpower, which must come from inside the community — if outside project organizers take the lead, it is unlikely that the initiative will be sustainable. Oftentimes the people who are excited to act on RCD recommendations already wear multiple hats in the community. For this reason, adding capacity at the start of a project goes a long way. Our job is to connect interested stakeholders, facilitate initial meetings and shepherd work along until it is underway.

One way we have added capacity to communities is securing funds for projects. Rural budgets are often already strained, and staff capacity tends to be lean. In two RCD communities, we collaboratively applied for and received grants from the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency. These funds enabled the implementation of RCD recommendations.

In addition to facilitating community-driven climate action, the RCDs are intended to filter rural perspectives up into state and federal climate policy. State policy and programs are created primarily by state agency staff and elected officials, many of whom are based in St. Paul. Outreach opportunities are frequently limited; public meetings are usually in-person during the daytime (limiting people who cannot travel to St. Paul or take time off during the workday) and even when a call-in option is available, it is generally poorly advertised and creates a sense of distance for the participant.

Furthermore, a lack of trust in government prevents many rural community members from participating in state processes. Without a baseline level of trust in state government, rural community members will avoid input opportunities, especially when they are not happening in their own community.

Our advocacy with state-level staff and policymakers emphasizes that any climate-related decisions must be informed by direct engagement with rural communities. Decisionmakers need to be in rural communities, forging relationships and truly listening to the needs of those communities. We relay this same information and share perspectives from RCD events within networks and coalitions to inform their priorities and engagement strategies.



STEVENS COUNTY

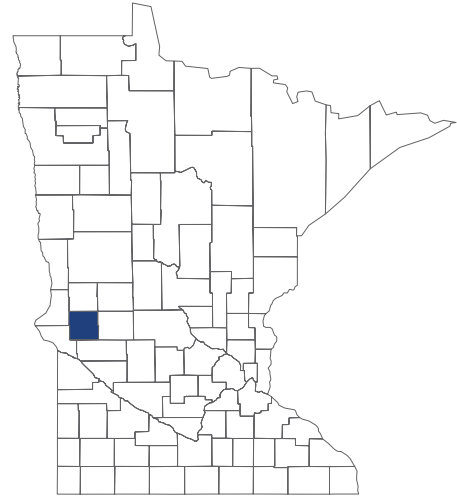
www.iatp.org/rural-climate-dialogues/stevens-county

STUDENT DIALOGUE

May 2014

We began our work in Stevens County with a student dialogue at the Morris Area High School. We partnered with teachers in the civics and agricultural education departments to create lesson plans on local climate impacts and had the students deliberate what responses they would like to see their community take. This process equipped students with real information on climate and effective communication and deliberation skills.

Outside the classroom, students disseminated energy surveys to their family and neighbors to help map the community's energy use and gauge interest in energy savings. Aside from data collection, the survey created an opportunity for conversation between students and the adults in their life about climate change adaptation



and mitigation, which are topics that may not arise at the dinner table very often. The data from these surveys was collated and presented at the community RCD by students themselves, empowering the students to share

their perspectives and helping the adult RCD participants connect with the content through the young people in their life.



Morris Area High School students participate in a mapping exercise

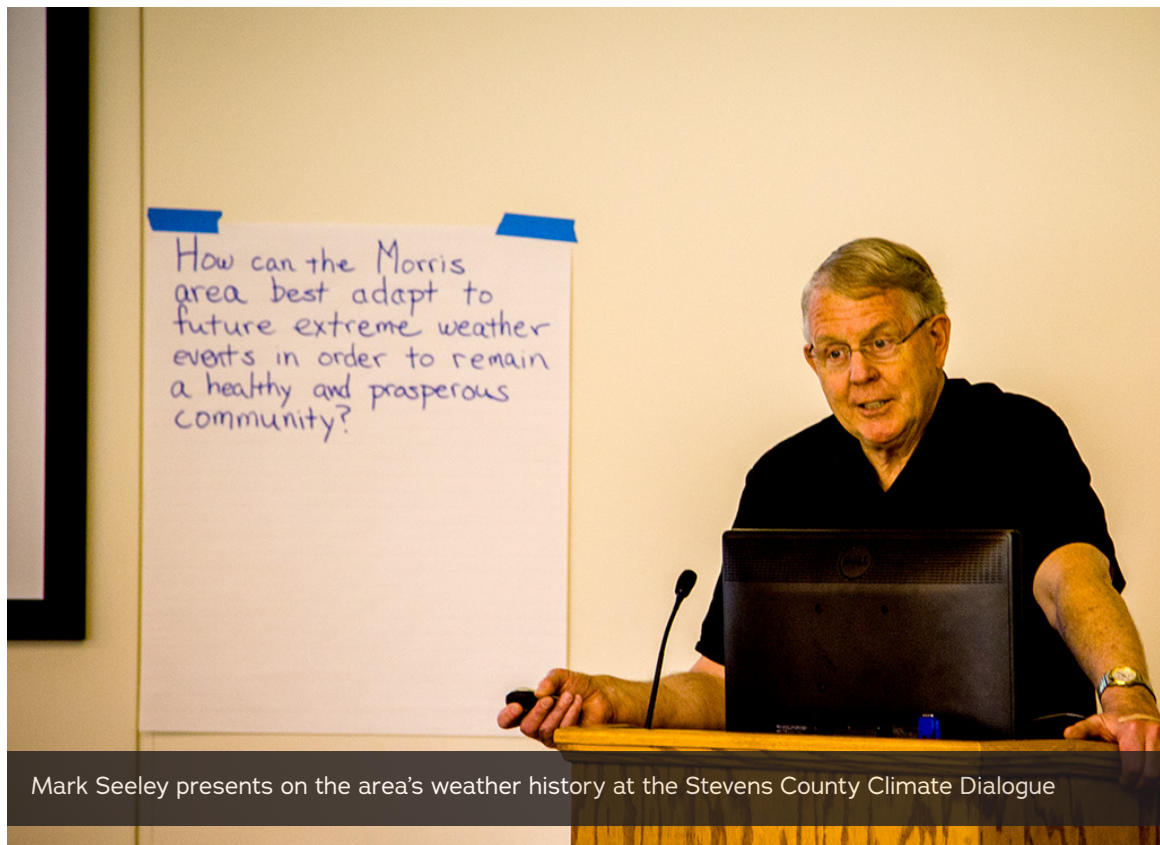
CLIMATE DIALOGUE

June 2014

The Stevens County Climate Dialogue was held in the county seat of Morris. Over the course of three days, participants got to know one another, engaged with presenters and wrote a final statement of recommended community actions.

