



# Building rural climate resilience

The role of Minnesota state agencies



By Tara Ritter and Phoebe Aguiar

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# INTRODUCTION

As climate impacts worsen across Minnesota and the United States, all communities—rural and urban—need the financial and technical tools necessary to adapt to these changes. Yet, rural cities and counties continue to be under-resourced, with limited funding and capacity to engage in climate planning. State government program offerings can help close this gap, but they are often underutilized.

The Fourth National Climate Assessment, released by 13 federal agencies in November 2018, acknowledges the “climate gap” that exists in rural communities. This gap is defined as “disproportionate and unequal impacts of climate change and extreme climate events” in rural areas of the country.

There are many reasons that rural communities experience increased impacts from climate change. In 2017, the rural poverty rate was 16.4 percent compared to 12.9 percent in urban areas. Rural households have lower incomes and older housing stock on average. This means rural residents often spend a larger percentage of their income on energy costs and often use more energy to heat and cool energy-inefficient spaces. As heating and cooling needs increase in the face of more extreme temperatures, rural communities will suffer the brunt of this burden.

Rural communities are also more closely tied to natural resource-based economies than urban communities. These industries (including agriculture, forestry and fishing) will become less predictable in the face of more frequent extreme weather events, temperature changes, droughts and floods, wildfires and increases in weeds, diseases and pests that thrive in warmer weather. As a result, rural economies based on these industries will become less stable as climate change worsens.

Emergency preparedness is also more difficult in rural areas, where homes and businesses are further apart and public transportation is lacking. When extreme weather causes roads to become impassable, or roads experience more wear and tear due to weather fluctuations, rural residents will be heavily affected.

Despite these challenges, rural communities are at the forefront of creating the solutions necessary for a climate-friendly economy. The rural landscape is comprised of forests, farms and rangelands that can capture carbon when managed appropriately; land and resources for wind, solar and other renewable installations; and, most importantly, people and ingenuity to implement the transition to a low carbon economy. The unique role rural areas and people play in climate mitigation, as well as the urgency they face in adapting to climate change, make it especially critical for state resources to support rural communities in climate planning.

Minnesota state agencies have this capacity. State-run financial and technical resources exist to support individuals, communities and businesses in local climate adaptation. Unfortunately, these resources are often overlooked, underutilized or misunderstood, which limits the effectiveness of the programs and compromises the ability for Minnesotans to build more resilient communities and economies.

As a new administration takes power in 2019, state agencies should devote more time and resources to dialogue with rural residents and program outreach and support. This report takes a first step towards this goal by outlining some of the state’s major program offerings that could benefit rural communities.

# BACKGROUND

Since 2014, the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy and the Jefferson Center have partnered to host Rural Climate Dialogues throughout Minnesota. These Dialogues are built upon the belief that, although rural communities have a lot at stake when it comes to climate change, they are often overlooked in climate conversations, and policy tends to center on urban and suburban perspectives. In many communities, this has led to a culture of misinformation and confusion that prevents publicly supported policy from emerging.

The Rural Climate Dialogues use the Citizens Jury method for community problem solving and leadership development. This approach, which brings together a representative sample of the community to study an issue in-depth and generate a shared community response, provides a productive, educational and inclusive way to address challenges. (You can read more about the Rural Climate Dialogues at [www.iatp.org/rural-climate-dialogues](http://www.iatp.org/rural-climate-dialogues).)



Discussions at the 2016 Rural Climate Dialogue State Convening

After successful Dialogues in Stevens County (2014), Itasca County (2015), and Winona County (2016), we hosted a State Convening that gathered residents from the three counties and staff from ten state agencies to strategize together on next steps to meet rural communities' needs with existing state program offerings. The State Convening identified areas where change is needed, including building a State Program Navigator for local government officials, 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 residents.

The research behind this report is directly driven by the State Convening's call for a State Program Navigator. There was a consensus among state agency staff and rural residents that it is difficult for rural residents to access financial and technical resources given the sheer number of available resources and a lack of program outreach and standardization. This report attempts to aggregate some of the state's major program offerings.

