WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY
EXTENSION

Assessing the Impact of Partnerships to Improve Local and Regional Food Systems




An Evaluation of the USDA Regional Food System Partnerships (RFSP) Program

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Regional Food System Partnerships (RFSP) program, administered by USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS), strengthens local and regional food systems by fostering cross-sector collaboration and strategic planning. Through two project types, Planning and Design projects and Implementation and Expansion projects, RFSP supports projects that build partnerships, expand market opportunities for producers, and invest in the long-term resilience of food systems. To assess how RFSP-funded projects advance these goals, this evaluation uses Ripple Effects Mapping (REM) and online survey data. REM results, in particular, highlight impacts across the Community Capitals Framework (CCF), including social, human, financial, cultural, and political capital, illustrating how RFSP investments produce both direct outcomes and broader ripple effects through regional food systems.

The overarching finding of this study is that RFSP's emphasis on partnerships and relationship-building, supported by program resources, was central to achieving project goals and broader social, financial, and skills-based outcomes. During REM sessions, participants consistently discussed how the RFSP planning grant provided them with the time and funding to build regional networks, engage in planning, and then the implementation grant helped them apply those changes. Partner organizations were allowed by RFSP to build and structure partnerships in unique and innovative ways that were informed by local values and culture, filling gaps in the food system and establishing a strong and sustainable foundation for growing and sustaining a robust regional food system into the future. The findings are organized into two sections: key RFSP impacts and factors influencing project success, including participant-driven and program design factors.

Key Findings: RFSP Impacts Organized by the Community Capitals Framework

Overall, RFSP projects generated interconnected impacts across multiple community capitals, with social capital underpinning broader human, financial, and economic outcomes.

Stronger Collaboration (Social Capital)

RFSP-funded planning enabled partners to co-create networks rooted in trust and reciprocity. Data from both REM and the online survey indicate clear growth in partnerships and social capital across projects; demonstrating that RFSP's emphasis on relationship-building provides a durable foundation for ongoing cooperation.

Increased Resilience (Social, Political, and Human Capital)

These strengthened partnerships and trust developed through RFSP contribute to greater community resilience. Because partners had already built strong social capital, they were able to broaden participation, mobilize volunteers, and coordinate resources during disruptions. For example, one RFSP project relied on the relationships and trust developed across the community to organize volunteers who rescued and distributed 30,000 pounds of salmon from a closing fish farm, demonstrating how trusted networks were leveraged to quickly respond to unexpected challenges.

Expanded Skills and Leadership (Human and Social Capital)

RFSP projects built human capital through hands-on training, farm tours, and garden-based education for children and families. Producers gained business and financial skills, including understanding taxation, grant applications, and accessing credit. Food system leaders also emerged as recognized experts who shared their models locally, regionally, and nationally. Trust and collaboration established through RFSP strengthened these learning and leadership opportunities and helped create supportive environments for ongoing skill development.

Stronger networks leveraged to secure new funding (Social and Financial Capital)

Many projects used their strengthened partnerships to develop competitive grant proposals. Collaborative networks enabled partners to co-write applications, share data, and match complementary strengths. As a result, projects secured additional (not RFSP) grants ranging from $20,000 to $1.5 million for purchasing trucks, aggregation and processing infrastructure, cold storage, and product development. This demonstrates how social capital directly supports the growth of financial and built capital.

Economic Innovation and New Revenue (Financial and Social Capital)

RFSP projects expanded institutional markets, increasing sales to schools, childcare centers, and senior centers. One project reported doubling its local food sales. Creative distribution solutions, such as a truck-to-truck model in the South, enabled $430,000 in local produce sales without needing costly facilities. Collaborative networks and shared problem-solving capacity strengthened through RFSP drove these innovations and outcomes.

Celebration of Food and Culture (Cultural and Social Capital)

Community events such as “okra parties,” Indigenous recipe demonstrations, and storytelling events honored local food traditions, built cross-cultural understanding, and reinforced community identity while drawing new consumers to local foods. These celebrations were possible because trusted relationships among partners enabled co-organizing and broad community participation.

Key Findings: Factors Impacting Success

Participant Driven Factors

REM findings indicate that each RFSP project’s success was strongly influenced by how participants designed and managed partnerships.

Intentional Network Design

The most successful projects prioritized building networks that elevated many voices rather than relying on a few organizations or leaders. One grantee described their approach as creating “a network of constellations, not stars.”

Critical Connectors

Individuals with strong local knowledge and relationships played indispensable roles in bridging organizations, maintaining communication, and mobilizing action. These “connectors” often “knew everyone” and were instrumental in expanding networks, identifying funding opportunities, and ensuring continuity as projects grew in scope.

Skilled Facilitation and Event Planning

Effective collaboration required skilled facilitation to bring diverse partners together and keep networks moving forward. Projects that had staff or leaders experienced in facilitation, along with resources for event planning, were able to build stronger, more resilient partnerships.

Program Design Factors

Participants consistently emphasized the importance of the RFSP program for success.

Longer planning timelines compared to other grants

REM participants repeatedly described the two-year planning periods built into RFSP’s Planning and Design grant as “game changing.” It gave organizations the rare opportunity to step back, think strategically, and design systems intentionally, rather than rushing into implementation.

INTRODUCTION

Overview of the Regional Food System Partnerships Program

The Regional Food System Partnerships (RFSP) program is one of four grant programs implemented under the Local Agriculture Market Program (LAMP). LAMP is a U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) program that supports the development, coordination, and expansion of local and regional food systems. The goal of LAMP is to strengthen food supply chains and increase market opportunities for agricultural producers through activities such as value-added agricultural production, improving infrastructure, and building strong, resilient partnerships (USDA AMS, 2025).

There are four complementary programs under LAMP that support different aspects of local and regional food systems:

1. **Farmers Market Promotion Program (FMPP)**
    - Administered by USDA AMS, FMPP supports direct-to-consumer marketing activities for agricultural producers, such as community-supported agriculture and farmers markets.
2. **Local Food Promotion Program (LFPP)**
    - Administered by USDA AMS, LFPP focuses on intermediary supply chains to help move products from the producer to markets, excluding direct-to-consumer activities.
3. **Regional Food System Partnerships (RFSP)**
    - Administered by USDA AMS, RFSP supports cross-sectoral partnerships to plan, develop, and strengthen regional food systems.
4. **Value-Added Producer Grants (VAPG)**
    - Administered by the USDA Rural Development agency through the Rural Business-Cooperative Service (RBCS), VAPG supports the processing and marketing of value-added products for agricultural producers.

RFSP builds on FMPP, LFPP, and VAPG by focusing on cross-sector collaboration, leveraging public and private resources to coordinate efforts, align goals, and expand impact across regional food systems (USDA, AMS, 2025). There are currently two main types of projects supported through RFSP: (1) Planning and Design, and (2) Implementation and Expansion. USDA AMS allocates $100,000 to $250,000 to Planning and Design projects for a 24-month period to support early planning activities, including partnership development, needs assessment, goal setting, and resource identification for local and regional food system development. USDA AMS also allocates $250,000 to $1,000,000 to Implementation and Expansion projects for 36 months to implement or expand food system initiatives grounded in earlier planning.

A third RFSP project type, Farm to Institution, was offered in 2023 but subsumed under other project types beginning in 2024. For Farm to Institution projects, USDA AMS awarded between $250,000 to $1,000,000 to develop supply chains between producers and institutional purchasers, such as schools and hospitals.

RFSP recipients provide performance progress reports to USDA AMS on an annual basis, including information on successes and challenges. Recipients must select at least one outcome and one indicator to report on throughout the grant performance period. The three outcomes that recipients can select – as listed in the RFSP Grant Performance Measures (USDA AMS, 2023) – are:

- “Encourage collaborative approaches to strengthen the capacity of a regional food system;”
- “Develop new market opportunities for regional food producers and processors,” and
- “Improve the infrastructure of a regional food system through the development of business and/or strategic plans and feasibility studies (Planning and Design Projects only).”

These outcomes provide the initial framework for examining RFSP success and impact.

Project Evaluation Goals

The primary objectives of this evaluation are the following:

- Examine the direct and indirect impacts of RFSP on the grant recipients, stakeholders, partners, and communities.
- Identify grant management and project implementation factors that bolster and/or hinder RFSP success.
- Evaluate whether and how receiving previous grants, such as FMPP and LFPP, impacts RFSP success.
- Assess whether and how receiving RFSP funding impacts future FMPP and LFPP funding.
- Provide recommendations for program improvement and future policy considerations.

Understanding RFSP's impact is essential for ensuring the program meets its goals and remains relevant, effective, and responsive to the needs of its grant recipients and communities. This evaluation examines how RFSP-funded projects have contributed to the program's core goals, identifies the factors that support or hinder success, and considers opportunities for USDA AMS to strengthen the program moving forward. The following sections outline the methods used to conduct this evaluation and present the insights gathered through in-depth Ripple Effects Mapping sessions and survey responses from RFSP participants.

METHODS

This evaluation uses a phased mixed-methods design that includes Ripple Effects Mapping (REM) and an online survey to assess both direct and indirect impacts of RFSP. The evaluation began in 2023, and REM was conducted in two phases with groups drawn from RFSP-funded projects awarded between 2020 to 2022, as these projects were more likely to be completed or sufficiently advanced to demonstrate long-term impacts. Findings from the initial REM phase informed the design of the online survey administered to projects that received RFSP funding from 2020 to 2024, enabling the evaluation to capture broader and more recent experiences across a larger sample.

The second phase of REM was then conducted with additional projects from the 2020 to 2022 project pool to provide further insight on program impacts and capture a wider range of participant experiences. Together, these methods provide both qualitative and quantitative insights into the direct and indirect impacts of RFSP-funded activities, as well as implementation challenges.

Ripple Effects Mapping (REM)

REM is a highly participatory evaluation technique designed to help communities and evaluators understand the impact of programs and projects. It focuses on bringing together partners, stakeholders, community members and more to tell the stories of their success and map the impact of their work. There are three primary REM approaches: web mapping, in-depth rippling, and theming-and- rippling.

This evaluation used the in-depth rippling approach, which focuses on each participant sharing their stories of the program or project being evaluated, to understand impacts of the RFSP program. The evaluation team selected this approach because it is particularly effective for capturing the complex and interconnected impacts that are a characteristic of regional food system work.

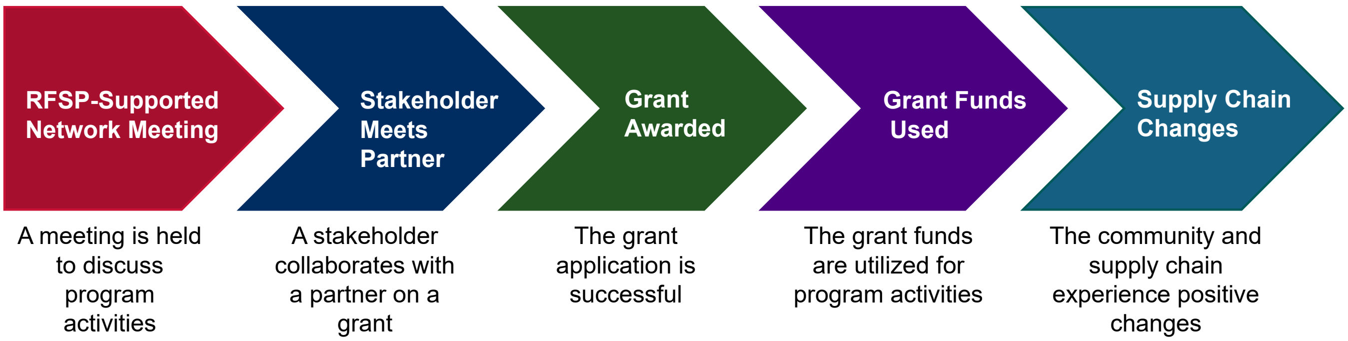
For this evaluation, we used a virtual REM approach which involved the following steps:

1. **A small breakout session in which the research team divided participants into groups of two or three and provided guiding questions to facilitate discussion of stories they may want to share with the larger group (See Appendix A). Researchers did not attend the breakout session.**
2. **A larger group discussion where all participants shared their stories one at a time while a facilitator mapped their activities and impacts using the mapping software Xmind to create a visual representation of relationships between actions and outcomes.**
3. **The research team transcribed the recording of the group session using REV.com transcription services and used the transcripts to refine and improve the accuracy of the draft impact map.**
4. **The evaluation team shared a draft map with participants to ensure accuracy.**
5. **The research team provided a final map for the REM participants.**
6. **The transcription was coded and analyzed thematically by the evaluation team.**

The purpose of breakout session (step 1) is two-fold. First, it provides participants the opportunity to reflect on their experiences related to the program and a chance to "audition" what they want to share with the larger group. Second, the breakout session fosters a sense of comfort and safety conducive to a productive storytelling environment. The guiding questions for breakout discussion use an Appreciative Inquiry approach, which emphasizes successes rather than failures. The research team designed the questions to elicit the range of experiences related to the program being ripple mapped. Although the questions guide the breakout session, they are not incorporated into the mapping process, which takes place during the larger group discussion (step 2). Instead, the research team asks participants to share with the larger group the story they told during the breakout session.

During the larger group discussion, one research team member mapped the stories shared with the full group, and each "ripple" includes details that the team links to specific outcomes. For example, within the RFSP program, a ripple might start with an RFSP-supported meeting (initial activity), which prompted a stakeholder and valued partner to collaborate on a grant proposal (second ripple). The funder then awarded the grant (third ripple), allowing the team to implement grant-funded activities (fourth ripple) that ultimately generated measurable changes in the community or regional supply chain (fifth ripple) (See Figure 1). The process is highly participatory with several participants often adding to each story shared and providing more details, which leads to a context-rich map of activities and impacts.

Figure 1: Example of Potential Ripples (Continued from Previous Page)



REM Sample

To identify potential RFSP projects for REM sessions, the evaluation team received a list of 88 RFSP projects that were funded between 2020 and 2022 by USDA AMS. The team drew a random sample from this list to identify potential projects for REM participation. The evaluation team reviewed these projects to ensure representation across regions and the two RFSP project types (Planning and Design; Implementation and Expansion). The initial random sample proportionally represented both regions and current project types; therefore, stratified sampling techniques were deemed unnecessary by the evaluation team.

The evaluation team conducted REM sessions with 10 RFSP projects during two rounds: four in the spring/summer of 2024 and six in spring 2025. All REM sessions were held on Zoom and lasted approximately two hours. Attendance ranged from seven to sixteen people per session, with a total of 95 participants. Table 1 summarizes the total number of REM participants by food system actor type. REV transcription services processed and transcribed each session's Zoom recording.