Presentations included:

- Mark Seeley, a climatologist for University of Minnesota Extension, presented on local extreme weather and climate conditions. This presentation was a feature of all three of the initial RCDs, providing an informational foundation for discussion. The presentation was successful for several reasons. First, it focused solely on local impacts — not on distant phenomenon like melting ice caps or rising sea levels. Second, it presented a detailed weather history of the area — there was no mention of models or projections into the future. Grounding climate information locally and based on historical data made it easy for participants to accept and digest.
- Shalini Gupta from the Center for Earth, Energy and Democracy presented on local energy burdens. This presentation was based in part on data collected by students in the student dialogue. The presentation addressed local energy poverty — a household's ability or inability to afford energy prices — and how climate change impacts that.
- Mark Kulda from the Insurance Federation of Minnesota presented on how weather extremes are impacting insurance rates. This presentation was especially relevant because the community had recently experienced several hailstorms that severely damaged property.
- Abdullah Jaradat from the USDA Agricultural Research Service presented on how climate change and extreme weather are impacting farmers and local agriculture, which is a primary economic driver for Stevens County.
- Blaine Hill, the city manager for the City of Morris, presented on local infrastructure concerns, including stormwater infrastructure and city buildings.



Mark Seeley presents on the area's weather history at the Stevens County Climate Dialogue

- Bill Klyve from Otter Tail Power, the local utility, presented on community energy and energy efficiency.
- Troy Goodnough from the Office of Sustainability at the University of Minnesota, Morris presented on local options to strengthen resilience.

Based on these presentations, participants' top concerns included: rising energy and food costs, which would disproportionately impact low-income and elderly residents; lack of community awareness of changes in extreme weather and climate and ways to address those changes; and potential negative climate impacts on agriculture.

Top opportunities included recommendations to strengthen the local agricultural economy; better utilize local expertise and resources; and increase local economic benefits through creating new markets for crops, increasing water and electricity efficiency and using the local tax base for climate-friendly infrastructure.

In the post-event evaluation, 14 out of 15 participants agreed that community members and local, county and state governments should take action to address the risks created by extreme weather and shifting climate patterns. 13 out of 15 participants were willing or very willing to talk with their neighbors about the risks of extreme weather and shifting climate patterns.

PARTICIPANTS COLLECTIVELY AUTHORED A "STATEMENT FOR OUR NEIGHBORS," WHICH READ:

Climate change is happening, and we need to adapt our behavior and infrastructure to meet the challenges of our new world, which include extreme weather events, financial difficulties, and long-term adverse effects on agriculture. Research, education, and improvements are underway in the Morris area concerning extreme weather and climate change; however, there seems to be a lack of communication between researchers and the general public and policymakers. Climate change presents short- and long-term challenges and opportunities for everyone. We must all participate to solve these issues. Education is key.

Devastating weather is becoming more frequent in Stevens County. Increased living expenses brought about by climate change and extreme weather, including food, clean water, transportation, property damage, and energy costs currently, and will continue to, adversely affect all members of the community, especially those with low or fixed incomes. Because of a lack of community awareness and underutilization of tools and resources, community members need to be both educated on climate change and given tools they can use to deal with its effects. Once again, education is key.



OUR ENERGY FUTURE

December 2017 / February 2018

After three years of partnership with the City of Morris and the University of Minnesota, Morris, IATP and the Jefferson Center convened two more events — one in December 2017 and one in February 2018. Each of these events was a three-hour evening convening that was open to the public.

At the first event, 50 community members gathered to learn about the basics of the energy system, discuss local energy goals and brainstorm ways to achieve those goals. Topics and local speakers included:

- Energy 101: Mike Reese, director of renewable energy at the West Central Research and Outreach Center.
- Local energy from a utility's perspective: Brian Draxten, director of resource planning at Otter Tail Power.
- City of Morris partnership with Saerbeck, Germany: Blaine Hill, Morris city manager.

After the presentations, participants broke into small groups to discuss the future of the community's energy system. There was broad interest in local production and local ownership of energy and a sense of pride that rural communities could lead the way. A top concern was a loss of local decision-making abilities, with big utilities and outside developers owning and controlling the energy. Overall, enthusiasm about a few main themes rose to the top: renewable energy, energy efficiency and behavior change, batteries and energy storage technology, district heating and local energy ownership.

To explore the question of how to achieve the energy goals identified at the first event, we hosted a second event in

February 2018, where over 80 community members gathered to explore these topics more in depth. Community members heard about the following topics from local experts:

- Energy efficiency: Alexis Troschinetz, Clean Energy Resource Teams.
- District heating: Bryan Herrmann, University of Minnesota, Morris.
- Microgrids and local energy ownership: Arne Kildgard, University of Minnesota, Morris.
- Energy storage: Joel Tallaksen, West Central Research and Outreach Center.
- Renewable energy trends: Stacy Miller, Minnesota Department of Commerce.

After the presentations, participants discussed the potential benefits, challenges and action steps they could take to bring their energy goals to fruition. Participants voted on the topics they would like the community to address first, with district heating, energy efficiency and local energy ownership rising to the top. Since these events, Morris has pursued each of these issues aggressively and is widely recognized as an energy and climate leader in Minnesota.



OUTCOMES

Since the 2014 Stevens County Climate Dialogue, Morris has become a statewide model for climate and energy leadership. This cannot be attributed to the RCDs alone; however, the RCD was a springboard for conversation, connection and idea generation, and catalyzed subsequent community meetings, projects and partnerships.

Participants at the 2014 Stevens County Climate Dialogue and subsequent energy events ranked energy efficiency high on the list of easy and recommended climate actions. Soon after the RCD, the City of Morris replaced the city-owned streetlights and lighting in 12 municipal buildings with LED lighting, which was projected to save \$122,000 over 10 years. In addition, Stevens County public officials partnered with the local utility, Otter Tail Power, to pursue energy efficiency and a redesigned local economic development model that included local renewable energy.