## STATE AGENCY PROGRAM OFFERINGS

This report overviews select financial and technical resources offered by Minnesota state agencies. Program offerings highlighted in the report are housed in the following state agencies:

- Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA)
- Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA)
- Minnesota Department of Commerce
- Minnesota Department of Health (MDH)

- Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR)
- Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT)
- Minnesota Environmental Quality Board (EQB)

Given the number of state financial and technical assistance programs and resources, this report is not comprehensive. We feature 15 programs in the report's text and information for many more can be found in the report's appendix. The selection of the 15 highlighted programs was based on the following criteria:

- The selected programs include opportunities in each of the researched agencies.
- The programs have the capacity and accessibility to address needs for rural residents and communities.
- The programs support environmental, infrastructure, and/or community resilience improvements.
- The programs are stable and will continue to be supported by the state government. This includes continuous funding, explicit support for the program from the administering agency and longevity of the program.
- The programs are readily available and accessible. This includes having rolling deadlines or frequent and consistent application periods. Application material is straightforward and readily available.

- The programs were recommended by agency staff who identified their most popular, stable, and/or effective programs. In some instances, staff had data about program participation levels and used that as a guide for determining top programs. There is also data available for some programs on local government savings, health benefits, or emissions reductions, which provided another metric for state agency staff to recommend top programs.

This report can serve as an outreach opportunity for strong state program offerings. The information on the following programs is up-to-date as of December 2018.



*"There was a strong desire for communities... 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

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## PACE Case Study

Across the state of Minnesota, businesses large and small are becoming more energy efficient and investing in renewable energy. Many have met their energy goals by participating in the Minnesota Commercial Property Assessed Clean Energy (PACE) Program.

Paul Kluesner, owner and operator of Paul's Handyman Services, LLC., in Red Wing, has taken advantage of the PACE Program to install solar panels on his business. For a year, Paul investigated the feasibility of installing renewable energy to reduce energy bills.

"I had been looking at [solar] for a year and decided that now was a good time to do it and I guess the price is right. The price has gone down," Kluesner said.

The solar installer that Paul contracted knew about the PACE program and suggested it as a financing option. Intrigued, Paul looked into the program and applied for a loan in 2017.

"It was actually pretty easy. We sent an application in and they approved it in about a month. It was all done over phone and email, I never had to go up to Saint Paul or their office," Kluesner said. "They sent the application, I filled it out and sent it back. Then they do a direct deposit into our bank account with all the funds that we needed."

A month after filling out the application, Kluesner had \$34,000 in his business bank account to begin installation on a 10 Kilowatt Solar PV System. Since the installation of the solar power system, Kluesner immediately began to see savings on his company's energy bills.

Paul is able to repay his loan through a special assessment placed on his property taxes. His taxes will increase, but the savings on his energy bill will offset the increased property tax.



*One of the PACE program sites.*

"PACE is a win-win for business and the region," said Peter Lindstrom, Manager of Public Sector & Community Engagement with Clean Energy Resource Teams (CERTs). "PACE is helping businesses become more energy efficient and save money, as well as create clean energy jobs because participating businesses are hiring people to do lighting, put in windows and install energy systems."

Currently, PACE has financed more than 120 projects across the state that have saved businesses money, created jobs, and decreased energy demands. PACE is making it easier than ever to become energy efficient in Minnesota.

"I would do it again," Kluesner said. "It beat going through a bank."

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## ENERGY PROGRAMS

### The Property Assessed Clean Energy (PACE) Program

The PACE program provides loans to businesses, nonprofits, places of worship and multi-family housing units to make energy improvements. More than 120 projects have been financed by PACE across the state and additional projects are added each month. Financing is available for new lighting, energy efficient manufacturing equipment and installation of renewable energy systems like solar, wind or geothermal energy.

The program is structured to eliminate the high—often prohibitive—upfront costs associated with implementing clean energy technologies by providing loans with a

unique financing mechanism. The loan is repaid by a special assessment placed onto property taxes; the property tax is increased, but the cost never exceeds the savings from energy improvements. Projects are assessed through an energy audit process to ensure that savings will balance out the tax increase. The loans are provided by the Saint Paul Port Authority through a revolving fund that was created in the 2009 Stimulus Package and is supported by private investments, so there is no expense to taxpayers.