Table 1: Categorization of RFSP Individual Participants by Food System Actor Type

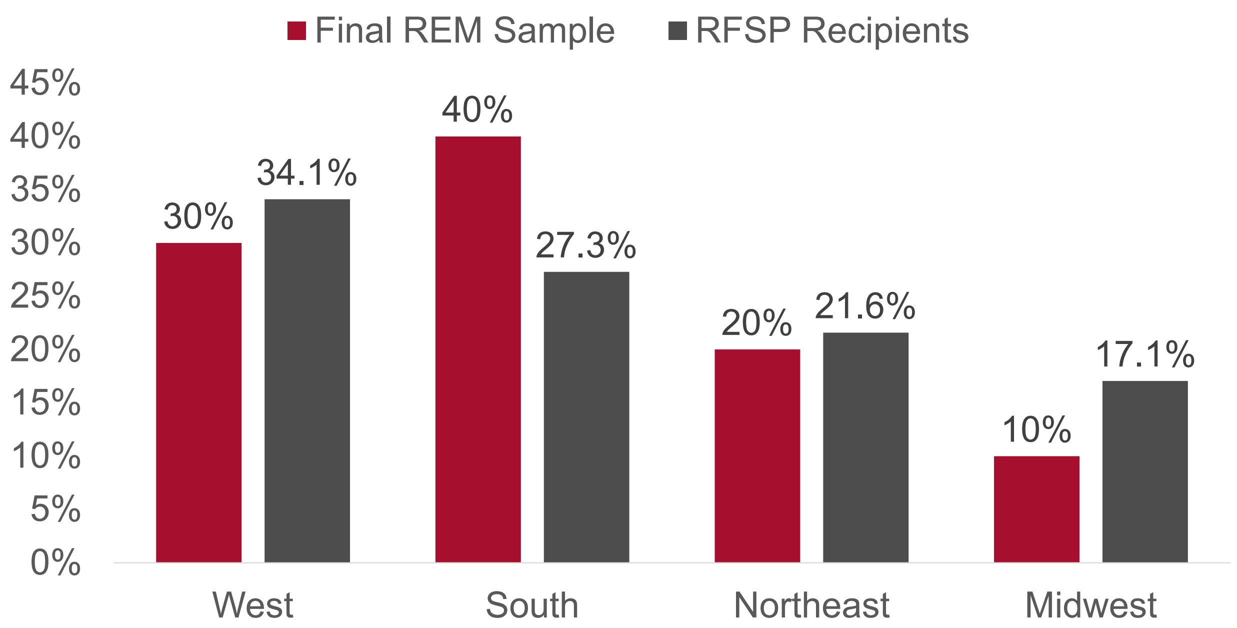
REM Participant Type	Total	Percent
Nonprofits/Networks	30	31.58%
Producers	16	15.79%
Extension/Universities	8	9.47%
Retail/Markets	10	10.53%
Food Hubs/Aggregators	8	8.42%
Hunger Relief Organizations	5	5.26%
Institutional Purchasers	4	4.21%
Food Rescue/Gleaning	5	5.26%
Government/Public	5	5.46%
Health/Nutrition	4	4.21%

The evaluation team assigned each individual participant to a single category based on how they primarily identified their role in the food system, either through their own self-identification during REM sessions or the primary role described on the organization's website. For example, if they identified as a non-profit, we applied that designation. However, it is important to note that many organizations operate across multiple roles, and the selected category may not capture the full scope of their activities.

The group of ten participating RFSP projects consisted of 40% in the South, 30% in the West, 20% in the Northeast, and 10% in the Midwest. Compared to the full population of RFSP recipients (34.1% West, 27.3% South, 21.6% Northeast, and 17.1% Midwest), the sample overrepresents projects in the South and underrepresents projects in the Midwest (see Figure 2).

The final sample contained equal proportions of grant types: 50% Implementation and Expansion projects and 50% Planning and Design projects. When interpreting the REM results, it is important to consider potential selection bias. Projects that chose to participate in REM may have experienced greater success in implementing their RFSP initiatives and achieving their goals compared to those who did not participate. Despite this limitation, the stories and insights shared through REM offer valuable qualitative evidence of project impacts and highlight key factors that influence success.

Figure 2: Comparison of REM Sample and RFSP Recipients by Region (%)



Ripple Effects Mapping: Thematic Analysis

To analyze the REM data, we coded and analyzed the transcripts thematically using a hybrid coding approach that incorporated both deductive (using pre-existing themes) and inductive coding (identifying emerging themes directly from the data). The deductive coding process used the Community Capitals Framework (CCF) to explore mechanisms for success and both intended and unintended impacts across the food system.

Deductive Coding

The Community Capitals Framework (CCF) was used to better understand how RFSP project activities contribute to success, as well as to explore the direct and indirect impacts across the food system. CCF is a systems approach for understanding and evaluating community and economic development. It focuses on the assets of a community exemplified by seven capitals: natural capital, cultural capital, human capital, social capital, political capital, financial capital, and built capital. According to Emery & Flora (2006), the CCF identifies “the assets in each capital (stock), the types of capital invested (flow), the interaction among the capitals, and the resulting impacts across capitals.”

Table 2 presents the seven community capitals, defines each one, and provides example codes used in thematic analysis to show how these capitals appear in food system activities. This analysis primarily focused on social, human, cultural, political, and financial capital, as these were the most consistently represented in the REM transcripts.

Inductive Coding

In addition to deductive coding based on performance measures and the CCF, the analysis incorporated inductive coding to assess emerging themes. This approach allowed the research team to identify patterns and context-specific insights that the deductive framework did not fully capture, such as factors that bolstered or hindered success, use of localized market strategies, regionalized distribution models, and more.

Table 2: Community Capitals Coding

Capital (Codes)	Definition	Examples (Sub-Codes)
Natural Capital	Natural assets in a community (natural resources, amenities, etc.)	Land access/preservation, natural resource planning
Cultural Capital	Traditions, languages, knowledge of the world and role within it	Recognition of local food traditions, cross-cultural collaboration, cultural events
Human Capital	Skills and abilities of people	Increased skills, knowledge, health, leadership development
Social Capital	Connections across people and organizations	New partnerships, increased trust, strengthened partnerships, growing networks
Political Capital	Access to power, connections to power brokers, ability to use own voice to make change	Increased access to policy makers, increased policy discussions
Financial Capital	Financial resources	Increased funding, revenue increase, increased access to markets
Built Capital	Infrastructure	New facilities, new equipment, upgraded infrastructure

Adapted from Emery & Flora (2006)

Online Survey

Additionally, we administered an online survey for all projects that received RFSP funding from 2020 to 2024. The survey was conducted from December 2024 to March 2025. The purpose of the survey was to complement REM by broadening participation across RFSP projects, and collecting additional data on prior grants, such as LFPP and FMPP, project activities, and project challenges.

The evaluation team worked with USDA AMS to obtain the primary contact for every RFSP project. Survey invitations went to 107 RFSP participants. Of these 107 invitations, eleven emails were undeliverable, and we could not identify alternative contact information. A total of twenty-three individuals completed the survey, resulting in a 23.96% response rate meaning this sample represents approximately 23.9% of the RFSP population.

Online Survey Sample

Nearly half of the final sample consisted of Planning and Design projects (47.8%), with Implementation and Farm to Institution projects making up the remainder (Figure 3). Geographically, slightly over a third of projects were located in the South (39.1%) and the West (34.8%), with smaller proportions in the Midwest and Northeast (Figure 4). Compared to the overall population, the sample overrepresents projects in the South and Midwest and underrepresents those in the Northeast. Most respondents (60.8%) indicated that their grant ended in 2024 or later (Figure 5).

Figure 3: Percentage of Survey Sample by Grant Type

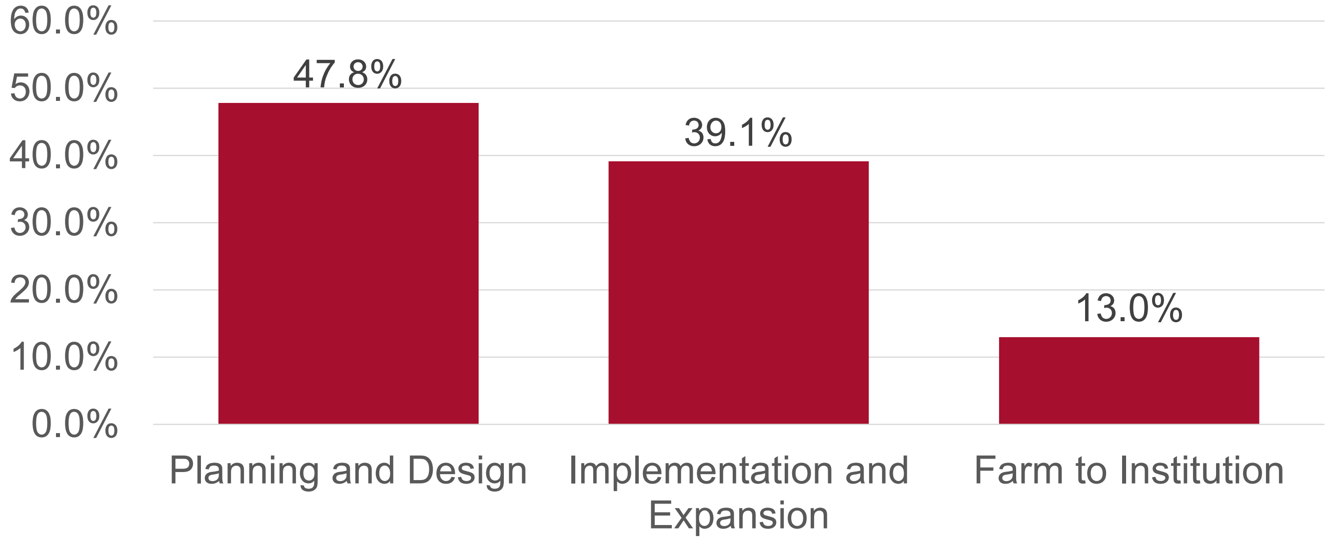


Figure 4: Percentage of Survey Sample by Region

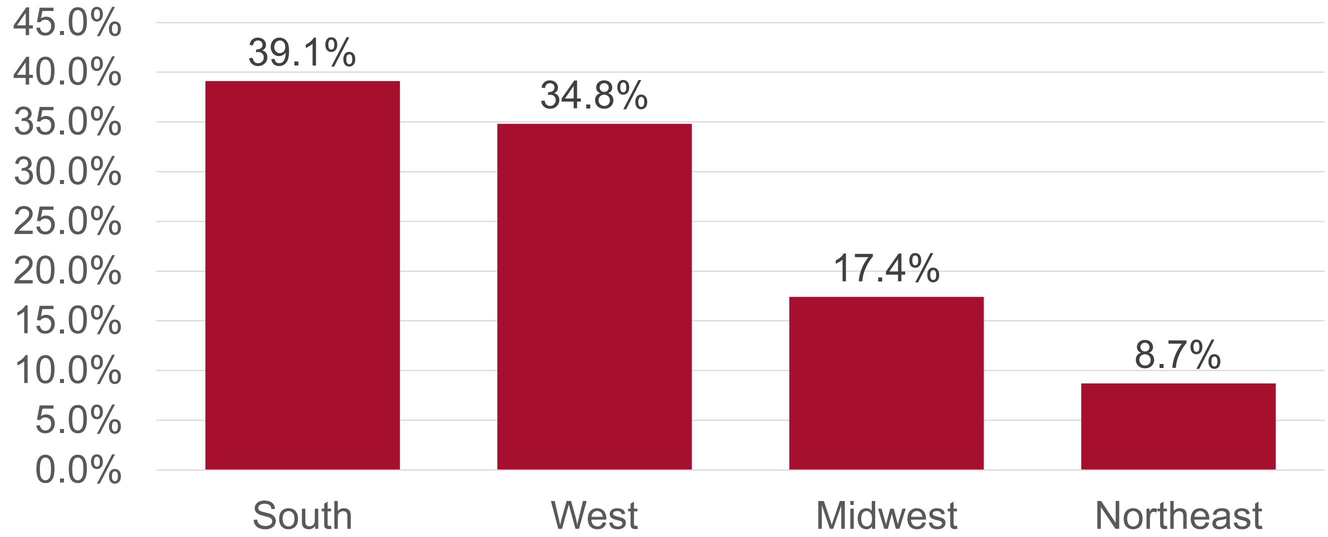
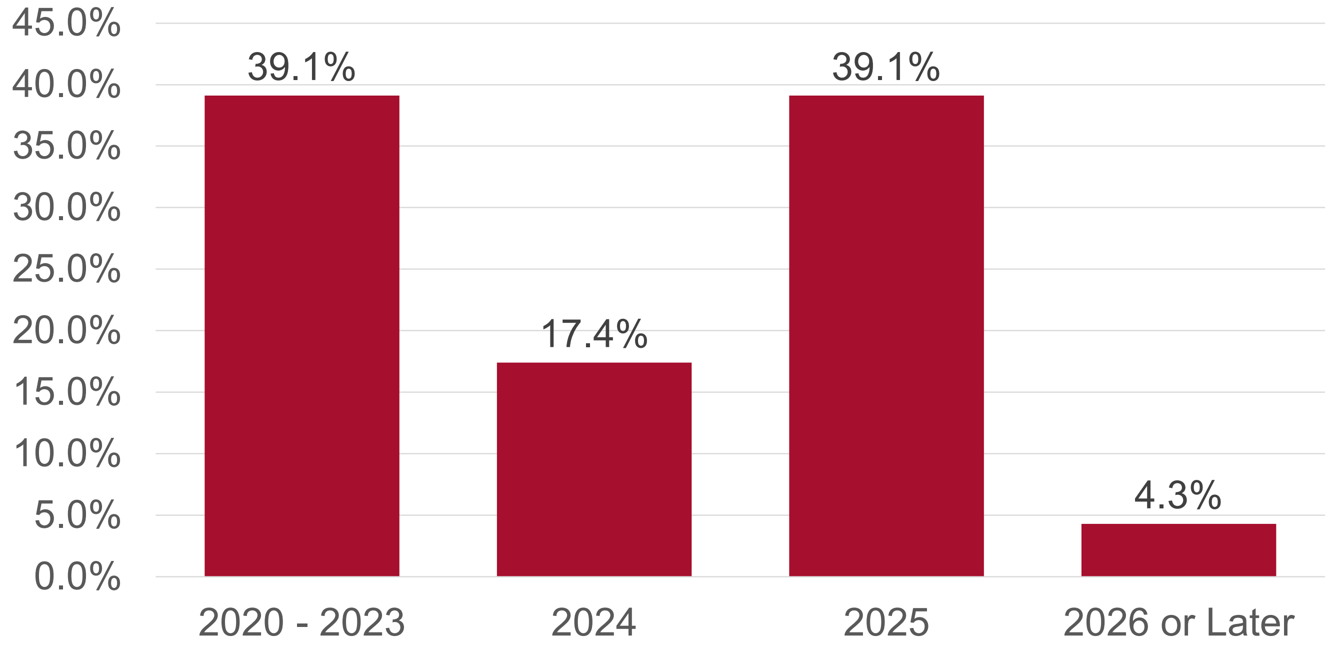


Figure 5: Percentage of Survey Sample by Grant End Year



RESULTS

Understanding Success and Impact - The Community Capitals Framework

To understand how the RFSP program and project activities contribute to success and explore the direct and indirect impacts across food systems, this evaluation applies the CCF. The CCF is a systems framework for understanding how stocks and flows of community capitals contribute to community and economic development. It enables the examination of how investment in particular capitals impact other capitals and, ultimately, a community's development. As described earlier, there are seven community capitals. Social, human, cultural, political, and financial capital are the primary focus of this analysis, as these were the most consistent themes across RFSP REM projects.

Social Capital

RFSP's deep emphasis on cross-sector collaboration led to a significant investment in social capital. Social capital is integral in the CCF, and Emery and Flora (2006) found it was particularly important for rural communities to reverse "a spiral of decline" and begin to "spiral up" (p. 20). REM sessions demonstrated robust evidence of cross-sector partnerships involving public actors (school districts, government departments, Extension, city or county health representatives, and more), private sector partners (local producers, food hubs, distributors, grocery stores), and a wide range of nonprofit organizations. In addition to formal relationships, most projects developed informal relationships that allowed multiple representatives across sectors to collaborate even when they were not official partners. These cross-sectoral partnerships often helped facilitate access to new markets and funding opportunities by leveraging the diverse experience, roles, and connections that these partners brought to the network.

A further indication of strong social capital was the high levels of trust and reciprocity developed among partners and stakeholders. Several projects (3 to 4) credited the RFSP Planning and Design grant for providing the opportunity and resources to co-create a vision which laid a stronger foundation for collaborative work during implementation. As a REM participant discussed, the RFSP planning year allowed them to “design a network based on true collaboration” and “build a foundation and framework for the network built on trust.” One participant from the West stated, “the value of [our network] has been to further relationships that may have already existed, deepen relationships and build trust between partners, or rebuild trust at some points.” This collaborative design process served as the bedrock for building trust, as partners felt meaningfully engaged and developed a deeper sense of ownership in the effort. Box 1 provides select quotes from RFSP participants that highlight the process and importance of building trust with RFSP.