The RCD initiated Morris's first resilience and climate adaptation planning work. This included an Extreme Weather Action Meeting in 2015 that gathered residents to discuss potential actions to boost community resilience in the face of extreme weather. In this initial phase of work, community members also hosted climate-related film screenings and additional opportunities for conversation and education.

In 2015, individuals from Stevens County, the City of Morris and the University of Minnesota, Morris came together to start the Morris Model (www.morrismodel.org), which has transformed the energy landscape in Stevens County. Since its inception, the Morris Model has led projects around energy, water, waste management and more. The Morris Model's 2018 strategic plan outlined three overarching goals: produce 80% of the energy consumed in the county by 2030, reduce energy consumption 30% by 2030 and no landfilling of waste generated within the county by 2025. These aspirational goals put Morris far ahead of the curve when it comes to community sustainability.

Also in 2015, the Morris City Council signed a climate protection technical assistance partnership with the city of Saerbeck, Germany to explore local clean energy production as a community economic driver. This partnership has resulted in learning exchanges with officials from each city visiting one another to learn about local energy production and moving towards energy autonomy.

In recognition of this innovative work, Morris and partners, including IATP and the Jefferson Center, won the 2015 Environmental Initiative Community Action award for community-based education, deliberation and planning to enhance community resilience in the face of climate change. In 2016, the City of Morris was awarded the Clean Energy Community Award through the Minnesota Department of Commerce for their work developing the Morris Model.

In 2017, The University of Minnesota, Morris earned a Minnesota Climate Adaptation Award from the Minnesota Climate Adaptation Partnership. Morris and Stevens counties continue to lead the state in local energy innovation.



Morris Engaged wins the 2015 Environmental Initiative Community Action award

ITASCA COUNTY

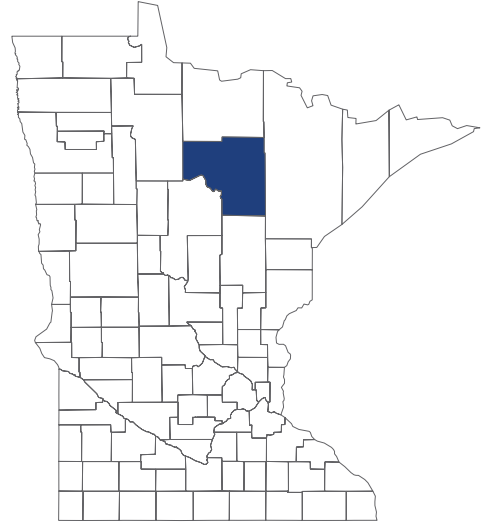
www.iatp.org/rural-climate-dialogues/itasca-county

STUDENT DIALOGUE

April 2015

Our first event in Itasca County was a student dialogue at Grand Rapids High School. We partnered with geography and agricultural resource teachers to create climate-specific lesson plans where students were asked to research impacts of climate and weather across Minnesota. Then, students shared their concerns regarding climate change in the Grand Rapids area. Many comments centered around the area's natural resources – impacts on fishing, hunting and water recreation. Student responses included sentiments such as “I fish all year round,” “I like to hunt white tail deer” and “I live on the lake.” The conversations in the classroom were effective at building enthusiasm for community climate action because they centered on topics that the students cared about.

After the classroom conversations, we assembled a discussion entitled “Woods, Water and Workforce” at which nine local experts joined hundreds of students to answer questions about how climate change was impacting them and their professions. The experts, who represented fields from



tourism to wildlife management to forestry, fielded two hours of questions from students. An ecology professor at the local community college noted, “It’s you guys who are going to make the change, and I know you can.”

Two ninth grade students later joined the community RCD to discuss what they learned at school. RCD participants agreed that hearing from the high schoolers was one of the most powerful parts of the event.



Grand Rapids High School students participate in a discussion with nine experts on local climate impacts



CLIMATE DIALOGUE

May 2015

The Itasca County Climate Dialogue took place in Grand Rapids. Over the course of three days, participants got to know one another, engaged with presenters and wrote a final statement of recommended community actions.

Presentations included:

- Mark Seeley, a climatologist for University of Minnesota Extension, presented on local extreme weather and climate conditions.
- Brian Palik from the USDA Forest Service presented on impacts to the local forestry industry.
- John Latimer, a local phenologist with a weekly radio show, presented on phenology and wildlife impacts.
- Tim Goeman, a local DNR employee, presented on fisheries.
- Megan Christianson from Visit Grand Rapids, the local tourism bureau, presented on how the tourism industry has been impacted by shifting weather conditions.
- Julie Kennedy, the city engineer, presented on public infrastructure.

■ Michael Duval, another local DNR employee, presented on water resources.

Based on these presentations, participants' top concerns included reduced lifespan of capital assets and public infrastructure, stormwater runoff increasing sediment and phosphorus load in waterways, changing fish composition which will affect angling opportunities, expanded territory for the Emerald Ash Borer and summer drought impacting the growth and health of pine forests.

Top opportunities included recommendations to manage forests so they are more adaptable in the face of changing weather conditions, increase public accessibility of information, adapt stormwater infrastructure to manage excess water, implement water conservation measures, protect and preserve habitat and avoid developing in floodplains.

In the post-event evaluation, 94% of participants said they were “very sure” or “extremely sure” that climate change is happening. Participants unanimously showed increases in belief that state government, Itasca County government, Itasca County residents and themselves as individuals can and should take action on climate change.

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## PARTICIPANTS COLLECTIVELY AUTHORED A “STATEMENT FOR OUR NEIGHBORS,” WHICH READ:

Evidence points to changing weather patterns, which will likely affect all of our lives in some way. These changes will have a real measurable impact on our overall economy, personal finances, health, and culture. The tourism, lumber, and outdoor life (fishing, hunting, hiking, camping, etc.) components of our economy can adapt and thrive with thoughtful long-term management. We as individuals and communities have the power to take action by working together. By doing so, we can improve our environment, save our natural resources, address the effects of changing weather, and create more opportunities to make a more vibrant community.

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ENERGY DIALOGUE

May 2018

Three years after the initial Itasca County Climate Dialogue, we hosted an energy-focused RCD in Itasca County in 2018. The energy dialogue brought together a randomly selected and demographically representative group of 18 residents for two days to study the energy system in detail, identify challenges and opportunities related to the energy system in Itasca County and create action plans to help address challenges and realize opportunities.