Before an eligible party can apply, the local unit of government must have a joint powers agreement with the Saint Paul Port Authority. This is a contract that

allows the Saint Paul Port Authority to provide the financing and adjust the property tax structure for PACE participants. Once this agreement is signed and ratified, a participant may identify a project. An application that details the project, capital needed, proof of an energy audit or another measure of energy savings, along with proof of good financial standing must be included.

Information can be found on the Minnesota Department of Commerce website or the Saint Paul Port Authority website. There are other supporting groups like the Clean Energy Resource Teams (CERTs) that help applicants and local governments understand and apply for PACE.

## Weatherization Assistance Program

The Weatherization Assistance Program provides free home energy upgrades to income-eligible homeowners and renters. These upgrades can be costly up-front but help to save money on utility bills by improving energy efficiency. Removing the barrier of the initial costs for these improvements is significant, particularly for low-income households.

Eligible households are assessed by an energy auditor who identifies cost-effective changes. The identified upgrades can decrease energy costs by up to 30 percent annually.

Potential energy upgrades covered by the program include wall and attic insulation, air leakage reduction, and furnace, boiler, and water heater repair or replacement.

The Weatherization Assistance Program is federally funded through the U.S. Department of Energy. The Minnesota Department of Commerce administers its own program with this funding. Minnesota's program works closely with its companion program, the Energy Assistance Program, to help permanently reduce energy bills for low-income households.

To apply for the Weatherization Assistance Program and/or the Energy Assistance Program, an eligible household must fill out an application including personal contact and financial information, certification of residence and utility information. Eligibility is based on 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Income Guidelines. Applications are available in English and Spanish, and are due in May of each year.

Program information for both programs, including application instructions, is available on the Minnesota Department of Commerce's website under "Consumer Assistance."

# HEALTH PROGRAMS

## Climate and Health Toolkit

The Minnesota Department of Health has a toolkit of educational materials available online. The toolkit includes information, reports and training videos about how Minnesota's climate is expected to change and how that could impact health. The resources are intended to help counties, communities, individuals and health professionals plan for environmental changes and emergencies.

The toolkit includes informational resources on topics including water changes, vector-borne diseases, well-being, extreme heat events, air quality, agriculture and food security, and planning tools and data. MDH communicates new projects through a newsletter, "Climate and Health," available for signup on their website.

One of the "planning tools and data" resources is a set of six regional reports on emergency management considerations. These reports can help local planners and decision makers understand current and projected climate

impacts in their communities and how to best mitigate them. Each report includes regional health and climate profiles and detail how changes in heat, precipitation, and increases in extreme weather events will affect the six different regions of the state. Each regional report connects users to resources and references that provide additional information and tools about climate change and health.

All of these resources can be found on the Department of Health's website. MDH will continue to add tools to inform Minnesotans about how climate change will impact health and what can be done to build resilience and minimize risk.

## VOC Reduction Grants

MPCA administers a grant program intended to improve air quality through the reduction of volatile organic compounds (VOCs). VOCs come from fuels, gasoline, paints and coatings produced by industrial processes. When released into the environment, VOCs can cause irritation, headaches, dizziness and memory issues. Long-term exposure causes nausea, fatigue, irritation of eyes, nose and throat, damage to sensitive organs and the nervous system, and cancers.

The VOC Reduction Grant program began in 2014 and has provided nearly one million dollars in funding to improve practices and equipment. Auto body shops, dry cleaners, print shops, gas stations and other organizations with activities high in VOC emissions are eligible for the program. Since 2014, 83 businesses have successfully

applied and worked to reduce VOCs across the state. The program has cut 37 tons of VOCs each year—the equivalent of 37,000 spray paint cans.

Interested parties can seek technical assistance from the MPCA's Minnesota Technical Assistance Program. Financial assistance is available for businesses with fewer than 500 employees. A request for proposals (RFP) is issued each year, which outlines the funds available, funding requirements, eligible activities and other pertinent application information. Businesses must complete a grant application and several other forms that document agreement to program rules and a record of current emissions. Grants vary by year in funding level, requirements and project specifications.

