Wisconsin Rural Partnerships Institute Call for Pre-Proposals

For any faculty or staff member at UW-Madison, the Fall 2026 Rural Partnerships Institute grant program is a collaborative initiative bringing together UW-Madison, Division of Extension with expertise in other units on campus and rural partners. The program offers up to $250,000 to support short-term, high-impact research and/or programming that improves the lives of rural Wisconsinites.

Wisconsin Rural Partnerships Institute (RPI) is a United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) funded initiative that funds projects designed to benefit rural residents and communities in Wisconsin. RPI has facilitated community-based research, extension, and education projects that engage diverse stakeholders throughout the state. The Fall 2026 program is aimed at timely research and outreach to address the priorities of rural stakeholders, tribal nations, and USDA-NIFA that can be executed by the end of 2027.*

To be eligible, projects must (1) include at least one faculty or staff member with an Extension appointment (including joint appointments and Extension-funded positions in CALS, SoHE, or L&S), (2) involve a multidisciplinary team of faculty or staff spanning at least two departments/units, (3) demonstrate community engagement and partnership such as with an external stakeholder (e.g a county government, a rural or rural-serving organization, tribal nation, etc.), and (4) address at least one issue identified by rural stakeholders (**see additional information below**). Projects that also address a USDA priority area will receive additional consideration (**also listed with additional information below**). Projects can be research-oriented, outreach-oriented, student-oriented, or hybrid. We invite proposals for groundbreaking problem definition, programs that pilot solutions or create new opportunities, and combined scholarship-practice initiatives. Teams should choose the approach that best fits their goals and the needs of their community partners. Projects should begin February 2027 and end in December 2027.*

To apply, please enter the following pre-proposal information into this google form (https://go.wisc.edu/k86b5y) by end of day **December 18, 2026.**

- Project Title
- Project Lead and Team (names, titles, affiliations)
- Rural community or tribal nation partner organizations/stakeholders
- Provide a brief description of your idea identifying the research question, outreach activity, or educational component (maximum 3 pages)
- How does this idea contribute to one or more of the priority themes? (maximum 1 page)
- What sector of the rural or tribal community will benefit and what will the overall impact be? (maximum 1 page)
- What specific future funding opportunities would be enabled by RPI support?
- Approximate budget (maximum 1 page)

The total budget for this phase of RPI funding is ~ $1.3M total funding. Project teams may request up to $250,000, however, participants should keep in mind that we hope to support multiple innovative projects that impact rural Wisconsin during the funding period.

The RPI leadership team will review the pre-proposals and request a more detailed full proposal on/before December 18 from selected applicants with the goal of making funding decisions and transferring funds to project teams by the end of January 2027. Projects will be evaluated in the following categories:

- Match with one or more rural/USDA priorities
- Potential for impact in rural Wisconsin
- Strong rural or tribal partner engagement
- Soundness and innovation of the idea/program
- Multidisciplinary nature of the work
- Size of Impact / sectors affected
- Prospects for future funding

**Please note that funding 1) depends on the USDA fulfilling the terms of our current RPI award and 2) if awarded, funding may be extended into 2028.*

Additional Information:

Rural Stakeholder-Identified Issues

- Workforce development
- Community/tribal economic development
- Attracting workers to rural and tribal communities
- Rural housing issues
- Rural daycare availability
- Quality of K-12 education
- Other quality of life issues
- Leadership development
- Civic engagement and volunteerism
- Preparing farmers, tribal land managers, and their workforce for emerging issues (AI, digital agriculture, automation, response to changing climate)
- Ground and surface water and other environmental quality issues
- Forest management for recreation and forest products
- Health and nutrition, including:
    - Access to health care

    - Mental health
    - Supporting local food systems to create markets for local producers and improved nutrition in rural and tribal communities

USDA Funding Priorities, which must address rural aspects of the following:

- **Increasing Farmer and Rancher Profitability:** Reducing volatility for producers, lowering input costs (like fertilizer and chemicals), improving water efficiency, advancing mechanization and automation (including AI and precision agriculture) to solve labor shortages.
- **Expanding Markets and Creating New Uses:** Developing new export markets, removing international trade barriers, and increasing domestic demand through the creation of biobased products and biofuels.
- **Promoting Soil Health:** Long-term land productivity is encouraged to regenerate the soil, sustain high yields, and reduce reliance on synthetic inputs.
- **Protecting American Agriculture:** Biosecurity to mitigate threats posed by invasive pests and animal diseases.
- **Precision Nutrition:** Connecting agricultural commodities directly to consumer health outcomes and food quality.

If you have questions about the submission process, contact Travis Olson (travis.olson@wisc.edu). If you have questions about the scope or structure of proposals, please feel free to contact Glenda Gillaspy(glenda.gillaspy@wisc.edu) or Tessa Conroy (tessa.conroy@wisc.edu).