The participant composition at the energy dialogue was a combination of community members, public officials and others involved in Itasca County energy issues. Of the 18 participants, 13 were community members randomly selected to reflect the demographic makeup of the county. The other five participants were the general manager of Grand Rapids Public Utilities, the Grand

I came away impressed with how diverse of a group we were, that we could come away with a common goal. That gives me hope for the community at large.”

— Itasca County Energy Dialogue participant

Rapids mayor, a Grand Rapids city council member, a Public Utilities commissioner and a member of the Itasca Clean Energy Team.

Presentations included:

- Stacy Miller from the Minnesota Department of Commerce reviewed energy basics and trends in Minnesota.
- Zac Ruzycki from Great River Energy presented on the pros and cons of different energy sources, both renewable and non-renewable.
- A panel of employees from the utilities serving the area (Grand Rapids Public Utilities, Minnesota Power and Lake Country Power) discussed how municipal utilities, rural electric cooperatives and investor-owned utilities make decisions.
- Tony Ward from the Grand Rapids Public Utilities Commission presented on the impacts of the energy system on household energy consumers.
- Burl Ives, an Itasca County commissioner and businessowner, presented on the impacts of the energy system on business and industry energy consumers.

Discussions centered around four criteria for a productive energy system: reliability, affordability, minimizing pollution and climate change and supporting local jobs and investment.



Top challenges identified by participants included the lack of energy storage to make renewables a more feasible option, the difficulty of replacing energy infrastructure and the challenge of educating consumers about how energy usage affects peak demand.

Top opportunities included greater community dialogue and public engagement to educate community members about the energy system; the opportunity to develop local biofuel technologies; that smart grids and other new technologies will enable customers to manage

their resources more effectively; and incentives for more efficient energy use can benefit individual users, as well as utilities.

A suite of recommendations (available in the event's final report¹⁷) outlined potential individual and community actions to achieve an affordable and reliable energy system that is friendly to both the environment and the local economy.

PARTICIPANTS CRAFTED THE FOLLOWING STATEMENT:

As individuals and as a community, we can play an important role in shaping our energy system, especially if everyone is involved. Individuals and businesses can conserve energy and save money by installing LED bulbs and other energy saving devices. Communities can save money for everyone by reducing electricity usage during periods of high demand (peak demand). There are many individuals and groups looking for creative ways to lower energy costs and make our energy system work for our community. It's on us to get educated and be involved. Knowledge is power!

OUTCOMES

Since the 2015 Itasca County Climate Dialogue, the community has hosted additional community education events and explored expanding local renewables. After the 2015 RCD, participants presented their findings to interested community members who asked questions and deepened the conversation about local climate and weather impacts. RCD recommendations were also sent to local decisionmakers, including the Grand Rapids City Council and Itasca County Commission.

Following the 2018 Energy Dialogue, the Itasca Clean Energy Team, a local group of individuals interested in expanding renewables, petitioned the Grand Rapids Public Utilities Commission and Minnesota Power for a community solar garden. As a result of this community advocacy, the utilities partnered to evaluate and plan for a buildout of community solar.

In 2018, IATP and the Jefferson Center partnered with Grand Rapids Public Utilities to hire a consultant and host a community solar forum.¹⁸ Forty community members attended the forum to learn about the proposed community solar garden. Participants heard from speakers who described the proposed project's impact on the utility, the community-driven process and the specifics about the project's associated benefits, costs and construction. Following the presentations, attendees participated in a facilitated discussion identifying key information about the proposal and the possible opportunities and concerns associated with the project's implementation. Grand Rapids Public Utilities concluded that the solar garden could save more than \$6 million over two decades. Construction remains in the works due to legal challenges between Grand Rapids Public Utilities and Minnesota Power. However, the two utilities are working together on an arrangement for the project to move forward.



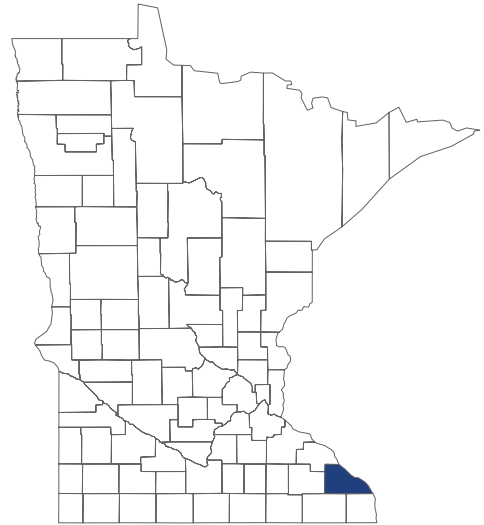
WINONA COUNTY

www.iatp.org/rural-climate-dialogues/winona-county

STUDENT DIALOGUE

February 2016 / May 2018

Our work in Winona County started at Winona Senior High School. We worked with an environmental science teacher to design a daylong event where nearly 100 students heard from local experts about climate change and discussed their own concerns and priorities. Topic areas were chosen to align with student interests and areas of study, including climate impacts on outdoor recreation, wildlife and habitat and impacts of floods. This process fostered effective communication and deliberation between students and community leaders. One presenter noted that students have a voice “more powerful than ours as it more clearly represents the future.”



We hosted a second student dialogue in May 2018 before the Winona County Energy Dialogue. Over the course of three days, students learned the basics of solar energy, energy efficiency, utility operation and wind energy. Through small group conversation and deliberation, students recommended that the community communicate the benefits of solar energy, focus on the cost savings and workforce opportunities that energy efficiency projects provide, promote local energy generation as a source of economic stability and showcase the opportunity for wind energy to support sustainable local economic development.



CLIMATE DIALOGUE

March 2016

The Winona County Climate Dialogue took place in Winona. Over the course of three days, participants got to know one another, engaged with presenters and wrote a final statement of recommended community actions.

Presentations included:

- Mark Seeley, a climatologist for University of Minnesota Extension, presented on local extreme weather and climate conditions.
- Lynn Hinkle from the Minnesota Solar Energy Industry Association (MnSEIA) and Chris Meyer from the Clean Energy Resource Teams (CERTs) presented on renewable energy and energy efficiency.
- Jennifer Biederman from Winona State University and Josh Eash from the Fish and Wildlife Service presented on water resources.
- Mark Kulda from the Insurance Federation of Minnesota presented on how weather extremes are impacting insurance rates.

