



*County of Sonoma*

# **Climate Resilience Comprehensive Action Plan**

# **Community Engagement Strategy**

*August 2024*



## Introduction

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The County of Sonoma (County) has long recognized the importance of community engagement in addressing climate change and building resilience. A rich history of community involvement, documented in various planning documents and reports shaped the County's proactive approach. While community engagement has been intentional, historically, folks most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change engaged minimally with planning processes. This data reflects a large opportunity and a stark reality that planning processes do not center climate justice, reparative planning, or racial equity. CARD recognized that equitable engagement requires resources to support climate justice communities and intends to continue community engagement over the next year to substantiate the Community Progress measures with input from climate justice communities. This section outlines the historic landscape of community engagement in Sonoma County, describes an equitable and comprehensive strategy for ensuring that community members are involved in climate resilience efforts, and outlines methods for incorporating equity and justice into future community engagement practices.

## Centering Climate Equity and Justice

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Equity and justice are central to effective community engagement. Ensuring that all community members, especially those from climate vulnerable and climate justice communities, have a voice in climate resilience efforts is critical and takes necessary steps to address historic harms. The County's strategy will incorporate the following principles:

- EQUITABLE AND INCLUSIVE REPRESENTATION
- UPLIFT ANTI-RACIST PRACTICES
- TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

These principles, as further explained below, will continue to center climate justice communities in climate planning efforts, and create a more resilient, equitable, and sustainable Sonoma County.



## Equitable and Inclusive Representation

Equitable and inclusive representation begins with targeted outreach to communities that are excluded, intentionally or unintentionally, in climate resilience and climate justice discussions. This includes low-income neighborhoods, communities of color, agricultural workers, unhoused communities, indigenous populations, and non-English speaking community members. Tailored engagement efforts, such as culturally relevant outreach materials and events held in accessible locations, will ensure that these communities are actively involved. Collaborating with community leaders and organizations that have established trust within these groups will help bridge gaps and build connections.

Developing culturally relevant engagement strategies that respect and incorporate the values, traditions, and knowledge of diverse communities must be a priority. This involves not only translating materials into multiple languages but also adapting engagement approaches to reflect cultural norms and practices. For instance, using storytelling and oral histories can be an effective way to communicate climate resilience information in communities where these methods are valued. Additionally, hosting events and meetings at times and locations that are convenient for community members, and providing childcare and transportation assistance, can remove barriers to participation.

## Uplift Anti-Racist Practices

Addressing disparities involves ensuring equitable resource allocation. Resources for climate resilience, such as funding, technical assistance, and educational materials, will be distributed equitably, with priority given to communities most vulnerable to climate impacts. This could include providing grants and support for resilience projects in low-income neighborhoods, ensuring that technical assistance is available to organizations serving climate justice communities, and developing educational materials that are accessible and relevant to diverse audiences. Equitable resource allocation also means recognizing and addressing historical and systemic inequalities that have made certain communities more vulnerable to climate change, and actively working to address this harm with a reparative lens.

Building local capacity by investing in the capacity of trusted local organizations and leaders from climate vulnerable communities will enable these groups to effectively participate in and lead resilience efforts. This can include offering training programs on climate science, resilience planning, and community organizing, as well as providing support for grant writing and project management. By empowering local leaders and organizations, the County can help build a network of informed and engaged community members who can drive resilience efforts from within their own communities.

## Transparency and Accountability

Transparency and accountability will be maintained through open, equitable decision-making processes. The County will provide clear information about how decisions are made and how community input is used. Publicizing meeting agendas, minutes, and outcomes will build trust and accountability with communities most impacted by climate change. Regular reporting and feedback mechanisms will ensure that community members have the opportunity to provide feedback and see how their input influences outcomes for climate resilience and justice efforts. This transparency helps build trust and ensures that the community feels heard and respected.

## Engagement Context

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The foundation of the County's community engagement has developed and evolved over the last two decades. In particular, substantial effort and dedication over the last 10 years in establishing more inclusive engagement practices. Wildfire and other disasters, including the pandemic, exposed gaps in communication and understanding that the County has taken active steps to remedy.