Box 1: Building Trust Through RFSP—Select REM Participant Quotes

Building Trust

“I’m just gonna shout out here for the people like [lists partners] as individuals who have trust and visibility and connections that are deeply rooted in their spaces, and then bringing those kind of connections together is what I think the glue is what our network, is able to do. The Network can only be successful due to the extent in which the nodes have already been rooted.”

“Networks grow at the speed of trust.”

“We have built a lot of trust within our community...for a community that usually likes to keep to itself.”

“The hope was that if we have time and we build trust and we really deepen the relationships, then we can figure out how to do all kinds of different projects that are bigger than any, um, any one entity, any one person, any one farmer, any one organization.”

“It’s a very reciprocal relationship…it also builds trust…we’ve really been able to build a lot of trust with different groups. Our [network] has done a really good job at creating space that is productive, but allows for feelings, for expression…in a constructive manner.”

Survey Evidence

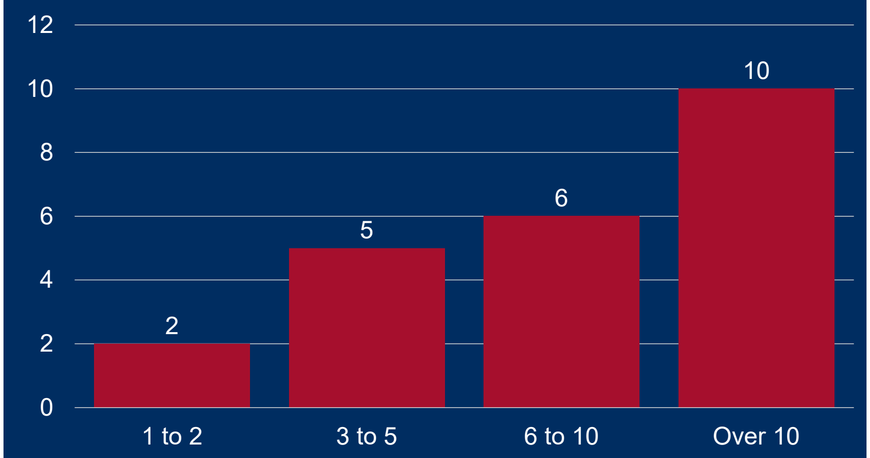
Survey data supports RFSP’s impact on the development of relationships and trust. One survey respondent indicated that “it takes time and resources to build relationships and get widespread community commitment”, with the RFSP planning grant allowing their project team to be “slow, intentional, and strategic in [their] planning so that [they] have an even stronger foundation moving forward.”

RFSP activities also strengthened and expanded networks, a clear indicator of social capital (see Box 2). Events, such as food summits, farm tours, and lunch-and-learn sessions, were fundamental in deepening existing relationships and creating new ones. An RFSP project in the West held lunch-and-learn events that featured the work the partners were doing and served to "deepen the relationships between current partners." These events allowed partners to share their stories and connect to others. This series helped increase connections across the regional food system, leading to shared resources to help other counties develop food systems plans. A participant estimated that the series of events had more than 1,000 attendees.

Survey Evidence

Survey responses suggest growth in networks and partnerships. All participants (n = 23) reported adding partners, with nearly half (10, 43%) adding more than ten. Six projects added between eight and ten partners, five projects added between three and five, and two projects added between one and two.

Number of Projects Reporting Growth in Partners



These events and activities have been fundamental for strengthening current partnerships and expanding collaboration with other food producers, institutional buyers, and more (see Box 2). Several "ripple effects" stemmed from single events. There were numerous examples of RFSP-supported events forging numerous connections that led to additional partnership and collaboration. For example, a local beef producer was interested in increasing distribution of their ground beef and attended a local food summit. At that summit, they met one of the RFSP partners who was able to connect them to the broader RFSP network. These connections allowed them to connect to local school districts to sell their product and at the time of the REM session, the producer was expanding their deliveries to other school districts in the area.

This investment in partnership building is one of the most critical direct impacts of RFSP and a key mechanism driving continued success. Partners develop strategies together, building trust and reciprocity and allowing them to expand their networks to other partners and stakeholders, a process that exemplifies the building of social capital and the leveraging of these gains to build even more. Many projects intentionally designed their networks to include communities that have had less involvement in regional food system initiatives in the past. For example, a project in the Northeast collaborated with the local Indigenous population, ensuring their policy and practices enabled full participation by community. This collaboration demonstrates bridging social capital, where social ties develop across different populations within a community (or across distinct communities), in contrast to bonding social capital, where strong bonds form between homogeneous groups. The development of bridging social capital helps RFSP project impacts filter across communities, leading to both deeper and broader connections across the food system, but also can enhance the ability to respond effectively to challenges.

Box 2: Strengthening and Expanding Networks and Partnerships—Select REM Participant Quotes

Strengthening and Expanding Networks and Partnerships

"We have been planning events with [project name] and we've gotten 75 people at a community planning event on a Saturday morning. I think it is because of the broad network we have created."

"By meeting [RFSP individual] and getting to know them and staying in contact, we were able to get our first ground beef deliveries into the school district."

"I attend most of them [lunch and learn events] as much as I can, because this is where you get to hear what's happening in the region and network with other people."

"We held a local food fair to bring awareness to locally grown foods. We heard from local businesses that they were not aware of what was locally grown so we created a pamphlet with locations of local farms so they could later find where to buy the items."

"It's such a simple idea [lunch and learn events] and it has such powerful implications…I think a lot of nonprofits are doing their best to provide this kind of food system sharing spaces in ways that make sense to them."

"I am very much looking forward to continuing this, with this being such a rural area, if our grocery store cannot be sustainable, our whole town is gone."

Social capital also played a crucial role in responding to disruptions. For example, in the Northeast, when a major distributor went bankrupt, RFSP partners help connect affected businesses and producers to alternative distributors and funding sources so "they didn't lose everything." In another example, a project in the Northeast was able to leverage expertise across the food system when a local salmon farm was shutting down. This farm did not have the capacity to sell the fish before they closed. By bringing in food system actors and consultants, the network was able to recover 30,000 pounds of fish and distribute it across the network. Many projects intentionally designed their networks to include communities that have had less involvement in regional food system initiatives in the past.

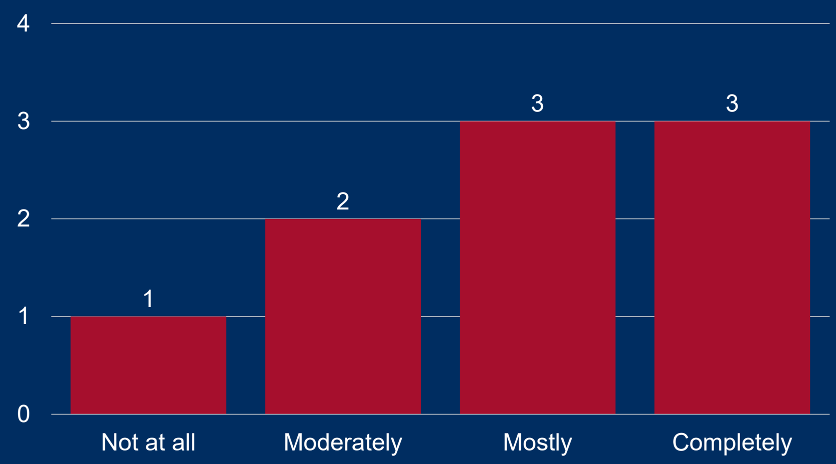
In short, RFSP helps build social capital through resources for intentional partnership development. Through RFSP-funded planning phases, events, and ongoing collaborative activities, RFSP projects can keep their networks connected and expand their relationships across the food system. As these networks deepen and broaden, projects and communities can leverage them to mobilize volunteers, coordinate resources, respond to disruptions, and creatively address food system challenges. This investment in social capital provides a foundation for lasting impact across the food system.

Survey Evidence

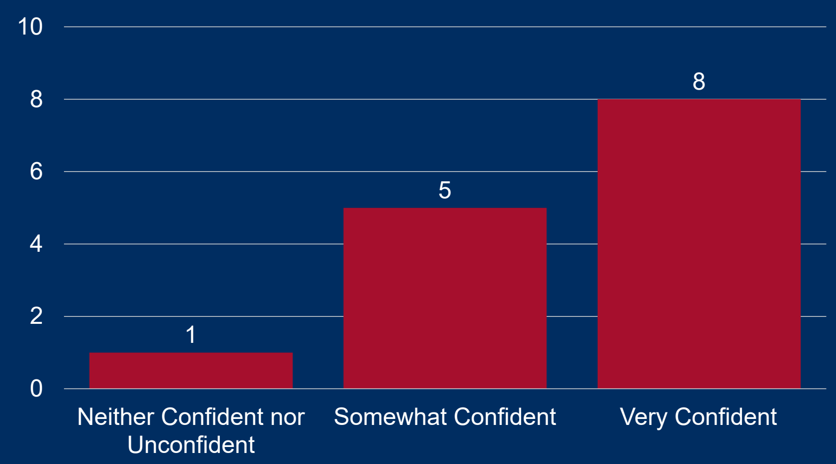
Survey responses indicate the development of strong social capital across many RFSP projects. Among completed projects (n = 9), one reported no continued partnerships, two reported moderate continuation, three reported mostly continued partnerships, and three reported complete continuation. Overall, two-thirds of respondents (6, 66.7%) reported that partnerships mostly or completely continued after the grant period.

For projects still in progress (n = 14), confidence in partnership durability was generally high, with eight respondents (57.1%) reporting they were very confident. One respondent was neither confident nor unconfident, and five were somewhat confident.

Number of Projects Reporting Partnership Continuation After RFSP



Number of Projects Reporting Confidence in Partnership Continuation



Human Capital

RFSP's investment in social capital has had impacts on human capital (skills and abilities). Evidence of education, training, and skill-building was present across all REM projects. A project in the West developed business training for mid-scale farms covering business structures, accounting, taxation, insurance, regulatory compliance and more. One producer shared that the training greatly increased their financial literacy and gave them the confidence to apply for a line of credit, something they would "never have done without this training."

In the East, farm tours that provided hands-on learning strengthened workforce development. According to a producer, their employees and volunteers attend different sessions and then discuss what they learned and the implications for their smaller farm. This participant stated, "I don't know another way we could offer this in-depth, super-nerdy education to a workforce. It has been a real blessing to us to learn as a team together."

Several projects (3 to 4) discussed experiencing leadership development as partners became recognized experts in specific aspects of the food system. RFSP participants shared their models and expertise beyond their states and/or regions. For instance, a participant in the Midwest was providing advice on food distribution to schools in Georgia. A participant in the West presented their activities to national-level organizations. In fact, nascent networks in other states were considering adopting the network model developed by this project, which focused on creating leaders within their food system activities. The growth of networks fostered through RFSP (social capital) became a key catalyst for spreading knowledge (human capital) not only within individual projects but also others in the region and beyond pursuing similar goals.

Human capital also increased through youth education. In the South, RFSP partnered with Extension to teach children about growing produce, pest control, and food life cycles. One participant recalled a garden project where the children were being taught the life cycle of squash. As it started growing, one child said, "why are there flowers in the same bed as the squash." According to them, the child's "mind was blown" that flowers turned into something they could eat. More importantly, according to the participant, the program was successful in "connecting children to where food actually comes from…and helping them develop a healthy relationship with food."

Another participant for the same RFSP project discussed their program connecting with a local food hub to conduct educational field trips with the children. This led to numerous "field days" and tours of gardens in their county. On one field day, they focused on purple potatoes, and the children got to make and taste various recipes for a type of produce they had never seen before. Parents attended the event and learned from their children, extending the knowledge gained from RFSP-supported work. This demonstrates clear growth in human capital, as both youth and adults developed new skills and awareness around local foods. It also illustrates how RFSP impacts ripple outward, deepening community connections and expanding knowledge of local food systems beyond the program's initial goals.

Financial Capital

RFSP projects also helped grow financial capital. Many projects (5 to 6) specifically discussed their success in creating new market opportunities for producers and processors. Across regions, producers accessed institutional markets, developed new retail partnerships, and reached new customers. A local beef producer in the West connected through an RFSP-supported event began distributing to a nearby school district and was preparing to expand delivery to additional districts. Another project estimated their local food purchasing increased 100% through RFSP and related work.

Increases in institutional food purchasing across schools, childcare centers, and senior centers was discussed by several projects (3-4). In the South, a project developed a home-delivery model in partnership with a food hub, enabling eighteen childcare centers and homes to regularly order local food products. The food hub created a dedicated webpage, managed pricing and availability, and assumed responsibility for deliveries.

Survey Evidence

Nearly two-thirds of surveyed RFSP projects (14, 63.6%) reported supporting 40 or more stakeholders. Reported financial capital impacts included:

- Funded 12 food hubs, supporting sales, wholesale operations, and value-added production, benefiting 300+ individuals and indirectly impacting 1,600+ farmers and 10,000+ customers.
- New distribution routes helped at least one local distributor nearly double sales to regional food banks.
- Supported dozens of school districts in expanding local food purchasing and farm-to-school supply chains.
- Strengthened local food production for Tribal communities, increasing economic activity and market access.

RFSP projects also helped stakeholders secure grants and investments. A project in the West helped a local organization apply for a Washington State Department of Agriculture grant for $70,000, which funded the purchase a refrigerated truck. They also helped apply for another grant for $1.5 million. RFSP partners in the South helped a local producer apply for a dairy innovation grant administered in Wisconsin. They were awarded a $100,000 grant, which will help them increase their product line. They also received a $20,000 grant from Invest Appalachia to support product marketing.

Financial capital also increased through innovative distribution models. One project developed a truck-to-truck produce distribution model to address regional infrastructure challenges. This model involved meeting farmers on the road and transferring produce between trucks. As noted by this participant, “we don’t need a building, we need a truck and a human. We might just need people to meet up on a road or in a parking lot…create a schedule.” The participant further stated, “it’s really hard to make the food system profitable in these small, rural areas…and this is one methodology we are looking at.”

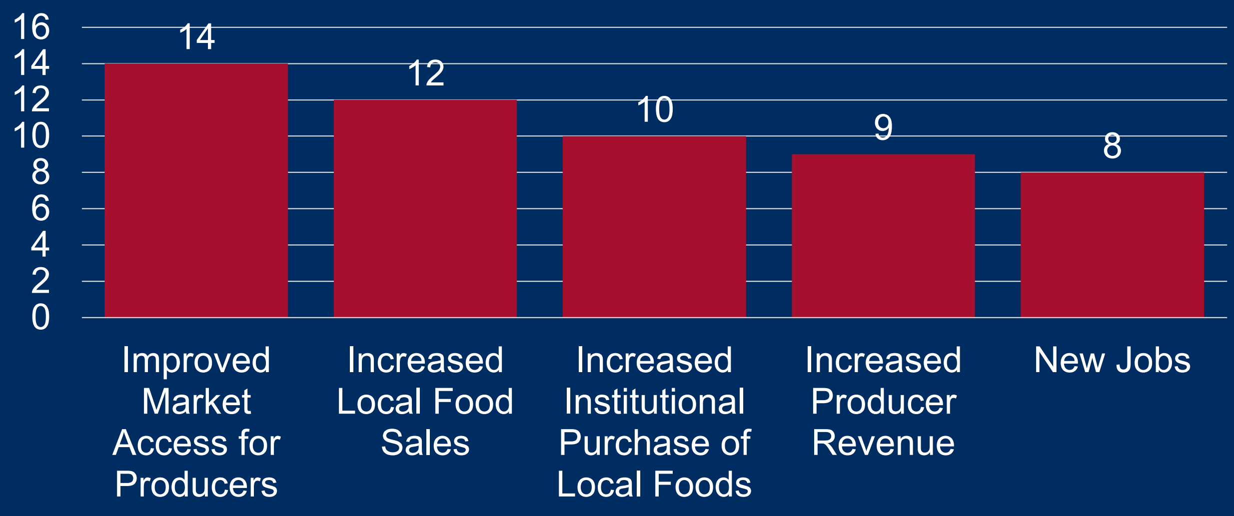
Through this model, the team sold $430,000 in local produce without a facility. The project developed this model through relationships established before and strengthened during the RFSP grant. RFSP provided the support needed for partners to convene, enhance communication, and sustain the collaboration. A participant asserted, “I don’t know that this would have happened if we had not already laid the foundation for these relationships that then just continued to grow. It won’t end when the grant ends…but it certainly makes it more difficult when you don’t have the support to get together.”