- Bruce Snyder from the University of Minnesota presented on public health impacts of climate change.
- Jake Overgaard from University of Minnesota Extension presented on how climate will impact the local agricultural system.

Based on these presentations, participants' top concerns included adjusting farming practices and other land management to adapt to more frequent extreme weather events; dealing with erosion, runoff and degradation of stream habitat from high intensity precipitation; and rising homeowner's insurance costs due to extreme weather events.

You can go into a situation with your mind made up, but with the right information you can really change your mind, and I think that's where we come in when we go home and talk to our neighbors.

— Winona County Climate Dialogue participant



Top opportunities included local development of clean energy, implementing best management practices to slow runoff and restore ecosystems, adopting agricultural best management practices and planting perennials to boost soil health, and striving for responsible land use practices with agriculture and mining.

In the post-event evaluation, the number of participants who were “very sure” or “extremely sure” that climate change is happening rose from 55% to 83%.

PARTICIPANTS COLLECTIVELY AUTHORED A “STATEMENT FOR OUR NEIGHBORS,” WHICH READ:

Evidence suggests that Minnesota’s climate and weather are changing more rapidly and more dramatically than many other parts of the country, including through increasing temperatures and more extreme weather events. These changes will have a real measurable impact on our overall economy, our environment, fish and wildlife habitat, health, insurance rates, and more. Individually and as a Winona County community, we need to take action by working together to prepare for the future. We need to educate ourselves, our neighbors, and our elected officials to face challenges and pursue opportunities together. By doing so, we can ensure Winona County remains vibrant, resilient, and prosperous into the future.

ENERGY DIALOGUE

June 2018

Two years after the initial Winona County Climate Dialogue, we hosted an energy-focused event in Winona County in 2018. The Energy Dialogue brought together a randomly selected and demographically representative group of 19 residents for two days to study the energy system in detail, identify challenges and opportunities related to the energy system in Winona County and create an action plan to help address challenges and realize opportunities.

The participant composition at the energy dialogue was a combination of community members, public officials and others involved in Winona County energy issues. Of the 19 participants, 13 were community members randomly selected to reflect the demographic makeup of the county. The other six participants were two Winona City Council members, two Winona County commissioners, a local energy developer and a representative from the local community action agency.

Presentations included:

- Lissa Pawlisch from the Clean Energy Resource Teams reviewed energy basics and trends in Minnesota.
- Eli Massey from the Midcontinent Independent System Operator (MISO) presented on different energy sources and the grid.
- A panel of employees from the utilities serving the area (Dairyland Power Cooperative, St. Charles and Xcel Energy) discussed how municipal utilities, rural electric cooperatives and investor-owned utilities make decisions.
- Ben Bratrud from the Citizens Utility Board of Minnesota presented on the impacts of the energy system on household energy consumers.
- Jim Goblirsch from Winona State University presented on the impacts of the energy system on business and industry energy consumers.

Discussions centered around four criteria for a productive energy system: reliability, affordability, minimizing pollution and climate change, and supporting local jobs and investment.

The top challenge identified by participants was the difficulty of improving existing infrastructure while taking advantage of current technologies and preparing for security and distribution issues. Other identified challenges included the difficulty of providing energy at a reasonable cost while also complying with emissions standards and the need for more consumer education around energy.

Top opportunities included offering education to residents and policymakers so they can make informed decisions around energy; encouraging local energy options, including renewable energy built and maintained by local



workers; and diversifying energy options through bioenergy, renewable energy and other technologies.

A suite of recommendations outlined potential individual and community actions to achieve an affordable and reliable energy system that is friendly to both the environment and the local economy. These recommendations are available in their entirety in the event's final report.¹⁹

It was very interesting to see people from different backgrounds and experiences expressing similar ideas, often easily coming to a consensus about the issues.

-Winona County Energy Dialogue participant

PARTICIPANTS CRAFTED THE FOLLOWING STATEMENT:

The Winona County Energy Dialogue featured a wide collection of opinions, perspectives, and great ideas from people from all walks of life and across the county. It was a productive conversation that helped bring shape to the major themes and concerns for Winona County's present and future energy situation. We reviewed a lot of technical details and other information about our energy system in order to highlight the key information and recommendations in the report below.

To start, the energy system is changing, and there's much Winona County can do to help shape our energy system. But that change will take time and investment. We need to continually educate ourselves on energy and related issues. We also need to actively educate our neighbors, children, and officials to make a positive impact in our community and beyond.

We can do more to conserve energy and use energy efficiently. We can research what's trending our way, like new technology and renewable energy. And government is not the only solution to energy issues. All of us, as citizens or the private sector, can be involved. While we didn't agree on every topic or issue, there was more consensus than we expected.

OUTCOMES

After the 2016 Winona County Climate Dialogue, IATP and the Jefferson Center partnered with Sustain Winona (www.sustainwinona.org), a partnership of local government, education and other community leaders, to secure a grant from the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency to organize and lead a series of projects based on recommendations from the RCD. The goal of the project was to motivate climate adaptation and climate change awareness in Winona County by engaging 7,500 different Winona County residents and workers in climate resilience education and implementation activities. Over the course of the grant period, Sustain Winona hosted county-wide energy and water saving contests, educational sessions, pilot projects and more.

To boost local water quality, the City of Winona launched a rain garden program by funding plantings for three residential rain gardens featuring native plants. The City of Winona partnered with Bluff Country Co-op and First National Bank in downtown Winona to install rain gardens in their parking lots.

Sustain Winona's energy-focused goal was to expand access to energy efficiency improvements for households across the county. Xcel Energy, which serves the majority of the county's energy needs, administers many energy efficiency programs through its Home Energy Squad. However, Winona's distance from the Twin Cities meant that the Home Energy Squad was unable to serve Winona County residents. To address this issue, Sustain Winona partnered with Xcel Energy and Semcac, the local community action agency, to enable Winona residents to

receive Home Energy Squad visits implemented through Semcac. This innovative coordination expanded local capacity for rural energy efficiency improvements while leveraging Xcel's existing funds dedicated to energy conservation. In 2017, 197 Winona County households received Low Income Home Energy Squad visits.