In the wake of the 2017 Sonoma Complex Fires, the County established an Office of Recovery and Resiliency. The Office created a Recovery and Resiliency Framework with social equity as a core principle. The Board of Supervisors approved the Framework and further embedded equity in County operations and services by dedicating one of five Strategic Plan pillars to Racial Equity and Social Justice, and by creating an Office of Equity.

The overarching goal of the Racial Equity and Social Justice pillar is to “achieve racial equity in County service provision and ensure a workforce reflective of the community we serve.”

The pillar has four goals:

1. Foster a County organizational culture that supports the commitment to achieving racial equity.
2. Implement strategies to make the County workforce reflect County demographic across all levels.
3. Ensure racial equity throughout all County policy decisions and service delivery.
4. Engage community members and stakeholder groups to develop priorities and to advance racial equity.



In support of Goal 4, the Board invested American Rescue Plan Act resources to develop a Community Engagement Plan to provide clarity in expectations and responsibilities, as well as guidance on best practices on the County’s community engagement efforts. The Office of Equity followed an equity-driven planning and implementation process to study existing community engagement efforts at the County and in comparable jurisdictions, review models for County community engagement and partnerships, and aid in the development of a robust community engagement strategy for the County.

As a first step, the Board endorsed the Community Engagement Toolkit developed by the Office of Equity. A key takeaway from the Toolkit is a definition of “a culturally responsive framework for community engagement [as] one that “affirms the worth and preserves the dignity of individuals, families and communities” (NAMI California, 2020) by being responsive to the needs, wisdom, and ways of being and knowing of community members who are marginalized by traditional engagement processes.” (County of Sonoma Office of Equity Community Engagement Toolkit, 2024).

Guided by the framework “Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership” by Rosa González, the Community Engagement Toolkit provides examples of engagement practices that promote organizational culture shifts. It includes an accountability framework to help create the organizational systems needed to conduct culturally responsive community engagement.



Community engagement during the development of the Climate Plan worked to bring in voices from the margins and responsively shape the measures in the Climate Plan. Based on knowledge gained during this process, the County understands that deeper engagement with more communities is necessary before the County can prioritize actions it can take to support climate resilience progress by and in communities.

## Climate Plan Engagement to Date

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The development of the Climate Plan included new outreach and engagement with communities through different avenues. It also relied on the engagement done for key climate-related strategies, plans and programs that the Climate Plan rests on.

To inform the development of the Climate Plan, the County collaborated with agencies and affiliated community-based organizations/partners (CBO/Ps) to engage with communities on climate change efforts and resiliency work. The Regional Climate Protection Authority's Climate Mobilization Strategy was developed with extensive input from residents, businesses, and local organizations to unify climate resilience efforts across jurisdictions. Public workshops, surveys, and stakeholder meetings were integral to shaping the strategy. Additionally, two countywide plans provided critical data and guidance on climate-related hazards and efforts: the Sonoma County Multi-Jurisdictional Hazard Mitigation Plan (MJHMP) and the Climate Resilient Lands Strategy.

The MJHMP provided current and projected future data on climate hazard-related emergencies, including dam failure, drought, earthquake, flooding, landslide/mass movement, sea level rise, severe weather, tsunami, and wildfire. The MJHMP not only increased public awareness of hazards that threaten health and safety, but also provided a decision tool for County of Sonoma leaders to take action on addressing vulnerabilities. The MJHMP involved the collaboration of many jurisdictions with the County of Sonoma, including the City of Santa Rosa, City of Cotati, Town of Windsor, City of Sonoma, Departments and Divisions within County of Sonoma, Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District, Sonoma Resource Conservation District, Gold Ridge Resource Conservation District, Timber Cove Fire Protection District, Northern Sonoma County Fire Protection District, North Sonoma Coast Fire Protection District, and Cloverdale Fire Protection District.

