



20 years of Partnerships

About RSDP

Since 1997, the University of Minnesota Extension Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships (RSDP) have fostered Greater Minnesota sustainability through a two-way flow of ideas and expertise between communities and the University. In November 2017, our community and University partners, board and work group members, and staff past and present gathered to celebrate our 20th anniversary.

Event attendees used #RSDP20 to share moments from the anniversary events on Twitter.

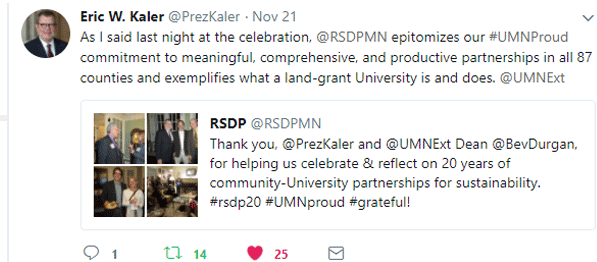
Eastcliff reception

University of Minnesota President Eric and Karen Kaler hosted RSDP founders, partners, board members and staff for an anniversary reception at Eastcliff, the President's residence.

Video photo collage of RSDP's 20th anniversary reception at Eastcliff

Statewide event

Our longtime community and University partners gathered at a statewide public event on the St. Paul Campus to reflect on our lessons learned and to chart a vision for the next 20 years of partnership.



Anniversary perspectives

Event attendees shared wisdom, ideas and perspectives to guide the next 20 years of partnership. Here are a few of their messages we will carry in the years ahead.

Open doors



Robert Cline, RSDP Statewide Board Chair and Southeast RSDP Board Member, reflected on how RSDP helps communities open doors to the University. "Becoming involved in RSDP opened a door - no, in fact, many doors - into the University. Meeting University experts who were willing, in fact, eager, to share their expertise and opinions in our five regions of Greater Minnesota made me realize there is something remarkable happening here. Seeing the innovative research and thinking on campus that puts the long-term needs of the citizens of Minnesota first has truly been inspiring. Being part of the connection of the regions to the University has been a great honor."

Show up

Ben Winchester, Extension Center for Community Vitality, reminded us that "history is written by those who show up," and that is our imperative. Winchester conducts research under the umbrella of "Rewriting the Rural Narrative," providing applied research on a number of positive trends across rural America. He is frequently in the news for his "[brain gain](#)" research, which has brought attention to a hopeful trend: that many people migrate to rural towns in their 30s and 40s when they are primed to add value to their communities.

Start with empathy

In the words of Virajita Singh, Assistant Vice Provost for Equity and Diversity, healthy partnerships exercise empathy. "Think of the experience from a minority perspective and what do you see? You may see the experience of not being asked, of not being listened to, and perhaps broken promises and pain. Then think of the experience from the majority perspective, and you may see the comfort and ease that comes from being part of the group that has safety in numbers and has their way, and perhaps an unintentional heavy-handedness that comes with it. Lived experience matters, and bringing a diversity of lived experience to the Partnerships' work, which you already do to a great extent, and expanding the circle of lived experiences will make the work even better. Being empathic means there may be a need to sit with the pain of another human being or a group, to look at collective histories in the face and realize the

celebratory histories of my ancestors may collide with the genocide of your ancestors and there is nothing you or I can do to erase those histories but we can stand side by side and look at those histories together and then resolve together to change the course of the future for ourselves and our children and their children. This is possible through empathy."

Lead with heart

Longtime RSDP community partner David Abazs shared an impassioned charge for the years ahead: "I hope that in 20 years the Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships will be more vulnerable, go deeper, hold greater conviction and make larger and more ripples in society by leading with our hearts, reasoning with our heads, and acting with our hands – for the sake of our lives, the lives of our wild and domestic friends, and for the unborn lives of the generations yet to come."
– David Abazs, Round River Farm, Wolf Ridge Organic Farm, Organic Consumers Association AgroEcology Center.



Build trust

Former Extension Educator Shirley Nordrum, who was based out of the Leech Lake Division of Resource Management, emphasized how good community partnerships take time. It's all about the relationship, and those relationships need to be based on listening, understanding, and ultimately, trust. This calls us to listen and work to deeply understand the present-day impacts of historical trauma in the communities with whom we partner.

Be of service

RSDP Assistant Statewide Director Caryn Mohr shared words from RSDP founding member and former University of Minnesota Regent Mary Page which capture the service at the heart of our model. "We are here because of the tireless work of inspired citizens – people like former Regent Mary Page, whose family is here tonight. Mary once wrote, 'I describe myself as a career volunteer activist, grateful for the opportunities.' Those words epitomize the dedicated community members who have been with us throughout our history."