Winona's efforts on energy efficiency and conservation led the City of Winona and Sustain Winona to win the 2018 Clean Energy Community Award from the Minnesota Department of Commerce.

In 2017, a Winona Energy Action Team formed from a group of city staff, elected officials, local business representatives, educational institutions and committed community members. This team created an Energy Action Plan for the City of Winona,²⁰ which included the bold goal of carbon neutrality by 2050. The Energy Action Plan mapped out avenues to meet that goal, with benchmarks for residential energy consumers, institutions, industrial energy users and businesses.

In 2019, IATP and the Jefferson Center partnered with the Clean Energy Resource Teams (CERTs) to host a community conversation after a film screening at Winona County's Frozen River Film Festival. The film, called "The Power of Minnesota" and produced by CERTs, was a documentary about renewable energy in Minnesota. The City of Winona's Natural Resource Sustainability Coordinator began the conversation by sharing about local energy projects. Then, participants were asked to identify ideas for local energy action, which ranged from increasing adoption of solar to incentivizing energy audits for all buildings in the county. The ideas generated at the event were relayed to the Winona Energy Action Team and Sustain Winona to inform their 2019 activities.

I have a feeling of accomplishment, of facing something that I've been avoiding. There was an air of respectfulness for everyone's viewpoints. I don't know exactly what I want to do going forward, but I want to do something, and it feels good to participate in my community like that.

— Winona County Climate Dialogue participant



STATE CONVENING

www.iatp.org/rural-climate-dialogues/state-convening

THE EVENT

September 2016

After the initial three RCDs were completed, a common theme emerged — many of the actions proposed by the participants would benefit from successful and responsive government programs. In response, we organized a State Convening that gathered residents from each county with staff from over 10 Minnesota state agencies for two days in St. Paul, MN.

We recruited participants to participate in the State Convening balanced across the three RCD communities. Roughly half of the State Convening participants had participated in a previous RCD, and half were community leaders identified through prior relationship-building. The participants comprised a cross section of lifelong rural residents, recent transplants, retirees, young farmers, public servants, small business owners, researchers and more. We also invited representatives from every major state agency as well as a handful of Twin Cities-based climate and energy nonprofits.

On the first day of the State Convening, participants from the three rural communities were asked to separate into three groups by interest and expertise: energy transition, infrastructure needs and land stewardship. Each of the three groups identified how their communities were working to address the issue. These discussions drew heavily on the recommendations from the RCDs and participants found common threads between each of their counties. The resulting lists of priorities, actions and barriers in each category were presented the following day to frame the discussion with state agency and nonprofit representatives.

Top priorities that participants from the three communities shared included pursuing the transition toward a clean energy future; strengthening infrastructure like roads, housing and utilities to be more climate resilient; improving the stewardship of rural land by adopting more sustainable agricultural practices and promoting watershed-based planning and management strategies; and integrating ecotourism and education to drive community-level change.



The Center for Rural Strategies, a Kentucky-based nonprofit, joined the State Convening to help participants craft and share their personal stories. Before state agency representatives joined for the second day, the rural residents developed stories highlighting their ties to the community and assessments of the urgency for action on climate resilience. These stories helped participants clearly share their interests and perspectives with agency and nonprofit representatives, condensing complex and lengthy personal histories into meaningful statements.

I really appreciated the whole structure of the event — the makeup of who was in the room was incredibly valuable because it was personal, but also professional and it was relational between people who did not share the same backgrounds.

— Brad Redlin, MN Department of Agriculture

The second day of the State Convening featured presentations from state agency staff on program offerings and efforts targeting climate and extreme weather, health, economic development, agriculture and the environment. The rural participants had the opportunity to take notes and ask questions of presenters. In the afternoon, small group discussions focused on the topics of energy transition, infrastructure and land stewardship. Each small group was made up of a combination of rural residents and state agency and nonprofit representatives. The groups identified existing programs which could support community efforts, program gaps and other oversights, possible methods for greater rural inclusion in state program development and execution, and ways to improve rural access and uptake of programs.

Participants from the rural communities and the state agencies strategized together on where change is needed and identified the following areas: better connecting rural areas with state programs by creating a one-stop-shop with agency programs and contacts, encouraging more rural-focused research on climate resilience, sharing best practices between rural communities and creating an ongoing space for state agency staff to engage constructively with rural citizens.

Because state agencies do not often have the opportunity to engage directly with rural Minnesotans, the voices and unique concerns of these communities are not fully reflected in agency policy or their promotion of existing programs. For this reason, state agency staff expressed excitement about the opportunity to speak in-depth with rural community leaders. From the rural participants' perspective, they often felt left out of policy and without a solid understanding of the state resources available to

them. Engaging in small group conversations and sharing stories with state agency staff provided an avenue to feel heard and build relationships.

The post-event evaluations illustrated how the State Convening bridged rural community members and urban policymakers. The amount of rural community participants that “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with the statement “Minnesota’s state government knows enough about climate risks to take action” rose from 30% to 77%.

Participating agencies and organizations included: MN Department of Agriculture, MN Board of Water and Soil Resources, MN Department of Commerce, MN Department of Employment and Economic Development, MN Environmental Quality Board, MN Department of Natural Resources, MN Pollution Control Agency, MN Department of Transportation, CERTs, Climate Generation, Great Plains Institute, St. Paul Port Authority, Region Nine Development Commission and University of Minnesota Extension.

OUTCOMES

At the State Convening, rural residents voiced a desire for a State Program Navigator that could better connect rural areas with state programs by creating a one-stop-shop with agency programs and contacts. State agency staff agreed that this was a gap; there was consensus that government websites can be challenging to navigate and that given the sheer number of available resources and lack of program standardization, programs are frequently underutilized.

There was a strong desire for communities to have the opportunity to access resources presented to them in a collected form that can be digested as more of a menu to consider.
— Michelle Gransee, MN Department of Commerce

In 2019, IATP published a State Program Navigator²¹ that aggregated some of the state’s major program offerings, including both financial and technical assistance. The Navigator provides in-depth information for 15 major state programs and contains an appendix with brief descriptions of 62 programs. The Navigator also includes case studies and interviews with individuals who have accessed certain programs. In addition to being a



resource to rural communities throughout the state, the State Program Navigator — and the process of finding the information to create it — offered state agencies insight on how to share the vast array of financial and technical resources that the state has to offer.