Collectively, these examples demonstrate the range of ways RFSP projects strengthened financial capital (See Box 3 for supporting participant quotes).

Survey Evidence

The survey data supports that RFSP activities have increased financial capital. Of 23 projects, 14 reported improved market access for producers and 12 reported increased local food sales. In addition, 10 reported increased institutional purchasing of local goods, nine reported increased producer revenue, and eight reported the creation of new jobs.

Number of RFSP Projects Reporting Select Financial Capital Impacts



Note: Responses reflect a select-all-that-apply question.

Box 3: New Market Opportunities for Regional Producers and Processors—Select REM Participant Quotes

New Market Opportunities for Producers and Processors

"We have partnered with [market] on a two-year pilot to find accessible rates so that small-scale farmers can access the market. Licensing fees are really expensive over time..."

"We have pre-negotiated wholesale prices, and even smaller childcare centers have already ordered more than expected."

"We created a regional brand that allows [producers] to really get into a more mass channel and just serve more mid-scale food and farm processors."

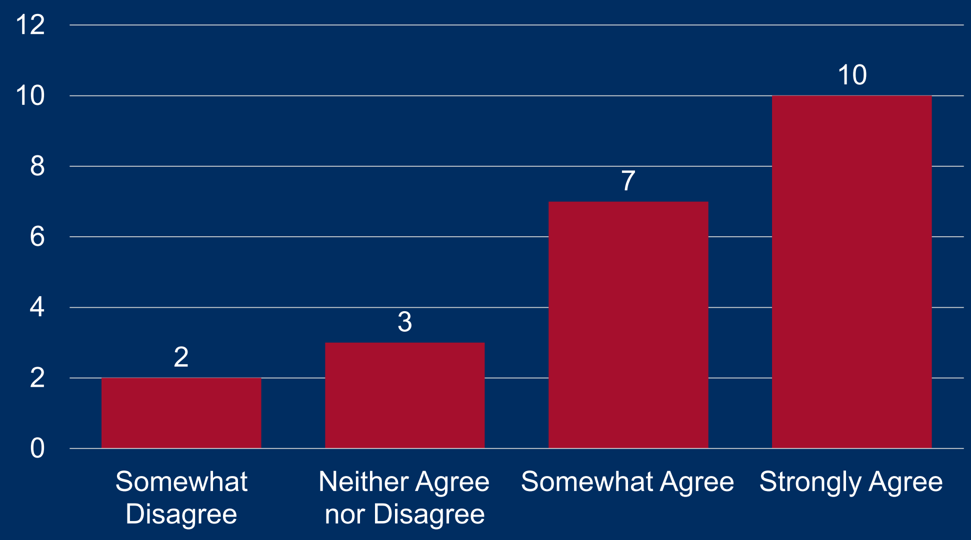
"We hope that the experience [launching a brand] will be really helpful, not only for ourselves, for our own business, but also to be better supporters of the small makers we work with, who also are looking to get their products more widely in production."

"The RFSP program has really built capacity of our partners to expand home delivery to childcare homes and centers. We hope it will be utilized in [two local counties] so that we can continue to see this expand."

Survey Evidence:

A majority of respondents (17, 77%) agreed that implementing an RFSP project increased their likelihood of securing future funding. Three respondents neither agreed nor disagreed, and two somewhat disagreed. These findings suggest RFSP builds the confidence and capacity to pursue additional resources beyond the grant period.

Agreement on RFSP Increasing Likelihood of Grant Funding



Cultural Capital

Increases in social capital have also led to increased cultural capital. The expansion of social capital has also increased community connectedness through culturally significant events that have brought partners, stakeholders, and the broader community together to celebrate local food (increased cultural capital). For example, in the South, an urban farmer started hosting an “okra party.” After their inaugural party, they worked with RFSP partners to expand the event, including collaborating with the local art community. This collaboration led artists to paint murals for the event and musicians to perform live, drawing even more community members to a “celebration of food” and “a celebration of culture and place.”

There were several instances of cultural exchange and celebration occurring throughout projects, including sharing food and recipes such as cantaloupe bread, a workshop on Indigenous food processing techniques, and more. These activities deepened community connectedness, increased awareness of local food traditions, and strengthened cultural ties across a variety of communities.

Political Capital

Several projects (3 to 4) discussed intentionally designing their activities to strengthen connections between their communities and government officials, contributing to increases in political capital. One RFSP project routinely held listening sessions in which government actors listened directly to community concerns, reversing the traditional approach of community members listening to government officials. This approach elevated local voices, particularly in communities that have had fewer opportunities to directly engage with policy networks. Expanded networks, greater visibility, and stronger relationships strengthened RFSP partners’ capacity to participate in policy discussions and elevate regional food system perspectives.

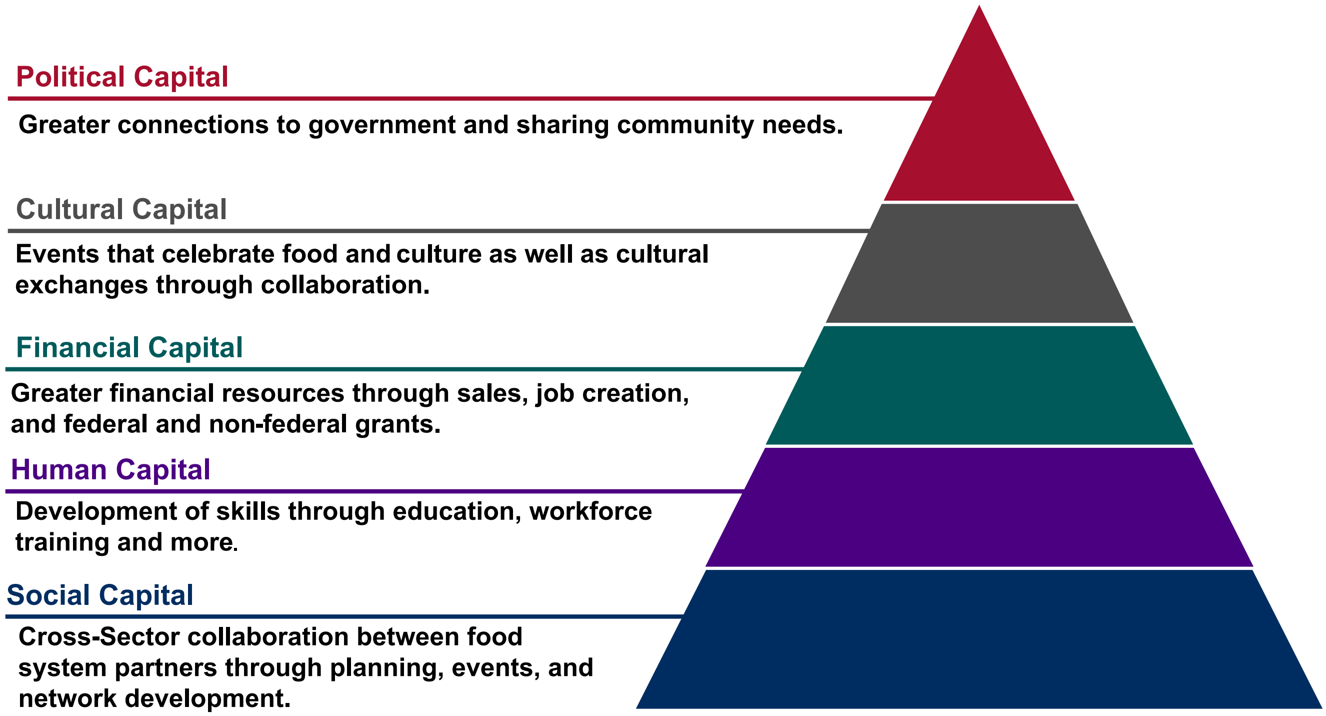
RFSP Community Capitals Impacts

Overall, the REM sessions highlight a range of impacts across community capitals on partners, stakeholders, and their communities. RFSP helped strengthen social capital through trust-building, partnerships, and expanded networks. This investment in social capital became the foundation upon which other capitals increased (See Figure 6). These projects demonstrate that RFSP can foster the development of social capital within communities and across the regional food system.

As partners repeatedly noted, RFSP provided the opportunity and resources to facilitate coordination on regional food system needs. RFSP’s focus on collaboration and bringing partners together created opportunities for deeper trust, shared learning, and expanded economic opportunities. As a result, growth in social capital helped catalyze increases in human capital (skills and abilities), financial capital (financial resources), cultural capital (traditions and language), and political capital (connections to power).

For many partners and stakeholders, participation in RFSP increased food distribution and sales, deepened connections to local communities, expanded educational opportunities, and enhanced resilience. While these successes varied across projects and require cautious interpretation, they illustrate RFSP’s ability to help communities “spiral up” toward broader community and economic development goals.

Figure 6: RFSP Impacts Across Community Capitals



Factors Impacting RFSP Success and Impact

RFSP projects clearly demonstrated numerous successes and generated meaningful impacts across regional food systems. However, design and implementation factors, including effective facilitation and network building, influenced the extent to which projects achieved these outcomes. The following section examines these factors in greater depth.

Grant Program Characteristics

The RFSP projects participating in REM were highly successful, which can make identifying variations in factors that either bolster or hinder success difficult. As mentioned, disentangling RFSP as a source of success from other grant-supported activities can also be difficult. Due to the nature of food-system work, projects received multiple sources of local, state, and federal funding both before and during the RFSP project to support their activities. For most projects, this work was in place long before RFSP, but RFSP provided an opportunity to build it out further. One participant stated, “applying for the grant was the distillation of all these years of work and thinking, and then to be funded was an amazing opportunity…it felt like all these different theories and dreams coming to reality.”

Several of the factors impacting success identified in REM sessions stem directly from the design of the RFSP program. RFSP emphasizes planning, coordination, and relationship-building as core activities. For example, for those who receive a Planning and Design grant, they have a two-year planning period to design their food system initiatives. RFSP also allows funding flexibility for network development. These features can help create conditions for long-term collaboration and capacity building across local and regional food systems.

When asked what specifically about RFSP helped them achieve their successes, many attributed it to the uniqueness of RFSP in focusing on relationship-building and planning. For instance, one participant stated “because RFSP was so focused on relationships… it really helped us grow those [relationships]. And we just got really so much better at who was great at what.” This increased clarity about partners’ strengths was possible through the extended collaboration facilitated by RFSP. The Planning and Design grant received much attention for allowing participants to intentionally design projects that would meet their food system needs. A project in the South used RFSP funding to develop a strategic food systems plan. This plan served as important groundwork for moving food system related activities forward in the county, not only through the connections established but because the process of making the food plan was a catalyst for “sparking new ideas as well as deepening and highlighting existing processes.” Several projects highlighted RFSP’s unique provision of two years for planning food system activities, a timeframe they reported was unavailable through other grant programs. For example, a participant in the West stated about RFSP, “it gave us funding to be able to dig deeper and actually start tackling these issues versus other grants that are a little more service-level and don’t give us the opportunity to say, ‘we are building a bid and this is going to take a year and a half to put together, and we need funding to be able to support it.’”

Another participant involved in creating the planning document emphasized the importance of developing the plan together. They were unsure why the planning document was being developed in the beginning, but “over time I have come to understand why…and I think it’s genius. It was not a document that either [of the co-leads] were writing…it was a collaborative effort, which is genius because the people who do the work, who are most going to benefit from a robust food system are the people who have the highest amount of skin in the game, of motivation, of passion, of knowledge…”.

These examples illustrate that RFSP’s distinctive design, particularly its emphasis on intentional planning, sustained collaboration, and flexible support for relationship-building, was central to the successes reported by REM participants. Many projects had been working toward food systems improvement for years, but RFSP created the unique conditions that allowed this work to deepen, accelerate, and become more coordinated. The extended planning period, support for network development, and space for partners to meet, reflect, and collectively design solutions were critical to project success. These features enabled the clarification of roles, strengthening of trust, and tackling of complex challenges that other grants’ shorter timelines or service-oriented requirements could not accommodate. **In short, RFSP did not replace ongoing food system efforts, but amplified them by providing the time, structure, and collaborative foundation necessary for transformative, community-driven progress.**

Survey Evidence:

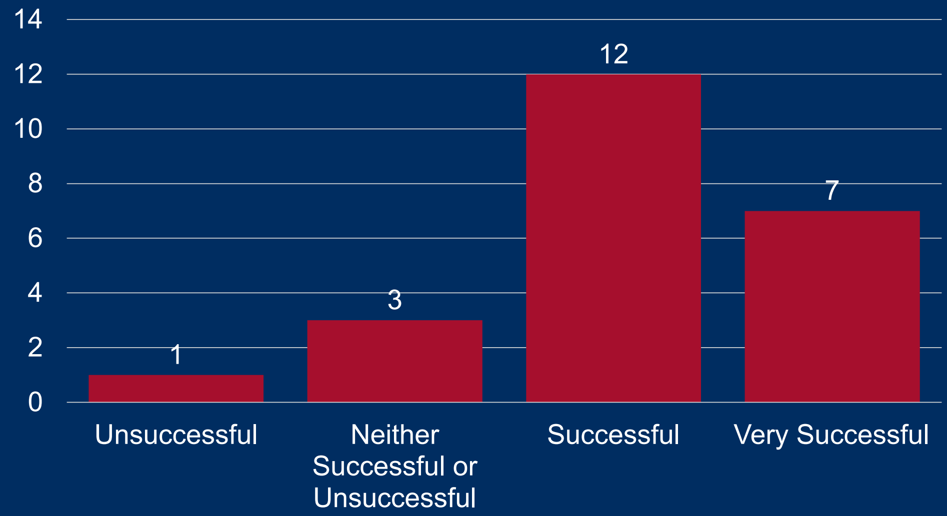
Survey responses reinforce and complement REM findings on factors that contribute to participant success.

One respondent noted that RFSP “is one of the few funding sources that funds partnership building,” describing it as “essential to food systems development work,” while another emphasized that support for scalability and long-term planning “does not happen often” in similar funding programs.

Survey Evidence

Survey respondents also reported a high level of success. Notably, most respondents (19, 82.6%) rated their projects as successful or very successful, while 3 selected neither successful or unsuccessful, and only one respondent indicating that their project was not a success (n = 23).

Level of Project Success



Grant Recipient Characteristics

While the design of the RFSP program helped support success and impact, the way grant recipients approached their work played a critical role. Network structure, partner engagement, and the methods used to facilitate collaboration all influenced outcomes. Importantly, no single model ensured success; however, several characteristics emerged as key drivers of improved project results.

The most successful projects devoted attention to the development of a truly collaborative network that supported numerous food system voices, rather than recognizing only a few leaders. As one project in the West stated, "we wanted to create a network of constellations, not stars." They wanted to create a collaborative model that focused on mission above organization and spent a year designing the regional model. This model has been so successful that individuals in the Northeast want to replicate it in their region.