The MPCA website contains additional information on the program along with application materials.

## AGRICULTURE PROGRAMS

### Disaster Recovery Loan Program

The Disaster Recovery Loan Program is run through the Minnesota Department of Agriculture. The loans are available in emergency circumstances to assist farmers with expenses incurred from natural disasters. The funds are allocated for damages that insurance policies do not cover. Established in 1998 as part of a revolving fund, the loans are available through the Rural Finance Authority (RFA).

This program is only available when the federal or state government has declared a disaster. In the case of a declared disaster, loans are made available for repair, cleanup and recovery of structures, equipment, and systems to their original functionality.

The low-cost financing is available for Minnesota farmers of all sizes. Applicants must demonstrate that they can repay the loan in 10 years. The application includes financial information, a signed agreement between the applicant and RFA, and a \$50 application fee. The RFA works with a local lender to secure the necessary capital. For lending institutions, a loan of this nature is a safe, secure investment because the loan is backed by the RFA and MDA.

Despite the limited availability of this program, it addresses a growing need to provide farmers with affordable financing when facing increasingly frequent

and severe extreme weather events. Additional information and application materials are available on the Minnesota Department of Agriculture website.

### Farm and Rural Helpline

The Minnesota Department of Agriculture offers a free, confidential phone-in service for farmers and other rural residents. The toll-free line is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week to provide immediate assistance to farmers and other rural residents with stress, anxiety, depression, business troubles and crisis situations. MDA acknowledges that rural communities and farmers face unique and challenging emotional and financial situations. The Helpline can be used by individuals in need and by those who are concerned for the well-being of friends and family.

Callers can be connected to financial assistance programs, health and mental health services, legal help and other resources as needed. The line can be called as many times as necessary, and translators are available.

The number for the Helpline is (833) 600-2670. Supporting resources and additional information can be found on the Department of Agriculture's website.



## Minnesota Grown

Minnesota Grown is a long-standing partnership between MDA and Minnesota producers. The 30-year-old program helps Minnesota's producers differentiate themselves from out-of-state or out-of-country growers. Farmers receive support in Minnesota markets through labeling, signage and outreach opportunities. Minnesota Grown also compiles a directory of the registered producers, which helps connect producers to markets, other farmers, restaurants and other potential buyers.

To qualify as a Minnesota Grown producer or market, members must sell a product that is 80 percent grown or raised in Minnesota. Wild rice is the exception; it must be completely grown in Minnesota to qualify. Interested producers can complete an application online through the Minnesota Grown website.

Eligible members must complete an application that details their product and production process. Once a participant is a member of Minnesota Grown, they can decide between two levels of membership. The first level has an annual fee of \$20 and provides a license, the right to use a trademarked logo, free unlimited promotional items like signage and stickers, access to a labeling cost-share program and listing in the directory. The second level has an annual fee of \$40 and provides all the above benefits in addition to a highlighted listing in the directory and increased exposure to potential buyers.

Application material, additional information about the program and the directory can be found online at the Minnesota Grown website.

## WATER PROGRAMS

### Minnesota Agricultural Water Quality Certification Program

The Minnesota Agricultural Water Quality Certification Program (MAWQCP), administered by MDA, aims to improve Minnesota's water quality by assisting farmers in implementing best practices. This is not a regulatory program; rather, it provides recognition for farmers that have taken steps to protect water quality and improve farm resiliency. The program provides both technical and financial resources.

Any interested farm owner or operator, regardless of size, can apply to the program. A farmer must complete an application that provides details about their land and the crops they grow. Once the application is accepted and reviewed, an on-site assessment will be conducted by a certifier from the local Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD).

There is a set of ranked criteria that determine if the farm can be certified. The criteria include things like improving drainage systems and reducing input usage along with other water usage improvements. If a farm does not qualify, the certifier will make suggestions and support the farmer to make necessary changes. Once a farmer qualifies, the operation is recognized as a Water Quality

Certified Farm and it receives signage to showcase the commitment to protecting Minnesota's water resources. Certified farmers are also entitled to regulatory certainty, which deems them in compliance with future laws and rules regarding water quality for ten years.