In December 2019, we presented our findings to the Inter-agency Climate Adaptation Team (ICAT), a collaboration of state agencies working to adapt to climate change and increase resilience in Minnesota. This group is working to coordinate more closely with rural communities on adaptation, local and regional responses to extreme weather events, and increased community involvement in energy, infrastructure and land use issues. Presenting the State Program Navigator to this group resulted in productive conversations across agencies and informed how the team is coordinating programs and conducting rural outreach.

Even if you thought you knew a lot about climate change, the information that we were all given, the experts that were provided, really gave you a chance to gain so much more knowledge and be able to have a dialogue with other people with all the information that you learned. I think once you start bringing that dialogue up, other people want to join in and they want to learn more about it. Everybody wants to be able to sit at the table with the same information.

— State Convening participant

REDWOOD COUNTY

www.iatp.org/rural-climate-dialogues/redwood-county

ENERGY DIALOGUE

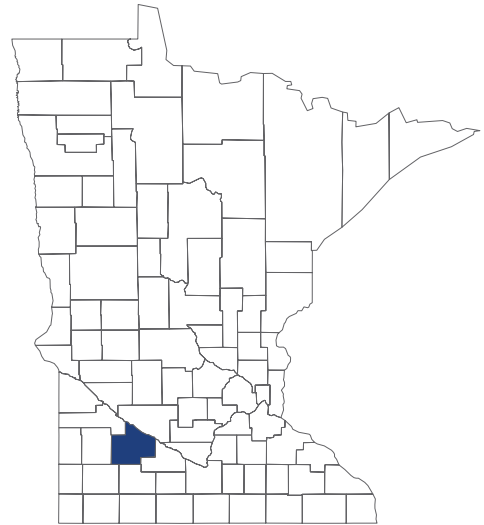
September 2019

Redwood County is on track to house a growing number of wind farms as the energy economy shifts towards more renewables. Although Redwood County does not currently have any wind development, future development is planned, and community feelings are mixed. Wind energy development can challenge a rural community's identity. For farming communities, building new technology on traditionally agricultural land and changing the landscape can stir complex feelings. Some rural residents feel as though they are left to deal with visually jarring developments that primarily benefit urban areas, where most energy is consumed. Yet, wind energy can provide much-needed money to counties and landowners. This is the context in which we hosted our first wind energy-focused event.

The Redwood County Energy Dialogue took place in Redwood Falls. Over the course of two and a half days, 18 participants shared their perspectives with one another, learned about the local state of wind energy development and wrote a final statement of challenges and opportunities for their community to consider.

Presentations included:

- Brian Ross, senior program director at the Great Plains Institute, provided an overview of energy development. This presentation walked participants through the process of how a wind development shows up in their community, from the developer's initial proposal to construction on the ground.
- Vicki Knobloch Kletscher, the county administrator, gave an overview of Redwood County's finances and how the county makes decisions.
- Shanelle Montana, a senior project developer for EDF Renewable Energy, presented on design guidelines and regulations that developers face and how developers interact with communities as they construct projects.



- Gene Metz, a farmer and county commissioner in nearby Nobles County, presented on the economic impacts of wind development for both landowners and the county.

Based on these presentations, participants identified the top benefits of wind development for Redwood County. These included the funding that Minnesota's wind energy production tax could provide to the local government, financial gains for landowners and the possibility of property tax reductions, and the potential for new local jobs and increased money spent locally.

Top drawbacks included that there might not be an opportunity for local utilities to use the power generated by the turbines, that funding may not be distributed fairly

When I first walked in here I knew these things existed, but I didn't know how close they were to functioning here. My opinion is that the positives far outweigh the negatives.

— Redwood County Energy Dialogue participant



between the county and townships, and the transmission grid is lacking capacity and would be very expensive to upgrade.

At the end of the event, participants were asked, “Based on what you’ve learned through this experience, do you feel residents should support expanded/future wind development in Redwood County?” Ten participants voted “Yes,



PARTICIPANTS COLLECTIVELY AUTHORED A “STATEMENT FOR OUR NEIGHBORS,” WHICH READ:

When people work together, they have the opportunity to get a lot done. We can see a future in wind energy and are inspired by the possibility of realizing its benefits. It is important for community input since this will directly or indirectly affect all residents. There are many ways for community members to make a difference, like joining any of the over one hundred committees the county has.

This is a subject not to be taken lightly, and there is a lot of thought and care that needs to be put into the process of wind development. If we get started with thoughtful exploration of expanded wind development in Redwood County now, we can move ahead faster. It’s time to move forward.



under most circumstances/when-ever possible.” Eight participants voted “Yes, but only if certain circumstances are met/put in place.” Nobody voted against expanded or future wind development.

OUTCOMES

After the event, participants were eager to share their perspectives and recommendations with their community. Three participants joined the Jefferson Center at a County Commission meeting to present their recommendations to the Commission. In November 2019, a participant joined IATP at a presentation to the Rural Minnesota Energy Board, a group of 18 counties in southern Minnesota that regularly meet to provide policy guidance on issues surrounding energy development in rural Minnesota.

Throughout our engagement in southwestern Minnesota, we worked with the Minnesota Agriculture and Rural Leadership program (MARL) to broaden and engage a network of regional leaders on climate and energy issues and cultivate local leadership. With support from the Southwest Regional Sustainable Development Partnership, we curated a session at a MARL gathering in December 2019 on courageous leadership around climate change and renewable energy development. This was followed by a deeper group discussion and workshop to discuss the role of respectful dialogue in creating healthy communities and people; to share pitfalls, advice and action steps to help empower participants to host productive discussion around local contentious issues; and to discuss being community leaders.

Finally, IATP partnered with LINC Redwood County to expand access to the program for local residents. LINC is a 9-month leadership program that engages a cohort of community members to lead, inspire, network and create to build a sustainable future in Redwood County. The RCDs were created to boost civic engagement and create local leaders on climate and energy issues, and LINC Redwood County is carrying out that mission locally.