Collaboration can take many forms and there is no single model of success. Similarly, projects employed a range of communication strategies, each proving successful. For instance, some projects met primarily over Zoom, others in person, some communicated activities through a listserv, while others relied on telephone and other sources of communication. The most crucial factor in success was choosing a model and method that worked best for their network. This included knowing their communities and who should be participating in the work, to ensure the models developed did not unintentionally exclude these participants. This flexibility extended beyond communication to the ways projects structured participation. For example, one project partnered with the local Deaf community, allowing them to provide their own interpreters and compensating them for their work. This not only reduced the administrative burden on the project team but also valued the expertise and leadership within the community itself.

Collaboration also required active support, such as facilitation, dedicated staff time, administrative help, and an individual who could keep the network connected, to be successful. Bringing actors together in an often-siloed food system was not enough without skilled facilitation to guide the process. A project participant in the South noted how their leadership was good at facilitating meetings when developing the food system plan and that they learned a lot about how to facilitate groups working on large projects. This project was fortunate to have leadership well-versed in facilitation, but this is not a skill that is universal. Projects that had facilitation expertise or took the time to research how to better facilitate seemed to expand their networks further.

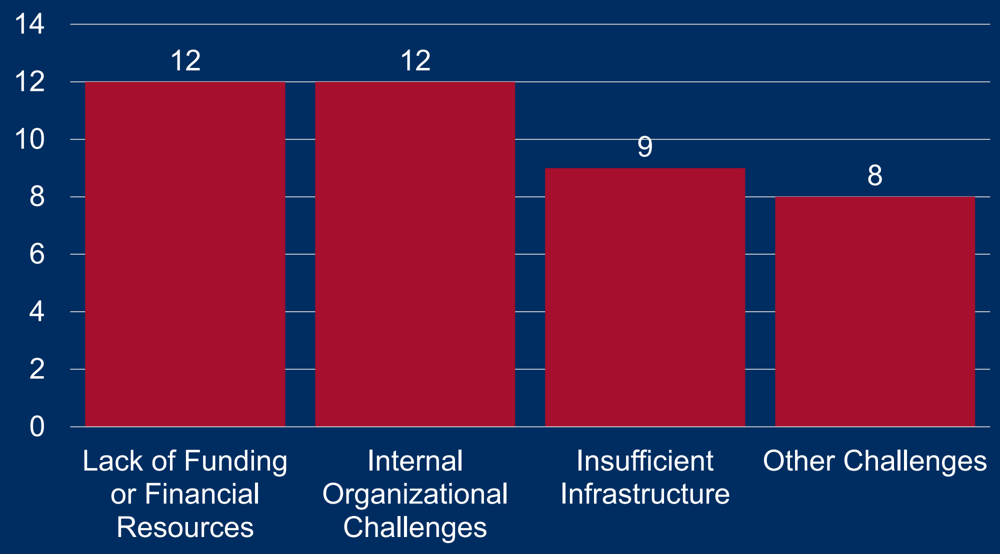
Additionally, partner selection played a crucial role in project success. As one participant noted, “you have to pick the right people.” The most successful projects emphasized the value of a critical partner, someone who, while differing in role from project to project, often served as a connector, typically described as someone who “knew everyone.” These individuals were instrumental in building and maintaining relationships across the food system network. Maintaining these connections was essential as networks expanded, and critical partners also supported stakeholders by identifying and applying for additional grant opportunities. Projects emphasized that funding the connection-building function, often through RFSP grant support, was vital to their success.

Lastly, because events were key to both maintaining and expanding networks, expertise in event planning and management emerged as another important success factor. Several projects specifically highlighted the need for funding to support event-related roles, particularly by designating a staff member to manage this work.

Survey Evidence

Lack of funding and internal organizational challenges were the most common barriers (12; 52.2% each), followed by insufficient infrastructure (9) and other challenges (8). Internal challenges included staff turnover and limited staffing capacity.

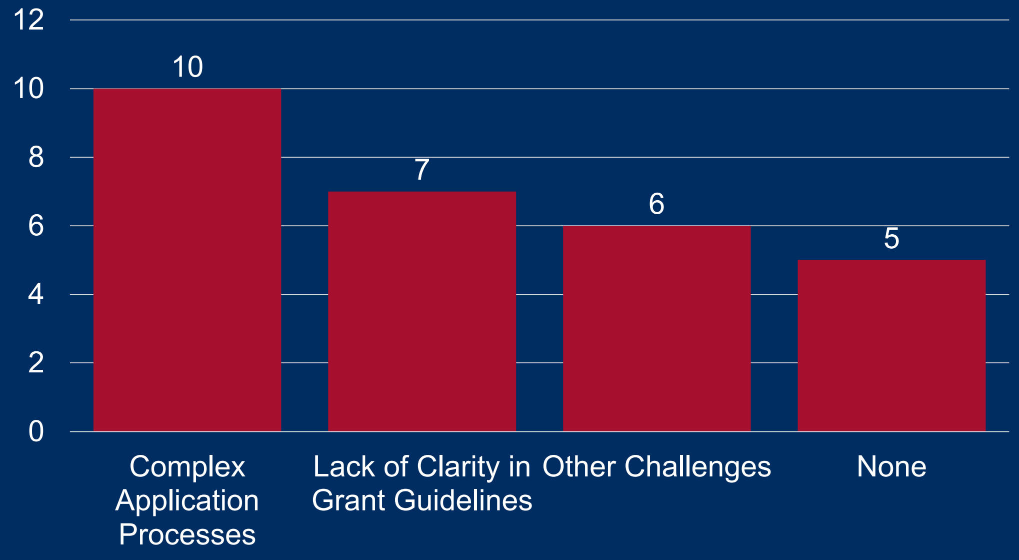
Top 4 Barriers or Challenges Impacting Project Goal Achievement



Survey Evidence

Survey respondents reported several grant administration challenges. The most common was a complex application process (10; 43.5%), followed by lack of clarity in grant guidelines (7; 30.4%), other challenges (5, 21.7%), and none (4, 17.4%). In open-ended questions, the application process was described as "difficult," "convoluted," "tough," or "so intense… that it precludes many organizations with limited capacity from participating". Post-award reporting process was also described as "intensive," "complex," "onerous," and "a burden."

Top 4 Grant Administration Challenges



CONCLUSIONS

This evaluation finds that RFSP is meeting its core objective: fostering partnerships and building capacity within regional food systems. These outcomes are not peripheral but central to the program's purpose and impact. Across a wide range of projects, RFSP grant recipients reported strengthened organizational capacity, deeper community relationships, and greater readiness to scale and sustain food systems work.

Across the projects evaluated, both indirect and direct impacts were evidenced. Direct impacts included increased local food sales, improved market access for producers, expanded regional food distribution, and greater institutional purchasing of local foods, particularly by school districts, childcare centers, grocery stores, and hunger relief organizations. Indirect outcomes include leveraging partnerships and infrastructure developed through RFSP to pursue additional funding opportunities, often in collaboration with other partners and stakeholders.

REM participants emphasized that RFSP is one of the few funding sources specifically designed to support partnership development, which is something they view as essential to long-term systems change. One participant described the program as "essential to food systems development work," noting that such a focus is rare among other federal grant programs.

REM participants praised RFSP for enabling long-term planning and strategic growth, a benefit that, as one respondent put it, “does not happen often” with similar funding sources. Additionally, several respondents highlighted the professionalism and responsiveness of USDA AMS program staff as a key strength of the program.

However, grant recipients also identified significant challenges. Burdensome application and reporting processes were identified by most survey respondents. Respondents described the application as “intense,” “convoluted,” and “a barrier to participation,” especially for smaller or under-resourced organizations. Some survey respondents characterized post-award reporting as “onerous” and “unintuitive,” with one respondent noting that requesting plan changes was so difficult that adjustments were often delayed or abandoned. Nearly half of the survey respondents identified the complexity of the application process as the most significant administrative challenge. Others pointed to unclear guidelines, technological frustrations with the reporting portal, and burdens on partners.

Another concern raised was the perception that large partnership sizes were required, which respondents noted could dilute funding and complicate coordination. However, RFSP requires only one eligible entity and one eligible partner, suggesting either a misunderstanding of program requirements or an expectation that larger partnerships were necessary or advantageous for securing funding. Other concerns included limited guidance on allowable costs—particularly for Tribal food systems—and insufficient support for seafood-based projects.

The interaction between RFSP and other USDA AMS grant programs, such as FMPP and LFPP, remains unclear. While some participants had previous experience with these programs and noted that they supported RFSP implementation, many either had no prior involvement or received these grants concurrently. In accordance with LAMP legislation, active RFSP recipients may apply for FMPP or LFPP funding on behalf of requesting producers or other eligible entities and may receive more than one FMPP and LFPP project within an award cycle serving in the facilitative role.

As a result, it is difficult to isolate the distinct impact of each funding source due to overlapping timelines and interdependent activities. Nonetheless, the evaluation found that RFSP often played a catalytic role in enabling future funding success. The program’s emphasis on planning and partnership-building provided projects with the groundwork needed to successfully compete for future funding. In many cases, the relationships and structures developed through RFSP led to joint applications for other grants, further extending the indirect impacts of RFSP.

In conclusion, RFSP is delivering measurable results in line with its goals. It is directly supporting capacity building and collaboration across regional food systems. These foundational outcomes enable communities to “spiral up” toward broader economic, cultural, and food access goals. Continued investment in these areas, along with refinement to the program’s structure and accessibility, will help ensure that RFSP remains a vital tool in the development and sustainability of regional food systems.

Survey Evidence

95%

of survey respondents are satisfied or very satisfied with the RFSP Program.

91%

of survey respondents likely or very likely to recommend the RFSP Program to others.

STRATEGIES FOR PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT

Based on the findings from REM sessions and the surveys, the following suggestions are offered to improve design, access, and long-term impacts of the RFSP program:

Sustain and Expand Support for Partnership and Coordination Roles

Because partnership-building is central to RFSP's purpose, the program should continue to prioritize funding for coordinators, event planners, and other staff who facilitate relationship-building, communication, and collaboration across partners and stakeholders.

Streamline Application and Reporting Processes

Reduce the administrative burden of applying for and reporting on RFSP grants. Simplifying documentation and providing user-friendly tools could improve access for smaller, lower-capacity, and community-based organizations.

Clarify and Expand Guidance on Eligible Costs

Several grant recipients noted confusion or limitations in the guidance around eligible costs, particularly those working with Tribal communities and seafood supply chains. Providing clearer and more flexible guidance would ensure that projects can align their activities with RFSP requirements.

Maintain and Strengthen USDA AMS Program Staff Engagement

Grant recipients praised the USDA AMS staff for their professionalism, responsiveness, and support. Continued investment in the RFSP team capacity can ensure grant recipients are supported and engaged throughout the grant cycle.

Establish a Community of Practice for RFSP Grant Recipients

To address issues of staff turnover, fragmented communication, and the loss of institutional memory, USDA AMS should consider supporting the development of a Community of Practice (CoP) for RFSP recipients.

A CoP would foster long-term relationships, enable knowledge-sharing, and support collaborative problem-solving across projects and regions. This could include:

- A regularly updated grant recipient contact directory
- Peer-led webinars or discussion forums
- Opportunities for mentorship between new and experienced grant recipients
- A digital platform for shared resources and communication

STRATEGIES FOR GRANT EVALUATION IMPROVEMENT

The findings suggest that RFSP application review criteria could better reflect the characteristics of successful projects and address barriers to participation. The following suggestions are made:

Emphasize the Depth and Quality of Partnerships over Size

REM results in particular show that trust, history, and specific roles among partners are more important than the number. Projects with one or two critical, well-connected organizations can be as effective if not more effective than larger but more loosely connected partnerships.

Clarify and reinforce partnership requirements in program guidance and outreach materials. Some participants expressed confusion about the number of required partners for RFSP projects, despite this information being included in existing materials. Program guidance and technical assistance should more clearly and consistently emphasize the minimum partnership requirements and explicitly communicate that larger partnerships are not inherently more competitive or likely to be funded.

Potentially Consider Event Planning and Facilitation Capacity

Event coordination and facilitation expertise were important to sustain engagement, managing collaboration, and supporting multi-stakeholder processes. Projects with clear strategies for convening, facilitation, and follow-up were more effective at maintaining momentum and aligning partners. Applicants should describe how they will plan, staff, and facilitate meetings or events that are central to the success of partnership-driven work.

Evaluate Organizational Capacity and Stability

Include evaluation of the lead applicant’s staffing continuity, ability to manage turnover, and internal capacity to administer the project. Less successful projects may struggle due to internal staffing challenges and leadership turnover.

Develop a readiness checklist to help grant applicants determine if they are prepared to apply for RFSP.

ADDENDUM: USDA ACTIONS SINCE EVALUATION (THROUGH JULY 2026)

In the years since many of the Ripple Effects Mapping (REM) and survey participants were Regional Food Systems Partnerships (RFSP) awardees, USDA AMS has taken steps to address applicant and awardee barriers and challenges. Actions include:

- Simplifying the instructions for the application narrative and adding Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) in response to recurring questions from applicants.
- Conducting webinars, office hours, and Q&A sessions to provide immediate answers about the application process and requirements.
- Updating language in the Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) and support communications to clarify that personnel costs for project coordinators, partnership coordinators, and similar positions are allowable when they directly support project objectives.
- Highlighting successful partnership-building projects during webinars and office hours to underscore partnership/coordination role salaries as eligible costs.
- Expanding FAQs and applicant technical assistance to address common questions regarding personnel, travel, contractual costs, and other direct costs.
- Providing peer to peer learning opportunities to encourage sharing of project updates, challenges, and resources among awardees.
- Updating the NOFO and FAQs to provide clearer guidance on partnership requirements.

USDA AMS will continue to consider the feedback and recommendations outlined in this report and work to ease the burden of applying for USDA AMS grants and improve the experience of awardees, with the purpose of better and more efficiently utilizing program funds.