## Ag Water Quality Case Study

“Congratulations, you now own lakeshore property,” said a neighbor to Winona County farmer Bryce Maus after severe rains in the Spring of 2017 caused the main drainage channel on his family’s property to wash out, flooding Maus’s property.

“The water couldn’t drain out, we had so much rain in such a short amount of time,” said Maus. “It was a bad deal.”

Extreme weather events like this are becoming increasingly common, making the already risky profession of farming even more volatile. One means of support for farmers in Minnesota is the Minnesota Agricultural Water Quality Certification Program (MAWQCP), a program run by the Minnesota Department of Agriculture to help farmers implement practices that improve farm resilience and water quality.

Maus and his four siblings are trying to keep their small family farm operational while also working full-time jobs. Raising corn and soybeans as well as helping their father raise cattle, the operation has been in the family for more than 100 years. The damage that the heavy rains in May 2017 inflicted upon the farm’s drainage system caused prohibitively high repair costs for the operation. Luckily, Maus had signed up for the MAWQCP the year before.

The Maus family received financial assistance in the form of a grant from the MAWQCP for \$5,000 after being certified in 2016. The cost of repairing the waterway surpassed the allotted amount, but the money still allowed the Maus family to make a fix they expect to last 30 to 40 years.

The Maus family farm lies in a unique position, situated on one of the highest points in Winona County, about a mile from the Mississippi River. Water drains directly from the property into the river.

“So [the drainage project] did have a big benefit from a water conservation and quality standpoint. It wasn’t just a project to make us feel better about things; it definitely had some long-term benefits,” Maus said.

The MAWQCP does more than help to improve Minnesota’s water quality. It can help farmers be more efficient and even help financially.

“We are saving them money, we talk about reducing tillage and using less pesticides in the field, and economically that is huge,” said Mark Root, Southeast Minnesota Area Certification Specialist. “Farmers are really looking at the dollars right now, so anything that they can cut is good.”

The MAWQCP has several funding opportunities available for farmers who are certified or in the process of getting certified. Farmers can apply for assistance to implement best practices through the United States Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), the Minnesota Department

of Agriculture’s MAWQCP grant, and funds from SWCD incentive programs. These funds can be used to make the changes necessary to comply with the program or to make additional improvements once certified. Participants in this program are given priority for financial resources and any supporting technical assistance.

For more information and application materials, visit MDA’s website. A local SWCD can also provide information and application assistance.

## Flood Hazard Mitigation Grants

As flooding becomes increasingly severe, cities, counties and townships can apply for flood hazard mitigation grants through the Department of Natural Resources. These grants are intended to help local governments plan and implement measures to reduce flood damage. This type of planning encompasses education, relocating structures out of floodplains, developing warning systems, restoring floodplains and more.

Local government units can apply for grants up to 50 percent of the project’s total costs up to \$150,000. This money comes from a program established by the Minnesota State Legislature, and projects must be approved by the Legislature. Projects are prioritized based on need and feasibility, and approved projects must reduce flood damage and enhance environmental benefits.

Information to apply for these grants is available on the Minnesota DNR’s website. Applications should be turned in by June 1 each year to a local DNR Division of Waters Area Hydrologist.



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# NATURAL RESOURCE PROGRAMS

## Angler and Hunter Recruitment and Retention Grants

Minnesota has a land stewardship tradition that includes hunting and fishing activities. To support that heritage while protecting Minnesota's natural resources, the Minnesota DNR created a grant program in 2015 to support local groups, such as environmental learning centers, schools and nonprofits, in attracting new hunters and anglers. Grants are authorized by the Minnesota Legislature and can be awarded for projects ranging from \$5,000 to \$50,000.

Anyone or any group can apply as long as they are located in Minnesota and committed to supporting or educating hunters and anglers. Eligible projects must encourage the sustainable recruitment and retention of hunters and anglers, especially from underserved groups and new immigrant populations. Funded projects have included educational activities, outdoor clubs and camps

and excursions for groups that face barriers to accessing outdoor education and activities. Funding can be used for, but is not limited to, equipment purchases, competitions, permits and licensing costs associated with activities, and administrative costs.