Work together



"The Partnerships help a community feel unstuck," reflected City of Gary Mayor Karie Kirschbaum in a panel on community partnerships for sustainability. Following the anniversary events, Mayor Kirschbaum shared her experiences partnering with RSDP on the Gary Pines master plan project in a Twin Valley Times article. Kirschbaum encouraged other communities to "get in contact with the university and see how they can work together for rural Minnesota."

Co-produce knowledge

RSDP's initial statewide director Dr. Steven Daley-Laursen, faculty and former President Interim at the University of Idaho, called for the importance of honoring diverse sources of knowledge. "My RSDP role enticed me to look deeper into the possibility of multiple sources of knowledge (empirical, experiential, indigenous, etc.) and how these different sources could be braided together to strengthen our understanding of and approach to sustainable living. ... Universities are [on the] verge now of honoring knowledge as a cultural phenomenon, seeing the possibilities of knowledge co-production, and making higher education accessible to students of many cultures who can bring their culture and sources of knowledge with them. If we continue this appreciative journey toward a braided knowledge fabric, we will better serve our citizens and expand our understanding of sustainability and our ability to advance its practice."



Celebrate success



Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture (MISA) Executive Director Helene Murray, an RSDP founder and longtime close partner, reflected on the accomplishments during our first 20 years of history. "Gathering together to celebrate 20 years of work by the Regional Partnerships was a wonderful opportunity to look back, evaluate, and enjoy the results. But also importantly, coming together gave us the time to collectively identify future activities and ideas to explore. The Regional Partnership staff, volunteers, university faculty, staff, and students are a wonderful group of individuals who together are committed to building a stronger, more sustainable community in Minnesota."

Remember the past

Event attendees emphasized the importance of remembering the past as we look to the future. When we approach a challenge, we must remember what has transpired in the past as we consider solutions. In this vein, we think you'll enjoy walking back in time in this historical photo collage video from RSDP's first two decades. This is what 20 years of partnership in every nook, cranny and corner of Greater Minnesota looks like.

Give thanks

We enter the next 20 years of partnerships with deep gratitude for the volunteer board and work group members who have served their communities these past 20 years and upon whom our model rests. In the words of President Eric Kaler, "I believe that with the projects RSDP executes, the partnerships you've developed, and the goodwill you've created, you help our University to be a truly unifying force in our state. For all you do, and for your 20 years of spectacular achievements, I applaud you. Happy anniversary, RSDP, and keep up the good work."



Impact

In association with our 20th anniversary, RSDP conducted focus groups with each regional board as well as a survey of lead project partners the past 10 years. **Evaluation activities** were conducted in spring-fall 2017.

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

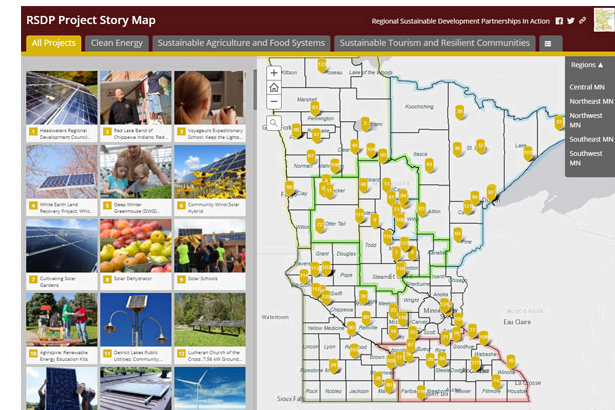
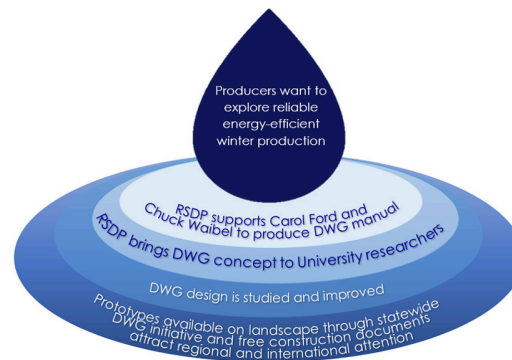
Each year we support around 150 community-based projects across the state...

Our interactive [storymap](#) enables you to click on a region or focus area and see what projects RSDP is supporting in your backyard.

Time and again, our locally seeded projects have grown to become wider sustainability initiatives...

Our project partners see changes in their communities...

- 98% agreed that RSDP produces tangible outcomes for communities
- 96% agreed that RSDP enables community members to access University resources
- 96% agreed that RSDP has an accessible proposal process
- 92% agreed that RSDP positively impacts the perception of the University in communities
- 92% agreed that RSDP is an important presence in rural Minnesota
- 90% agreed their community is stronger because of projects supported by RSDP



Learn more about our [20-year impacts](#).

Connect with us in the next 20 years of partnership!