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APPENDIX A: REM GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. **Share a story about how the Regional Food Systems Partnership Program (RFSP) has had an impact on [project] food system.**
2. **How has your RFSP work impacted the places, people, businesses, governments and NGO's in your community(ies)?**
3. **Has implementation of the RFSP project resulted in any new opportunities, resources, relationships or partnerships?**
4. **What RFSP success or achievement makes you the most proud?**
5. **Did any impacts (or ripple effects) surprise you?**

APPENDIX B: SURVEY QUESTIONS

1. **Please provide your project title. If you have multiple RFSP grants, please fill out a separate survey for each grant.**
2. **What year does (did) your RFSP grant funding end? If you received an extension, please use the new year.**
   - 2020-2023
   - 2024
   - 2025
   - 2026 or later
3. **How many eligible partners were involved at the start of your RFSP project? We are interested in the number of individuals and organizations that are/were actively involved in decision-making, contributing resources, expertise, and/or support for your RFSP project.**
   - 1-2
   - 3-5
   - 6-10
   - More than 10
4. **How many new eligible partnerships have been added during your RFSP project? If your RFSP project is ongoing, please tell us how many new partners have been added to date. If your RFSP project has ended, please tell us how many new partners were added by the end of your project.**
   - None (1)
   - 1-2 (2)
   - 3-5 (3)
   - 6-10 (4)
   - More than 10 (5)
5. **Please indicate the level of commitment among your partners during your RFSP project**
   - Very high (1)
   - High (2)
   - Moderate (3)
   - Low (4)
   - Very Low
6. **To what extent did your RFSP partnership continue after the grant period ended?**
   - Completely (all partnerships continued after the grant period)
   - Mostly (most partnerships have continued)
   - Moderately (about half the partnerships have continued)
   - Minimally (a few partnerships have continued)
   - Not at all (none of the partnerships have continued)
7. **What is the level of confidence that your RFSP partnerships will continue after the grant period ends?**
   - Very confident
   - Somewhat confident
   - Neither confident nor unconfident
   - Somewhat unconfident
   - Very unconfident
8. **How many stakeholders has your RFSP project assisted? We define stakeholders as individuals or organizations in the food system, such as farmers, producers, distributors, retailers, etc. that have directly benefited (immediate tangible benefits such as increase in contracts, sales, profits, access to local foods, etc.) from your project activities. This does not include partners or collaborators working on your project.**
   - None
   - 1 to 10
   - 11 to 20
   - 21 to 30
   - 31 to 40
   - 41 or more
9. **Please share some examples of how your RFSP project has assisted stakeholders.**

10. Which of the following activities has your RFSP project supported? Please mark all the apply.

- Agritourism
- Community-supported agriculture (CSA) programs
- Distribution center support
- Farm - to Institution (e.g. schools, hospitals, ect.)
- Farm to table initiatives (e.g. restaurants)
- Food hub support
- Food processing
- Food production
- Food policy council support
- Grant Writing
- Marketing and Promotion
- Direct sales to consumers (farm stands, online sales)
- Local or regional food events (e.g. food festivals, farm tours)
- Networking events
- Strategic Planning (long term planning)
- Research
- Training
- Value added products (products which underwent a change in its original physical state or form – such as milling wheat into flour and making fruit into jam)
- Value chain coordination (development of soft infrastructure, like relationships, networks and information sharing channels between suppliers, producers, distributors to enhance product quality and delivery)
- Other (Please specify)

11. Which of the following activities has your RFSP project supported? Please mark all the apply.

- Agritourism
- Community-supported agriculture (CSA) programs
- Distribution center support
- Farm - to Institution (e.g. schools, hospitals, ect.)
- Farm to table initiatives (e.g. restaurants)
- Food hub support
- Food processing
- Food production
- Food policy council support
- Grant Writing
- Marketing and Promotion
- Direct sales to consumers (farm stands, online sales)
- Local or regional food events (e.g. food festivals, farm tours)
- Networking events
- Strategic Planning (long term planning)
- Research
- Training
- Value added products (products which underwent a change in its original physical state or form – such as milling wheat into flour and making fruit into jam)
- Value chain coordination (development of soft infrastructure, like relationships, networks and information sharing channels between suppliers, producers, distributors to enhance product quality and delivery)
- Other (Please specify)

12. Are there any other activities your RFSP project has supported that you are particularly proud of? If so, please describe them.

13. Overall, how successful or unsuccessful has your RFSP project been in achieving its goals?

- Very successful
- Successful
- Neither successful or unsuccessful
- Unsuccessful
- Very Unsuccessful

14. You indicated your RFSP project has been successful achieving its goals. What has helped you achieve your project goals?

15. Which of the following barriers or challenges have impacted your ability to achieve your RFSP goals? Please select all that apply.

- Lack of funding or financial resources
- Limited access to markets or distribution channels
- Insufficient infrastructure (e.g. transportation, storage, ect.)
- Regulatory challenges (e.g. local, state, or federal policies)
- Lack of community engagement/buy-in
- Limited partnerships
- Technology challenges
- COVID-19 related challenges
- Internal organizational challenges such as high turnover, project director changes, internal conflicts, etc. (please specify below)
- Other challenges (please specify below)
- None

16. Has your RFSP activities led to increased local food purchases by any of the following? Please mark all that apply.

- Childcare facilities
- Community-supported agriculture (CSAs)
- Grocery Stores
- Distributors
- Food hubs
- Grocery stores
- Hospitals
- Restaurants
- School food programs
- Senior care facilities
- Other (please specify below)
- None of these

17. Have your RFSP activities led to any of the following for you, your partners, and/or your stakeholders? Please check all that apply.

- Increased producer revenue
- Increased regional food distribution
- Created new jobs
- Created new business
- Creation of new products
- Increased local food sales
- Increased institutional purchase (e.g. schools, hospitals, ect.) of local foods
- Increased purchase of local foods by restaurants, grocery stores, and other businesses
- Improved market access for producers
- Improved employee skills
- Improved local food logistics (enhanced efficiency of transportation/distribution of local food)
- Other (please specify)
- None of these

18. Are there any impacts (results of your RFSP activities) that you are particularly proud of? If so, please share them.

19. Do you have a report of your impacts that you would be willing to share with us? If so, please upload them here.

20. Have you received grants from the Farmers Market Promotion Program (FMPP) or the Local Food Promotion Program (LFPP) before receiving the RFSP grant? Please answer yes for FMPP and/or LFPP grants received directly by your organization and/or FMPP/LFPP grants your organization received on behalf of others, such as producers and other entities.

- Yes, FMPP
- Yes, LFPP
- Yes, both FMPP and LFPP
- No

21. How did receiving FMPP or/and LFPP grants impact the success of your RFSP project? Select all that apply.

- Provided experience and knowledge
- Established partnerships and networks
- Improved grant management skills
- Increased access to additional resources and funding
- Enhanced marketing and promotion strategies
- No significant impact
- Other (please specify)

22. Has FMPP and/or LFPP funding significantly contributed to the success of your RFSP project?

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

23. How has receiving RFSP funding prepared your organization for applying for future grants, such as FMPP and LFPP?

- Provided experience and knowledge
- Established partnerships and networks
- Increased access to additional resources and funding
- Improved grant management skills
- No significant impact
- Other (please specify)

24. Do you agree or disagree that RFSP has improved your chances of receiving other grant funding like FMPP and LFPP in the future?

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

25. Overall, how satisfied or unsatisfied are you with the RFSP grant program?

- Very satisfied
- Satisfied
- Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
- Dissatisfied
- Very dissatisfied

26. How likely or unlikely are you to recommend the RFSP grant program to others?

- Very likely
- Likely
- Neither likely nor unlikely
- Unlikely
- Very unlikely

27. Overall, what are the biggest strengths of the RFSP grant program?

28. Overall, what are the biggest weaknesses of the RFSP grant program?

29. Did you experience any of the following grant administration challenges? Please select all that apply.

- Difficulty meeting reporting requirements
- Delays in funding disbursement
- Complex application processes
- Limited administrative support
- Challenges tracking expenses or budget management
- Lack of clarity in grant guidelines
- Challenges in grantor policies
- Other (please specify)
- None

30. Based on your experience, what recommendations would you provide to improve the RFSP grant program for future participants?

31. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience with the RFSP program or its impact on your organization and community?

APPENDIX C: FULL SURVEY RESULTS

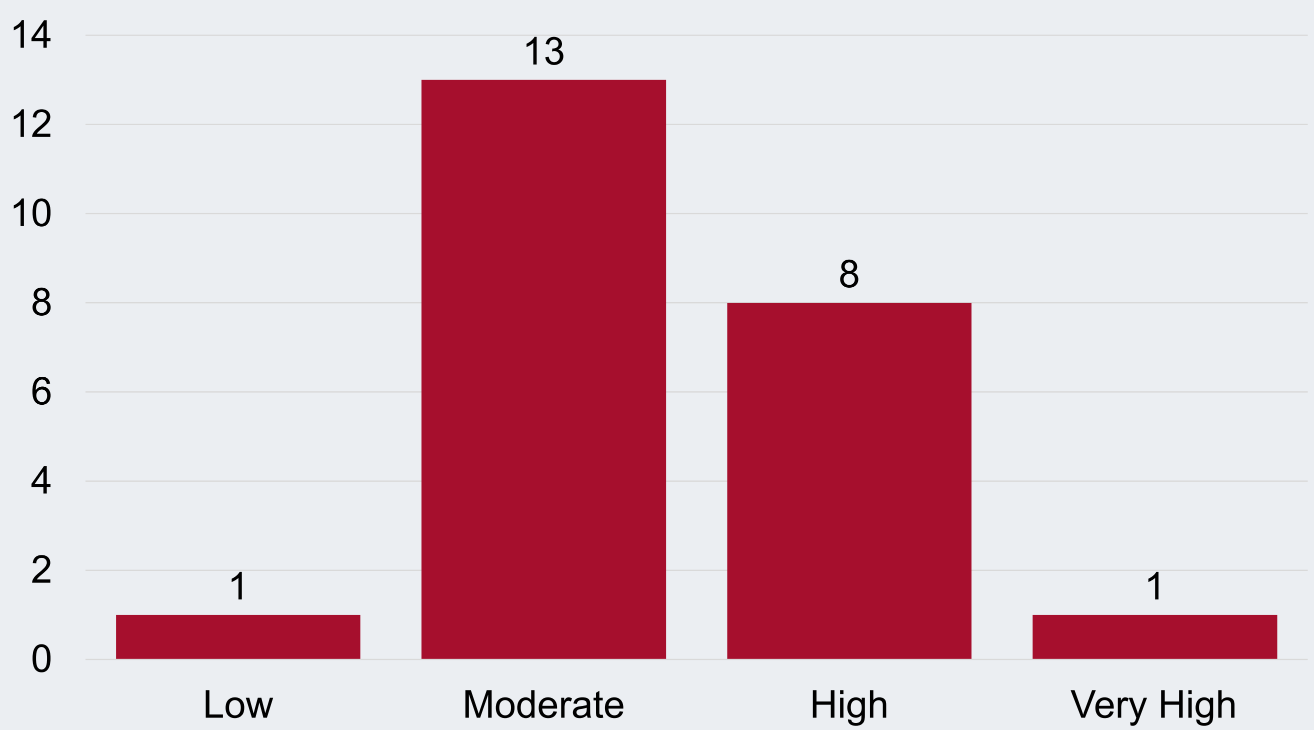
RFSP Partnerships

The survey was divided into four sections, asking respondents to (1) provide feedback on their RFSP partnerships and activities, (2) the impacts of those activities, (3) other grant funding their organizations had received, and (4) their opinions about the RFSP grant program. While most respondents completed all questions, some branching and open-ended items drew fewer than twenty-three responses.

The first section of the survey asked respondents to describe their RFSP partnerships and activities. It included questions about the number and type of partnerships during and after the grant period, the stakeholders involved, and the activities supported by each respondent's RFSP project. Respondents reported how many eligible partners (defined as individuals or organizations actively involved in decision-making or contributing resources, expertise, and/or support) participated at the start of the project. They selected from four categories: 1–2, 3–5, 6–10, or more than 10 partners. Responses were evenly distributed among the 3–5, 6–10, and more-than-10 categories, with 30.4% (7 respondents) choosing each. All respondents increased their partnerships over the course of the project, and the largest share (10, 43.5%) added 10 or more partners from project start to completion.

Most respondents reported moderate partner commitment during their projects. Of 23 respondents, one reported low commitment, 13 (56.5%) reported moderate commitment, eight reported high commitment, and one reported very high commitment (see Figure C-1).

Figure C-1: Partner Commitment Level During Project



Based on the funding end year they reported, respondents answered questions about the continuation of their project partnerships. Those with project end dates between 2020 and 2023 were asked to indicate the extent to which their partnerships continued after the grant period, selecting from: not at all (none continued), moderately (about half continued), mostly (most continued), or completely (all continued). Respondents whose projects end in 2024 or later were instead asked to rate their confidence that their partnerships will continue after the grant period concludes.

Figure C-2 shows that of the nine respondents who noted a funding end date of 2020-2023, more than half (6, 66.67%) indicated that most or all project partnerships continued after the grant period. Two respondents suggested that about half of those partnerships continued, and only one respondent indicated that no partnerships had continued.

Figure C-3 shows that of the 14 respondents who noted a grant funding end date of 2024 or later, over half (8, 57.1%) were very confident in partnership continuation after the grant period, five were somewhat confident, and 1 was neither confident or unconfident.

Figure C-2: Extent of Partnership Continuation After Grant

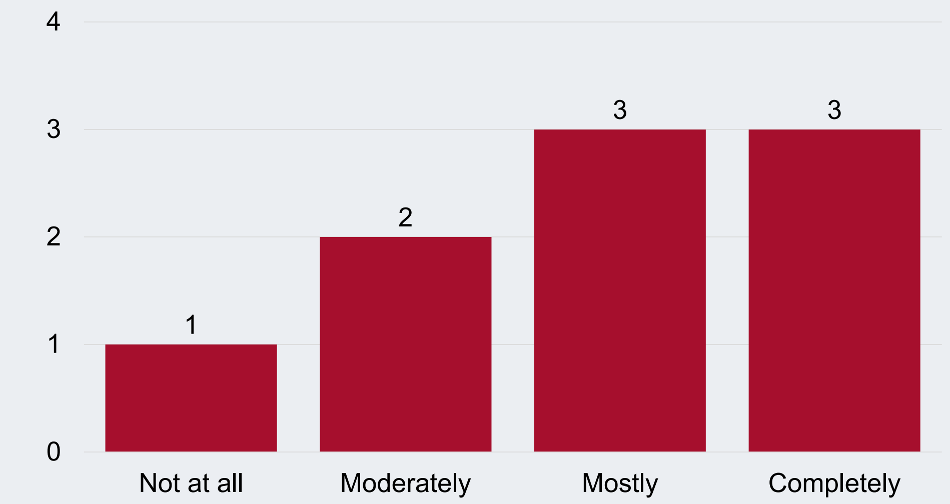
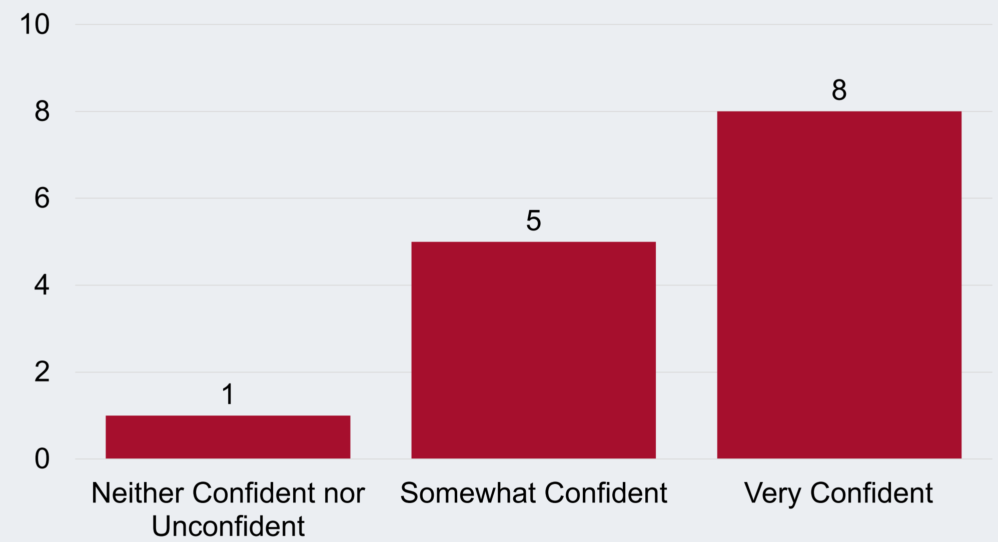


Figure C-3: Confidence in Partnership Continuation After Grant



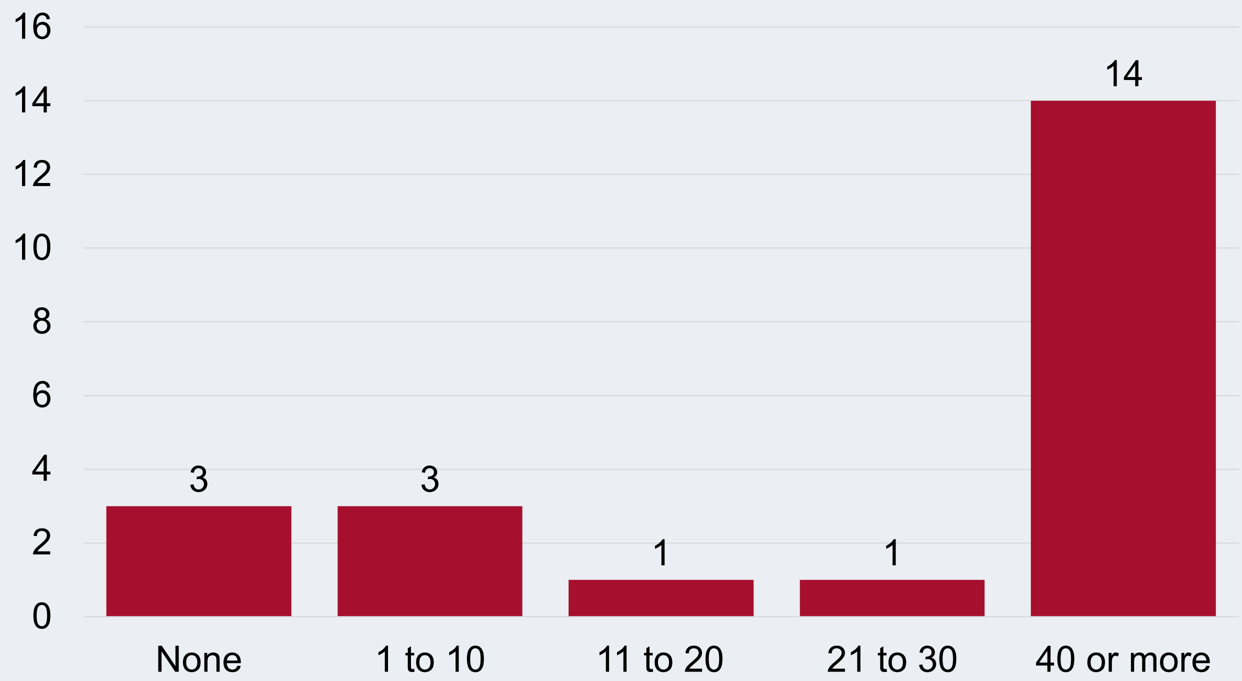
The final portion of Section 1 asked respondents how their RFSP projects assisted stakeholders and what types of activities the projects supported. The survey defined stakeholders as individuals or organizations in the food system—such as farmers, producers, distributors, or retailers—that directly benefited from the project's activities through immediate, tangible outcomes (e.g., increased contracts, sales, profits, or access to local foods). This definition excluded project partners or collaborators involved in implementing the project.