To access the funds, an applicant must complete all forms contained in the application packet and submit it electronically. The application must highlight the intended audience, learning objectives, financial needs and how results will be measured. Applicants must also demonstrate the feasibility of the project, including timelines, scope, sustainability, staff and equipment allocations. The applicant must also be willing to enter into a grant contract, a legally binding agreement with the state of Minnesota.

The Minnesota DNR hosts the application packet and all additional information on its website.

# TRANSPORTATION PROGRAMS

## Safe Routes to Schools (MnSRTS)

The Minnesota Department of Transportation is working to foster healthy lifestyle choices for Minnesota's youth by improving the safety and opportunity of walking or bicycling to schools. The initiative began in 2005 when federal funds were allocated from the U.S. Department of Transportation to MnDOT. The Safe Routes to Schools program provides a number of resources—educational, financial and technical—through MnDOT and other partners that help schools and communities develop infrastructure and programs creating safe routes to school.

The program provides grants for infrastructure improvement or construction across Minnesota. In 2018, \$2 million was made available to assist communities in creating and promoting safe routes to schools. Projects can receive funding up to \$300,000 to cover the cost of planning and building the necessary infrastructure such as footpaths and bike routes. Schools (public and private), school districts, cities, counties, tribes and townships are eligible for funds.

An interested group must submit a letter of intent for their project that identifies the project and how it aligns with the MnSRTS goals. Applications may then be submitted that detail the type of work, estimated costs, school policies and information about the schools that will be affected.

Additional information about MnSRTS can be found on the program's website. The necessary information and application materials for infrastructure grants can be accessed on MnDOT's website.

## Transit for Our Future Initiative

The Transit for Our Future Initiative aims to improve the accessibility and efficiency of public transit services in Greater Minnesota. The Department of Transportation provides transit operators with financial and technical assistance to implement strategies for improvement. MnDOT has defined these strategies for improving rural transportation in coordination with the Public Transit Advisory Committee. The Committee is composed of transit operators, tribes and other organizations that advise MnDOT on the best strategies to advance transit systems in rural areas.

The Transit for Our Future Initiative began as part of the 2011 Greater Minnesota Public Transit Investment Plan. It was developed to provide the appropriate level of funding to meet 90 percent of rural transportation needs by 2025. This includes operation costs, expansion of routes and reaching more riders.

Greater Minnesota Public Transit operators are eligible to apply for the program if they are pursuing projects that coordinate service between two or more systems, increase cooperation between transit systems or consolidate through partnering or merging two or more systems under one management. All of these strategies are intended to

increase the number of destinations, reach more riders and save money. MnDOT can provide technical assistance and funding with a minimum level of \$5,000.

Applications are available on MnDOT's website and can be submitted electronically throughout the year and go through two rounds of vetting. In the first round, two or more transit operators submit an outline of the proposed plan and budget information. In the second phase, applicants must submit more complete documentation of proposed outcomes, evaluation measures and financial information, including a finalized budget.

## COMMUNITY IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMS

### Environmental Assistance Grant Program

The Minnesota Pollution Control Agency provides financial assistance for residents, businesses, academic institutions, local units of government and tribal governments to improve or implement environmentally conscious practices. Examples of these practices include waste prevention and reduction, building community resilience to extreme weather, educational resources on waste issues and market development to reduce pollution and conserve resources.

The financial assistance to implement these practices is available through grants funded from the Environmental Fund (a statewide network of nonprofits dedicated to improving Minnesota's environment) and other miscellaneous legislative appropriations. The grants are open annually, and each round of funding focuses on specific areas of sustainability. The total funding available annually is about \$500,000. Each year the MPCA releases a Request for Proposal (RFP) which invites eligible parties to apply.

The grants are competitive, and applicants are encouraged to submit questions to the MPCA about projects, applications and funding. Information about past and current project areas, as well as the RFP, application and other necessary materials, are available on the MPCA website. Applications and supporting materials must be submitted online through email.