MURRAY COUNTY

www.iatp.org/rural-climate-dialogues/murray-county

ENERGY DIALOGUE

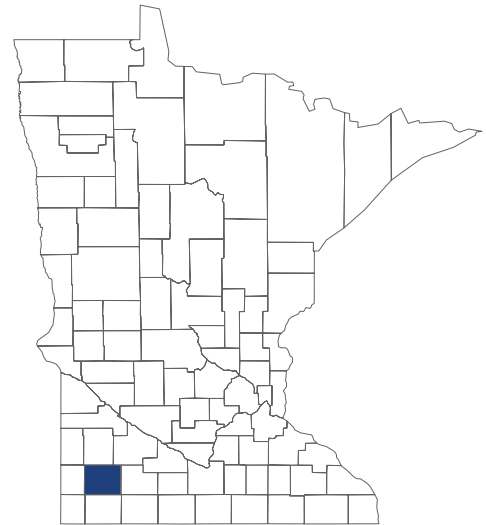
February 2020

Murray County, which neighbors Redwood County to the southwest, has already experienced wind development for over 20 years. With 255 operational turbines, residents are no stranger to what it is like to live in the midst of wind development. Yet, more development is planned, and many existing developments are facing decommissioning and repowering.

Over the course of two and a half days, 18 participants shared their perspectives with one another, learned about the local state of wind energy development and wrote a final statement of challenges and opportunities for their community to consider.

Presentations included:

- Jessi Wyatt and Jenna Greene from the Great Plains Institute provided an overview of energy development. This presentation walked participants through the process of how a wind development shows up in their community, from the developer's initial proposal to construction on the ground.



- Jean Christoffels and Heidi Winter, the zoning administrator and county auditor, gave an overview of Redwood County's finances and how the county makes decisions.
- Mark Lennox from NextEra Energy presented on design guidelines and regulations that developers face and how developers interact with communities as they construct projects.
- Dennis Welgraven, a Murray County commissioner, presented on the economic impacts of wind development for both landowners and the county.



I'm still in support of wind energy and what it does for our community. But there's always room for improvement, and the devil's in the details. Overall it may be good, but there are things that need to be addressed and concerns that need to be mitigated.

— Murray County Energy Dialogue participant



Participants at the Murray County Energy Dialogue

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## PARTICIPANTS COLLECTIVELY AUTHORED A “STATEMENT FOR OUR NEIGHBORS,” WHICH READ:

In the future, we hope to have more opportunities for public dialogue and a shared focus addressing the challenges related to wind development. As a community, we want more high-quality information from local officials about wind energy and have a desire for direct communication from groups involved in wind development – this may include clearer ways for the community to get involved like local boards focused on incorporating public input on these matters. We believe that communication and education are key and that it is important for community members to be curious and informed about wind energy and other issues in our country and beyond.

There are clear benefits to wind energy development, but there is also much more to learn. We hope to see expanded wind development in Murray County, and believe that it will be an overall benefit to the community if we acknowledge the challenges in our policy and ensure that our permitting reflects those considerations

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Based on these presentations, participants identified the top benefits of wind development for Murray County. These included that wind development provides cheaper, cleaner and safer energy than fossil fuels; that wind development provides an increase in all-around tax revenue for the county; and that wind development provides good paying jobs that require additional training, increasing residents’ income and education for those who choose careers in the field.

Top drawbacks included uncertainty about the health effects of wind energy; concerns around the end-of-life cleanup process, waste and cost from the decommissioned turbine parts; and possible legislative changes that could impact the wind energy production tax.

At the end of the event, participants were asked, “Based on what you’ve learned through this experience, do you feel residents should support expanded/future wind development in Redwood County?” Six participants voted “Yes, under most circumstances/whenever possible.” Twelve participants voted “Yes, but only if certain circumstances are met/put in place.” Nobody voted against expanded or future wind development.

OUTCOMES

The Murray County Energy Dialogue finished just weeks before Minnesota received a shelter-in-place order due to the coronavirus pandemic. This slowed our ability for follow-up work.

In July 2020, IATP presented virtually to the Rural Minnesota Energy Board. The Commissioners were excited to hear widespread regional support for wind energy development and took note of community concerns.

We will continue to foster our relationships in the area and share results of the event with our networks both regionally and statewide.

LESSONS FOR THE POLICY AND ADVOCACY COMMUNITY

In a 2017 report,²² the Interagency Climate Adaptation Team recommended six priority action steps for Minnesota:

1. Build greater resilience to extreme precipitation.
2. Identify opportunities to strengthen the health and resilience of vulnerable populations to climate effects through cooperation with local governments.
3. Increase focus on preserving natural and restored ecosystems and habitat to increase resilience of wildlife and native plants.
4. Strengthen agricultural water-management efforts to increase resilience to climate change impacts.
5. Increase focus on managing climate impacts in cities, towns and other population centers.
6. Strengthen our climate information infrastructure to support adaptation practices.

The recommendations from the RCDs largely mirror these priorities identified by the state, indicating we are not as divided as it may seem. However, the way these recommendations are designed and implemented is critical to making sure that all communities benefit and that rural communities see their priorities reflected. Some takeaways for successful engagement and relationship building in rural communities on climate change include:

- Opportunities for effective conversations about climate change are cut short when we focus only on messaging or educating. Listening is critical to build empathy and a true understanding of where people are at. Productive conversation only happens once everyone feels heard, understood and respected.
- Leading with values is a good way to connect with people. Regardless of political opinions, people generally want what's best for their communities and neighbors. Building community resilience and taking care of one another are shared values upon which solutions can be built. When we connect over celebrating a place

and building a vibrant future, deeper relationships are built and more work can get done.

- We must enter all our conversations, especially those in communities that are not our own, with humility. Nobody knows better what a community needs than that community itself, and sustainable solutions are community driven. Advocates can play important roles of convening and connecting, but long-term action will be led by the people who are anchored in that community.
- Rural areas face an array of challenges and generally have fewer resources than urban areas to meet them. As a result, climate and energy are usually not top priorities. Any climate work must recognize this reality and focus on creating solutions that address other community priorities as well. Climate solutions must also be community solutions.

To heal the divisions within our state, we need to engage with one another in ways that build empathy, recognize our shared humanity and are rooted in deep listening and respect for community. Climate change will impact every Minnesotan and tackling this monumental challenge will require all of us to work together.

For more information, stories and articles, visit www.iatp.org/rural-climate-dialogues.

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