

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

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



What is RFSP?

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 both Planning and Design grants and Implementation and Expansion grants, RFSP supports projects that build partnerships, expand market opportunities for producers, and invest in long-term food system resilience.

How Was this Evaluation Conducted?

This evaluation used Ripple Effects Mapping (REM) and online survey data. A random sample was drawn from 88 RFSP projects funded between 2020 and 2022, and REM sessions were conducted with 10 projects in 2024 and 2025 with a total of 95 participants. An online survey was also administered to all RFSP projects funded between 2020 and 2024, resulting in 23 responses (23.9% response rate).

Core Finding: RFSP's Effectiveness is Linked to Its Emphasis on Partnerships

The overarching finding of this study is that RFSP's emphasis on partnerships was critical to project success, including the achievement of project goals and broader social, financial, and skills-based outcomes. Participants consistently described how the RFSP Planning and Design grant provided time and funding to build regional networks and engage in meaningful planning.

RFSP allowed partners to structure collaborations in ways informed by local values and culture, filling gaps in the food system and establishing a strong foundation for growing and sustaining regional food systems into the future.

Program Impacts Across Regional Food Systems



Stronger Collaboration and Resilience

- Expanded cross-sector partnerships rooted in trust and reciprocity.
- Successful coordination following unexpected closures of suppliers and distributors.
- Greater volunteer mobilization and community participation.



Partnership-Driven Funding, Market Access, and Investment

- Successful grant applications.
- Increased producer access to new markets.
- Investments in distribution, processing, branding, and more.



Skills and Leadership

- Hands-on training, farm tours, and food education.
- Emergence of local leaders as recognized experts.





How RFSP Program Design Supports Success



Longer Planning Timelines

- Two-year planning periods allowed partners to build trust and plan strategically.



RFSP “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.”

REM Participant



The RFSP planning year allowed us to “design a network based on true collaboration and build a foundation and framework for the network built on trust.”

REM Participant

What Helped Partnerships Succeed

Intentional Network Design

- Successful projects prioritized building networks that elevate many voices rather than relying on a few lead organizations. Described by one participant as “a network of constellations, not stars.”

Critical Connectors

- Trusted individuals bridged organizations, maintained communication, and helped expand networks and funding opportunities.

Skilled Facilitation and Event Planning

- Skilled facilitators brought diverse partners together and kept networks moving forward. Projects that had staff or leaders experienced in facilitation, along with resources for event planning, were able to build stronger and more resilient partnerships.

Survey results indicate strong overall success: most respondents rated their projects successful (12) or very successful (7); three were neutral, and one reported an unsuccessful project.

PROJECTS REPORTING SUCCESS ACROSS KEY OUTCOMES (SURVEY RESULTS)