### Minnesota GreenStep Cities

Minnesota GreenStep Cities is a voluntary challenge, assistance, and recognition program administered primarily by the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, but also in partnership with other government agencies, academic institutions and non-profit organizations. Started in 2010, GreenStep Cities aims to help cities become more sustainable by implementing 29 best practices tailored to the needs and interests of Minnesota cities.

Best practices are divided into categories: improving or upgrading building and lighting, land use, transportation, environmental management, and resilient economic and community development. Each category has a set of best practices that can be carried out by a city at their own pace. Cities are classified by size, which determines the requirements for moving up the steps.

Step one is building interest in the community. Anyone living in the area can do this by learning about GreenSteps, generating support among community members and discussing the program with stakeholders and official city entities. Once the community has expressed interest in the program, planned and desired best practices can be determined. Cities are expected to share their work and plans online on the GreenStep Cities website. Step two cities have implemented a minimum of any four to eight best practices, depending on city classification, and step three cities have implemented an additional four to eight. Step four cities track performance metrics that indicate improvements in sustainability. Step five is achieved when cities continue to show improvement in their

# GreenStep Cities Case Study

Hutchinson is one of 124 cities across Minnesota that has joined the GreenStep Cities program. This voluntary, non-regulatory program began in 2010 to challenge, support and recognize cities that are working toward sustainability and community improvement.

“It is unique in that, usually, a state program is just happening at the state level. GreenStep Cities brings in some other perspectives and opportunities that cities wouldn’t have otherwise,” said Kristin Mroz, the EQB’s Local Government Coordinator.

Hutchinson joined GreenStep Cities in 2015 with the passage of a city council resolution to expand and recognize actions to make the city more sustainable.

“The process was super simple,” said John Paulson, Hutchinson’s GreenStep Cities Coordinator. “I had the templated draft resolution saved and ready to go for 18-24 months. So, once we put it on the council agenda it was moved, approved, and it was really easy once we got it to that level.

“Hutchinson joined [GreenStep Cities] as a resource and a tool to further expand the calling for a sustainable community in the future,” he said. “Beyond just resources, it is also to compile and recognize the efforts the community has implemented over time.”

Paulson is the self-described army of one working to plan, implement and report Hutchinson’s sustainability work. Already a Step Five city, Hutchinson has implemented

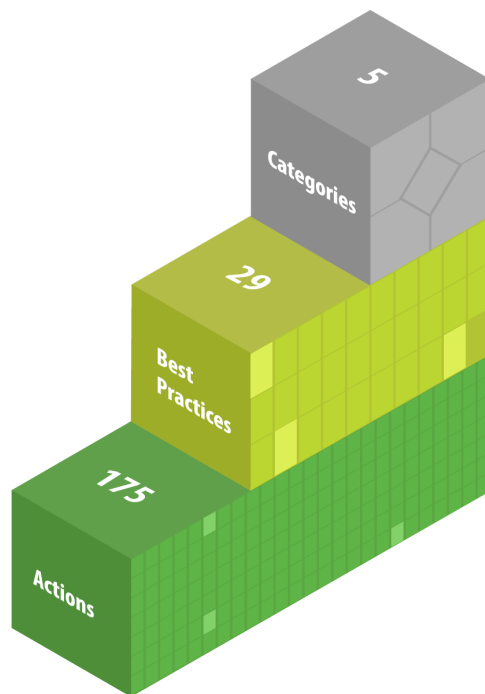
best practices related to energy efficiency, transportation improvements, building community resilience to environmental hazards, water quality improvements and economic stimulation.

We do things not always because it is environmentally right to do, but because they make sense long term to the community from assets preservation to minimizing our expenses. A lot of the time those align perfectly with the practices identified in GreenSteps,” Paulson said.

Even though Hutchinson has reached the highest level of Green Steps, that does not mean the work will stop. “One thing that is beneficial about the program is there is not really an end to it,” Mroz said. “It is not a certification program in that you just get a stamp and a pretty picture, we expect you to continue moving up that ladder.”

Paulson intends to do just that with energy savings and water quality improvement projects on the city’s Crow River Dam reservoir.

“We are going to continue doing things, we were doing things before the program was around and we will continue to do things that might not be necessarily quantifiable or recognized by the program but have the same underlying message that provides for more sustainable communities long term,” Paulson said.