Figure C-4 shows that of the 22 respondents who answered the question, a majority (14) noted that they assisted 40 or more stakeholders. Three respondents indicated the project assisted no stakeholders. Of the remaining five respondents, three reported assisting between one and 10 stakeholders, one reported assisting between 11 and 20 stakeholders, and one reported assisting between 21 and 30 stakeholders

The survey also asked respondents to provide examples of how stakeholders were assisted. They noted that projects helped support local food distribution and market development, institutional, educational, and community engagement, regional food system development, infrastructure and planning, and further funding for future projects. One respondent indicated that their RFSP project“supported 12 food hubs by funding personnel and resources to enhance online sales, wholesale operations, value-added product development, and more”, benefiting “over 300 individuals” and impacting indirectly “more than 1,600 farmers and over 10,000 customers”. Another respondent claimed that newly established distribution routes helped at least one local distributor nearly double their sales to regional foodbanks.

Other respondents shared examples that included the establishment of farm tours “to connect farmers with each other and provide opportunities for peer-to-peer, on-farm learning opportunities”, the development of “trust and communication between food service managers at different… prison facilities”, the assistance of dozens of school districts with local food purchases and supply chain development with local producers wishing to enter the farm-to-school supply chain, and the enhancement of local food production for Tribal communities.

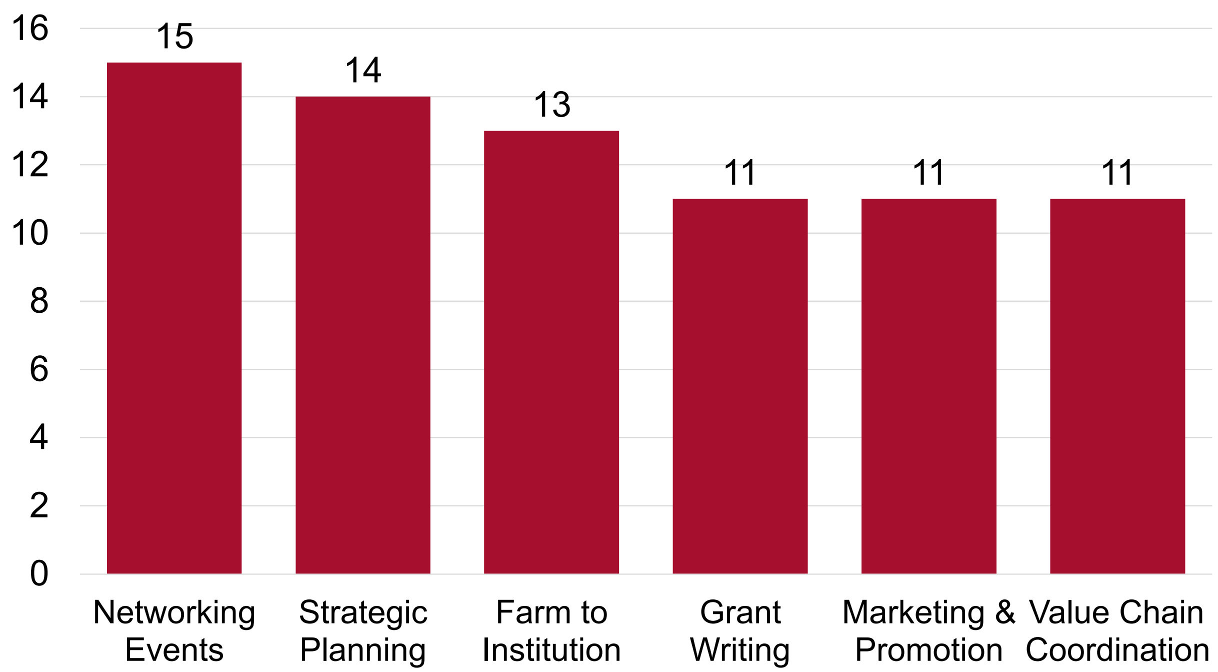
Figure C-4: Number of Stakeholders Assisted by Project



RFSP Activities

Figure C-5 displays the six most frequently reported activities that respondents said their projects supported. Respondents could select all applicable activities from a list of 20. The top six activities were networking events (15), strategic planning (14), farm-to-institution work (13), grant writing (11), marketing and promotion (11), and value chain coordination (11). While respondents reported supporting a wider range of activities overall, only the six most commonly identified activities are presented in the figure.

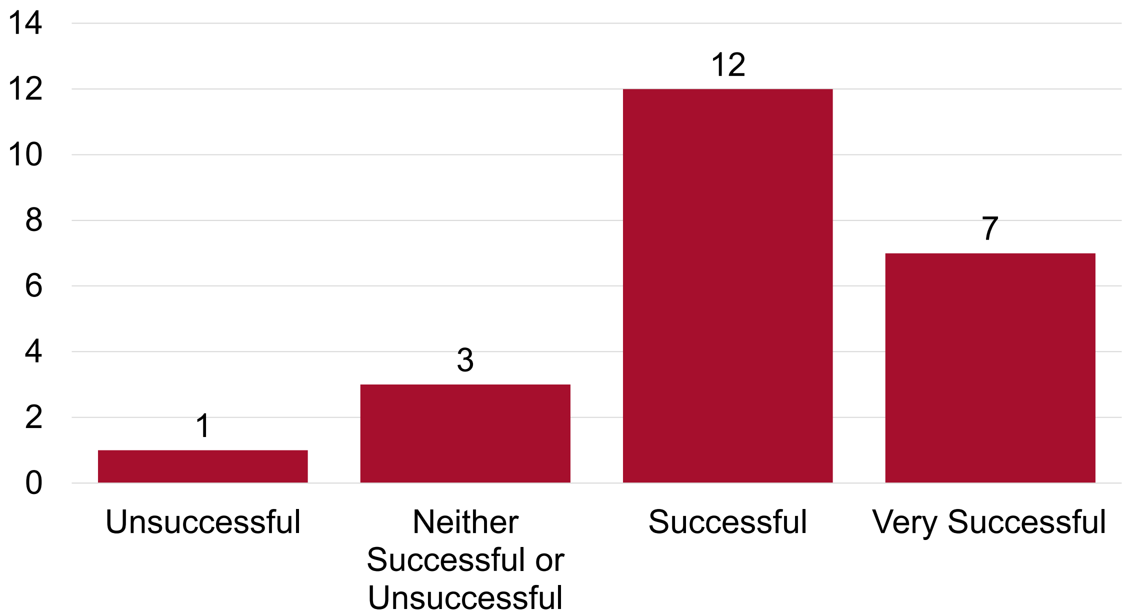
Figure C-5: Most Frequently Reported Activities



The second section of the survey asked respondents to assess the impacts of their RFSP projects, including their perceptions about project success and important drivers, barriers and challenges they encountered, and specific impacts on their communities their projects may have had. Figure C-6 shows the level of success respondents believe their projects had in achieving their goals. Notably, nearly all (19) respondents believed their project was successful or very successful, with only one respondent indicating their project was not a success. The remaining three respondents took a neutral position.

For those who indicated their project was a success, the survey asked what factors helped drive this. While respondents provided several drivers, many repeatedly indicated the importance of strong partnerships and collaboration, strong leadership, a shared vision among project participants, robust community engagement, and reliable funding as critical drivers of project success. One respondent indicated that “it takes time and resources to build relationships and get widespread community commitment”, with the RFSP planning grant allowing their project team to be “slow, intentional, and strategic in [their] planning so that [they] have an even stronger foundation moving forward”. Another respondent noted that “people are much more likely to show up and participate if they are funded,” emphasizing the importance of robust and reliable project funding.

Figure C-6: Level of Project Success



RFSP Challenges and Barriers

In addition to reporting on drivers of success, respondents also described the challenges or barriers they encountered during their project activities. The survey listed 11 possible barriers, and respondents selected all that applied. Figure C-7 highlights the top six barriers identified. The most common challenges were lack of funding (12), internal organizational issues (12), insufficient infrastructure (9), other challenges (8), marketing and promotion (5), and regulatory challenges (5). When asked to describe internal organizational challenges, respondents consistently noted significant staff turnover and limited staffing capacity.

Insufficient infrastructure, such as inadequate storage or transportation difficulties, was the next most common barrier, reported by nine of the 23 respondents. Eight respondents also cited other issues, many of which involved delays stemming from partner coordination. Together, these results suggest that when funding and organizational leadership are strong, they serve as key drivers of success; when they are weak, they become major barriers.

RFSP Activity Impacts

While the Ripple Effects Mapping section highlights the top four impacts, the survey results below provide a fuller picture by presenting the top six impacts identified by respondents. The final questions in Section 2 asked respondents to identify the impacts of their RFSP activities. Figure C-8 summarizes the top six impacts.

Improved market access for producers was the most frequently identified impact (14), followed by increased local food sales (12), increased institutional purchasing of local foods (10) increased regional food distribution (9), increased producer revenue (8), and the creation of new jobs (8). These indicate increases in financial capital and strengthened Built Capital.

Figure C-7: Barriers or Challenges Impacting Project Goal Achievement

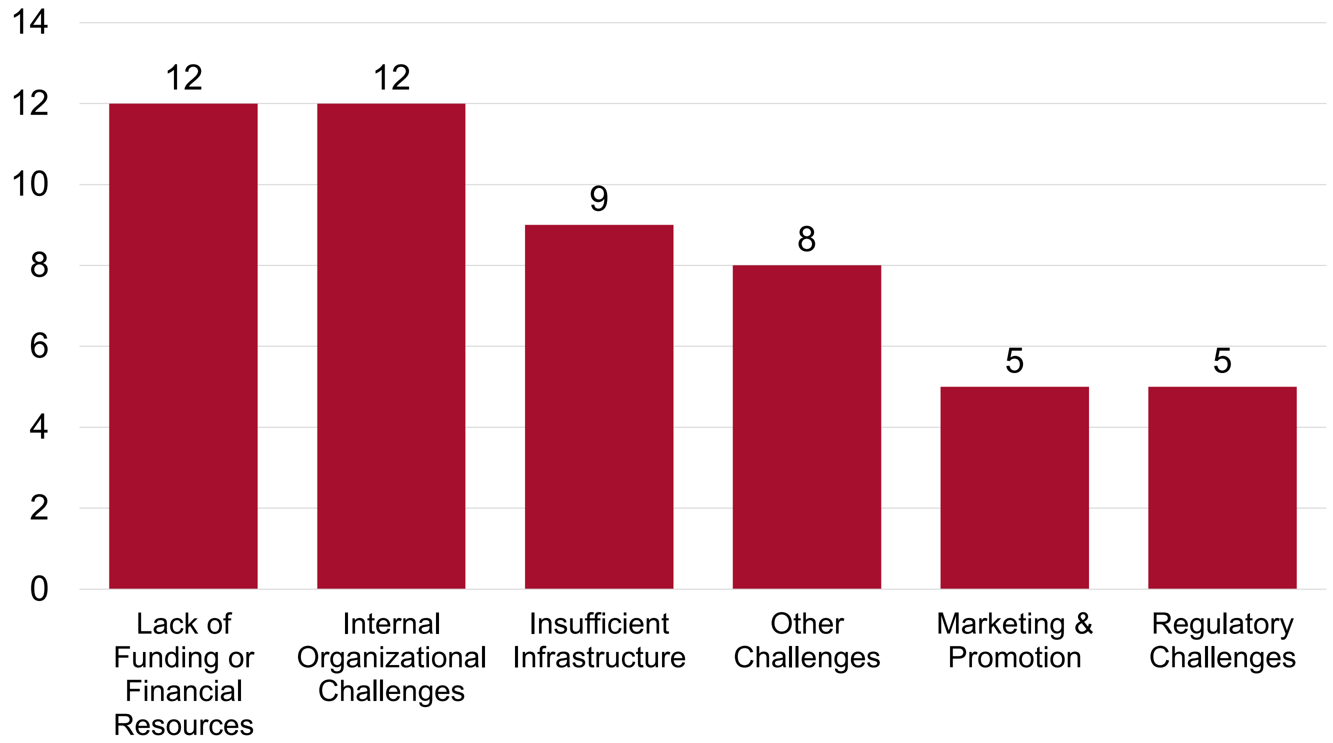
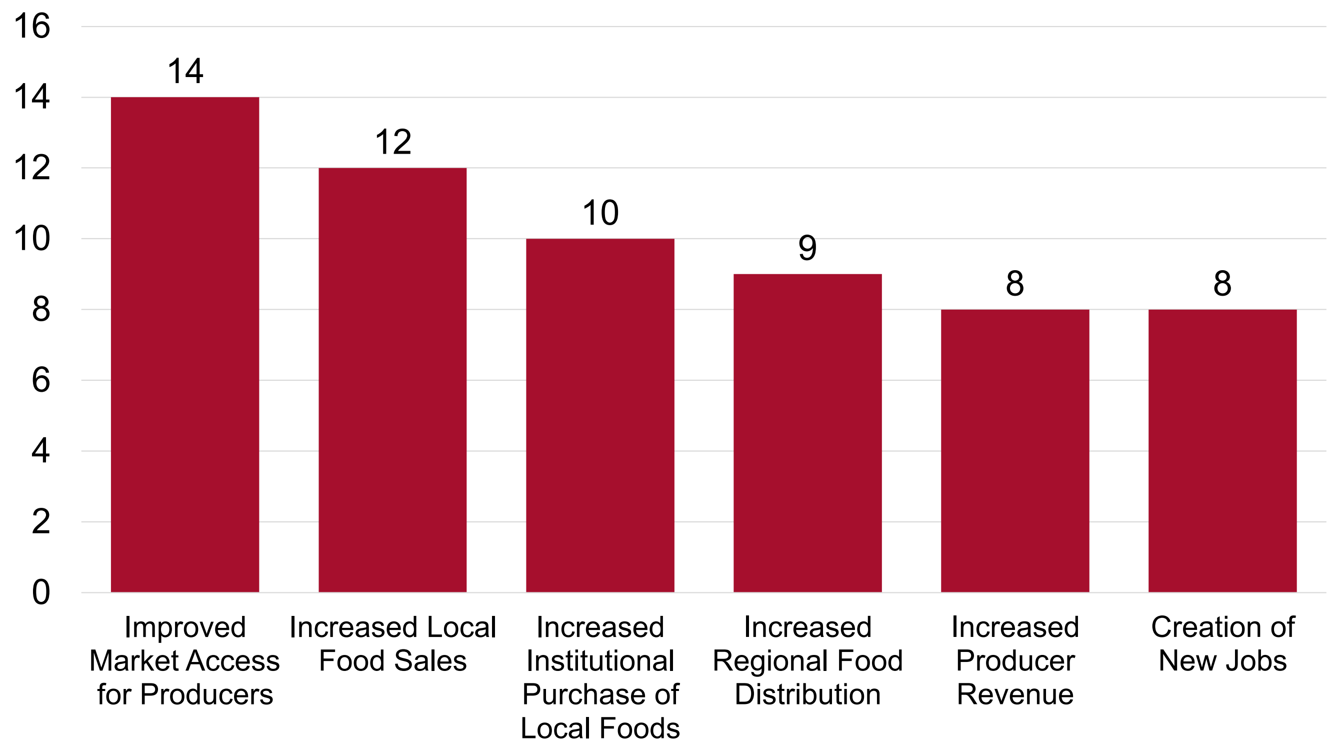