## Best Practice Categories

-  Buildings and Lighting
-  Land Use
-  Transportation
-  Environmental Management
-  Resilient Economic & Community Development

## Best Practice examples

1. Efficient Existing Public Buildings
22. Solid Waste Prevention and Reduction
29. Climate Adaptation and Community Resilience

## Action examples

- 1.6 Improve the operations & maintenance of city-owned/school buildings by using a customized online energy efficiency tool, asset management tool, or a green building framework
- 22.5 Arrange for a residential and/or business/institutional source-separated organics collection/management program
- 29.2 Integrate climate resilience into city or tribal planning, policy, operations, and budgeting processes



A workshop on Community Solar held by the GreenStep Cities program in 2015

Image used under Creative Commons license via Flickr user mncerts.

metrics. If a city fails to meet the requirement to move up or stay at a step, they are not penalized, but encouraged to continue to work towards improvement.

Cities are assisted by advisors who are experts on the best practice they oversee. Most of these advisors are state agency staff. Other advisors are from the University of Minnesota and other partner organizations. Advisors meet and collaborate to ensure cities have the most up-to-date information and resources, so they can implement their desired practices.

Each year, new and continuing cities are formally recognized for their participation at the League of Minnesota Cities. Cities receive awards based upon the reported progress and commitment to GreenStep goals. The MPCA and EQB are experimenting and planning on expanding the program to tribal governments, schools and counties.

Additional information about the GreenSteps program including best practices, steps, and how to participate can be found on the GreenSteps website.

## Retiree Environmental Technical Assistance Program (RETAP)

Administered by the MPCA, the Retiree Environmental Technical Assistance Program gives retired professionals the opportunity to use their skills to help businesses, institutions and communities. Retired engineers, scientists, and managers who have 30-plus years of experience are employed by RETAP to provide

non-regulatory, free assessments and assistance to Minnesotans. The program has been in operation for 15 years and has provided 200 organizations and units of governments with the information and guidance they need to improve sustainability.

RETAP members work with facilities on energy efficiency, water conservation, waste reduction and saving on operating costs. The RETAP team of retired professionals achieve these goals by visiting facilities and analyzing utility bills. Then, they draft a written report of recommended

changes that include environmental improvements and financial savings. There is no obligation by the organization to implement the suggested changes, but the recommendations save the client, on average, several thousand dollars per year.

To become a member of RETAP, retired professionals must be experts in the field that aligns with the work carried out by the program. Applicants must have transportation and be comfortable working with computers. An application, resume and two professional references must be sent to the RETAP program coordinator. If accepted into the program, assessors are expected to work 10-30 hours per month with an hourly wage of \$17.00. Consultants are expected to work 40-70 hours per month and are compensated at \$22.50 per hour.

Organizations or groups interested in an assessment or consultation must contact the RETAP program and make a request. Once the organization has signed a letter of agreement, provided a record of utility bills, and been approved by program staff, a RETAP assessor or consultant will be sent to the site. They will make a preliminary assessment and follow-up with the organization with recommendations and a written report, if pertinent.

Additional information and application forms can be found on the MPCA website.

# CONCLUSION

The Minnesota state government has the capacity, programs and resources to ensure Minnesotans across the state have access to the information, assistance and funding necessary to build resilient communities. Each state agency has an array of financial and technical resources that should be easily accessible to the individuals, communities and organizations that could benefit from their support.

Oftentimes, state resources are misunderstood or entirely unknown by their intended audiences. State program offerings have immense potential to boost community resilience across the state, but breakdowns in communication, collaboration and outreach between rural Minnesotans and state agencies hamper that capacity. Streamlining of program information online and increasing outreach throughout the state would improve the government's ability to deploy its invaluable technical and financial resources.

As the new administration takes shape in Minnesota, here are some considerations to improve program efficacy:

- Invest in dialogue that fosters direct engagement between state agencies and rural communities.
- Standardize program offerings across state agencies so they are presented with consistent language and format (both online and in print).
- Improve communication and coordination across state agencies. The issues facing Minnesota are multifaceted, and cross-agency coordination could boost efficiency and reduce program redundancy.