Figure C-8: Top 6 Reported Impacts

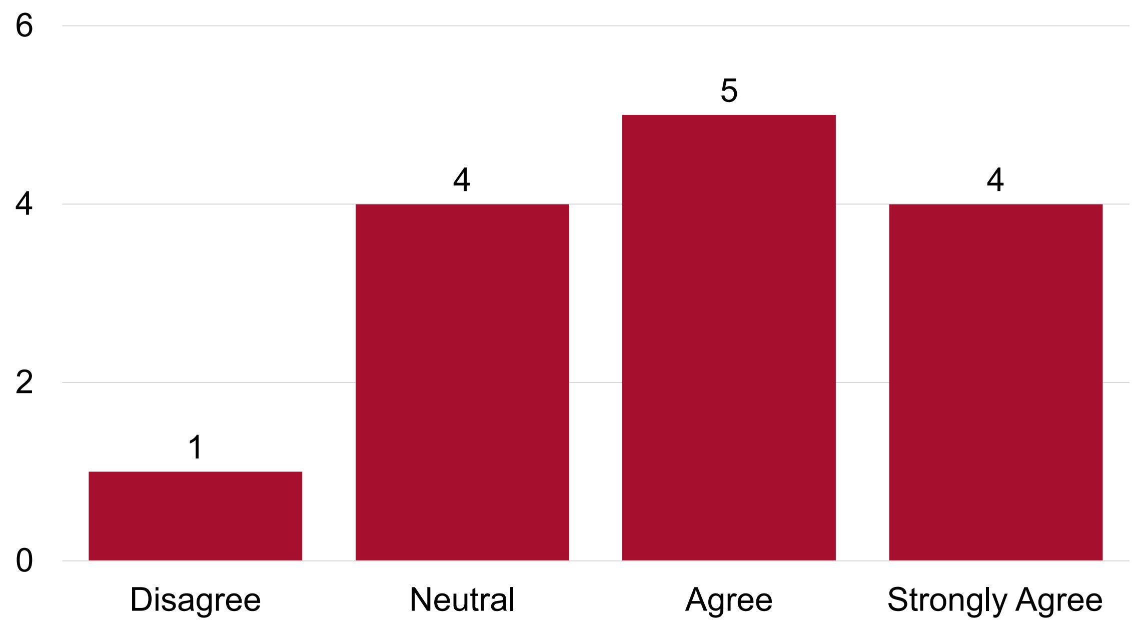


Other Grant Funding

The third section of the survey asked respondents about other grant funding they had received prior to RFSP—particularly from USDA's FMPP and LFPP programs—and how RFSP funding might influence future grant opportunities. Slightly more than half of respondents (14 of 23, 60.8%) reported having received an FMPP, an LFPP, or both prior to their RFSP grant.

The survey asked respondents who had received previous funding how prior FMPP and/or LFPP funding contributed to the success of their RFSP project. Figure C-9 shows that of the 14 respondents who had received prior funding, a clear majority (9, 40.9%) agreed or strongly agreed that prior funding had contributed to RFSP project success. Only one respondent disagreed, while the remaining four remained neutral.

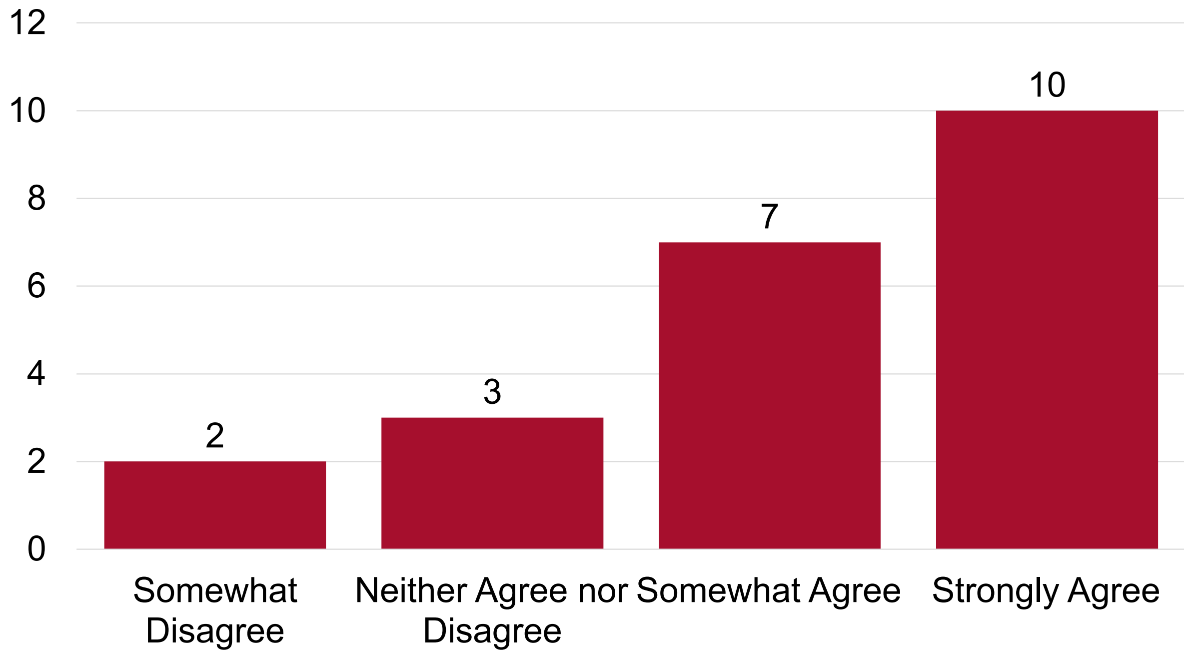
Figure C-9: Level of Agreement Regarding Significance of Prior Funding to RFSP Success



The survey asked all respondents how receiving RFSP funding prepared their organization for applying for future grants and whether their RFSP project had improved their chances of receiving future grant funding from other programs (including FMPP and LFPP). Just under half (11, 47.8%) reported that RFSP funding helped establish partnerships and networks that would be helpful for future grants, while eight identified experience and knowledge gained during their RFSP projects as likely to help with future funding efforts.

When asked about future funding probability, a strong majority of respondents (17) agreed or strongly agreed that their RFSP experience increased the likelihood of securing future funding, while 3 were neutral and 2 somewhat disagreed.

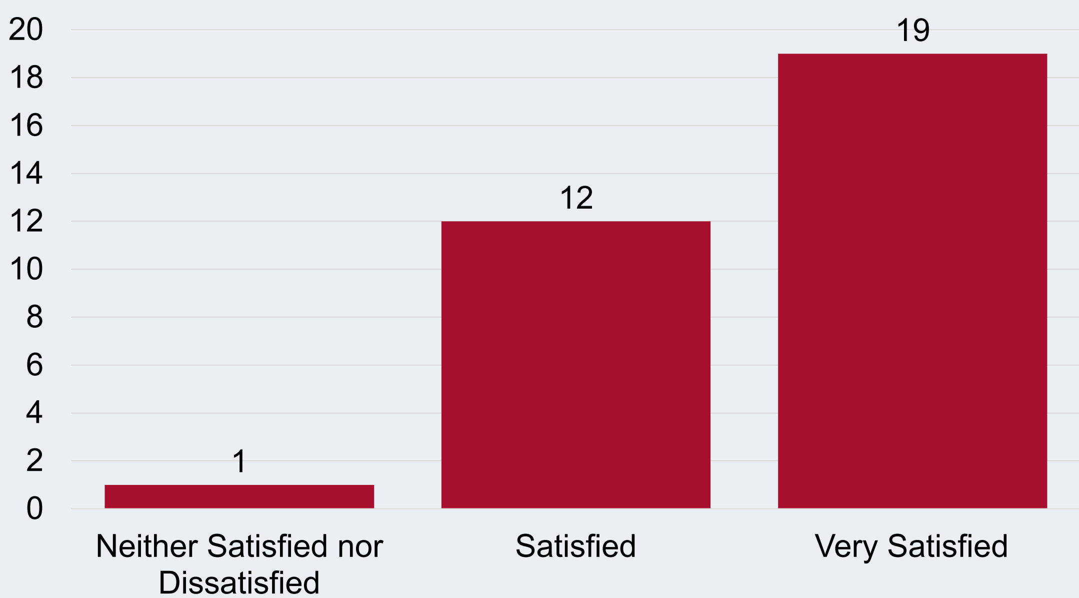
Figure C-10: Agreement on RFSP Improving Future Grant Funding Chances



Opinions on RFSP Grant Program

The final survey section asked respondents to reflect on the RFSP grant program and provide their opinions on it based on their project experiences. Respondents answered questions about their overall level of satisfaction with the program, whether they were likely to recommend it to others, strengths and weaknesses of the program they could identify, and challenges they encountered. As Figure C-11 shows, respondents were overwhelmingly satisfied with the RFSP grant program, with 19 reporting they were very satisfied, 12 satisfied, and 1 neither satisfied nor dissatisfied.

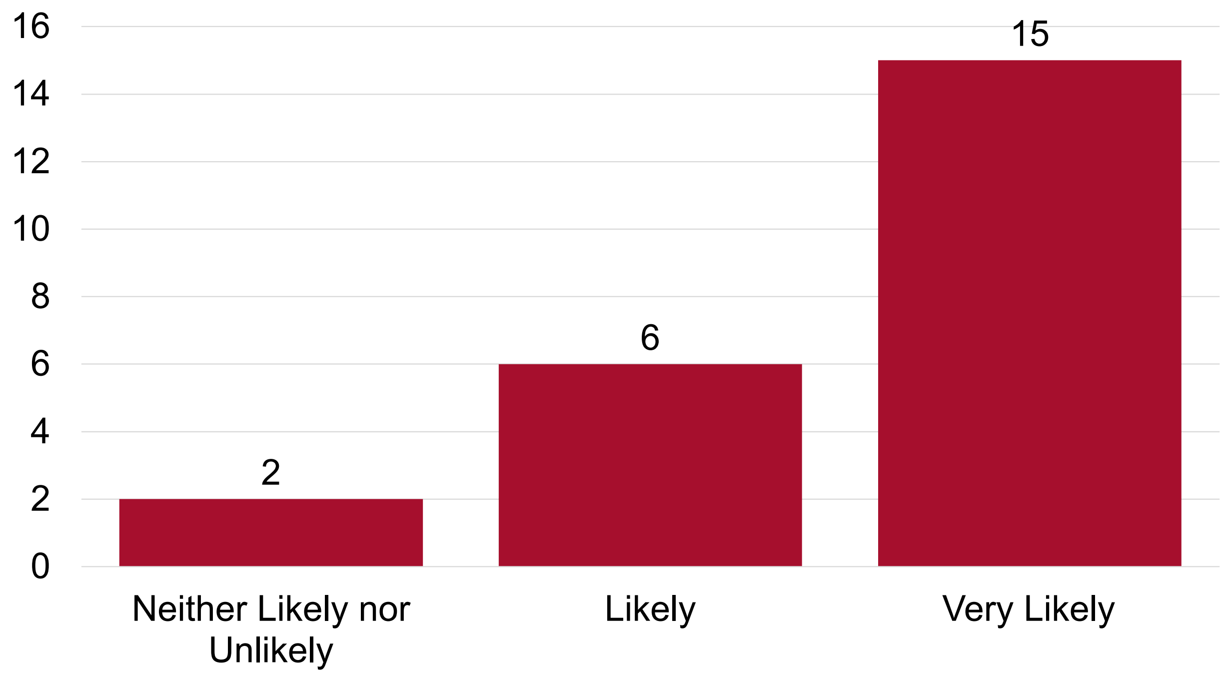
Figure C-11: Level of Satisfaction with RFSP Program



Opinions on RFSP Grant Program

Likewise, Figure C-12 shows that respondents are overwhelmingly likely to recommend the RFSP grant program to others, with 15 reporting they were very likely, 6 likely, and 2 neither likely nor unlikely. No respondents indicated they were unlikely to recommend the program.

Figure C-12: Likelihood of Recommending RFSP Grant Program to Others



Respondents also answered open-ended questions about their thoughts on the strengths and weaknesses of the RFSP program. One of the major strengths identified by most respondents was the program's focus on building partnerships and collaboration. One respondent noted that RFSP "is one of the few funding sources that funds partnership building," a feature "essential to food systems development work" that is otherwise difficult to find in other funding sources.

Another strength noted by some respondents was that the program helped with long-term planning and scalability, which, as one respondent wrote, "does not happen often" with these kinds of funding programs. Another notable strength included the program staff, whom respondents praised highly, asserting that "USDA staff we interacted with were excellent – they were very knowledgeable, thoughtful, responsive, and worked hard on our behalf."

Respondents also pointed out weaknesses in the program, with several highlighting application and reporting burdens as their primary concern. Respondents variously noted the application process was "difficult," "convoluted," "tough," or "so intense…that it precludes many organizations with limited capacity from participating". Likewise, some respondents reported that the post-award reporting process was "intensive," "complex," "onerous," and "a burden." One respondent wrote that the portal for reporting was unintuitive and time consuming, and another claimed that requesting changes to the plan was so challenging that these requests were often delayed or set aside altogether to avoid the hassle.

Other concerns expressed by respondents included the partnership size required by the grant, which spread limited funding thin and made it difficult to achieve partner buy-in, as well as general concerns about lack of funding. One respondent noted that although the program aimed to support Tribal communities, its definition of allowable food costs did not align with Tribal use. This respondent noted that this disconnect "does not encourage Indigenous communities to create partnership around food". Another respondent pointed out that the program was too focused on farms at the expense of seafood, making the application and reporting process for seafood-related projects like fitting "a square peg in a round hole."

Figure C-13 presents the results of the final survey question, which asked respondents to identify specific grant administration challenges. Earlier open-ended responses indicated that application and administration issues were common, and this question reaffirmed those concerns. The top four challenges were led by the complex application process, identified by 10 of 23 respondents (43%). The second most frequent challenge was a lack of clarity in grant guidelines, reported by seven respondents. "Other" challenges—primarily issues with the online portal, reporting difficulties, or partner-related administrative barriers—were selected by six respondents. Challenges in grantor policies were reported by 4 respondents. Finally, five respondents indicated that they encountered no administrative challenges.

Figure C-13: Grant Administration Challenges Experienced