The Climate Resilience Lands Strategy evaluated the effect of climate hazards on natural and working lands in Sonoma County. The engagement process during its development included gathering insight and input from community members, agricultural workers, farmers, County agencies, community-based organization, community advocacy groups, and businesses that reside in Sonoma County. The engagement process took place from 2021 to 2022, when the report was adopted by the Board of Supervisors. This process included town halls, focus group conversations, one-on-one interviews, surveys, and public workshops to inform the development of the report.

In addition, the five federally recognized Tribal Nations in Sonoma County graciously consulted with the County regarding climate resilience land management concerns, which informed approaches in the Strategy. Many of the recommendations and project concepts were developed in close collaboration with community members throughout the County, Tribal Nations, and local government entities. In particular, the Strategy recommends the County establish a Climate Resilient Lands working group to advise on priority actions and

project development, coordination, and funding. The Strategy also recommends convening a regular forum for Tribal partners to consult with the County on land management for climate resilience and related issues. The insight and priorities communicated during these meetings resulted in the inclusion of specific measures in the Climate Plan.

The County also considered the recommendations of community committees on the Regional Climate Protection Authority's 2022-23 Climate Protection Initiative and the 2023 Community Wildfire Protection Plan, among others. Staff also reviewed survey results collected for the update to the Safety Element of the General Plan.

Community engagement for the Climate Plan was iterative and incorporated different modes of engagement. Materials, interviews, focus groups, surveys, and meetings were offered in English and Spanish. Engagement activities were also designed to support interaction by people with different communication needs and preferences – with community input accepted verbally, written on notes, by dropping tokens in jars, anonymously through surveys, via polling at meetings, and also through email.

In preparing this Climate Plan, the County tabled 13 community-facing events throughout 2024 in Sonoma County, sharing information and offering activities that allowed people of all ages to learn about climate resilience and provide their perspectives on what the County should focus on in its plan. The County used the events as an opportunity to engage community members about the CR-CAP. More than 700 people engaged with County staff during these events. During the community engagement events, the County presented two interactive activities. The first asked participants to prioritize their concerns. Community members took three gems and dropped them into different jars labeled with climate topics like water, waste, wildfire, etc., to answer the following question: "What three themes should be prioritized in the Comprehensive Action Plan?" The results of this exercise, with close to 400 participants, indicated the top priority was water, followed by natural and working lands and wildfire. The second activity asked participants to offer solutions. Community members wrote out ideas to address different climate topics by answering the question: "How can we support communities to become climate resilient?" From this exercise, with more than 200 participants, the category of waste received the most comments, followed by natural and working lands and transportation. The engagement opportunities, while informative and intentional, require substantial follow-up engagement with communities most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.

Over the last year, the County also reached out to communities across Sonoma County through two surveys and a virtual Climate Resilience Town Hall meeting that was held in the evening. This outreach invited people to share their climate questions, concerns and priorities, and the opportunities they are interested in having the County explore. CARD received 90 written comments, questions, and suggestions following the Town Hall. In addition, two workshops with the Board of Supervisors provided another venue for people to learn about the County's progress implementing the goals and objectives of the Climate Action and Resiliency pillar of the Strategic Plan, hear the policy considerations for the developing Climate Plan, and offer input.

Finally, the County engaged a third party to conduct interviews with community members and community-based organizations. A total of 40 interviews were conducted with community members, leaders, and organizations representing a diverse set of backgrounds and perspectives. Interviews were conducted in English and in Spanish. Many of the participants spoke about wildfires and the disparate impacts experienced during and after the fires of 2017, 2019, and 2020. Impacts noted were the added challenges that non-English speaking communities had accessing information about the fires, about evacuation shelters and resources, and about recovery support. Participants also mentioned the challenges farmworkers and other blue-collar workers have avoiding smoke exposure and the pressure some feel to work in hazardous conditions such as during active fires, high heat events, and in heavy smoke. Housing challenges were mentioned by a number of participants as a necessary element for resilience. In addition, participants shared frustrations about the lack of culturally relevant information about climate resilience and many expressed a desire for expanded outreach and education to support better understanding of how resilience measures (like energy efficiency upgrades, or renewable energy) could benefit them. Many participants in the interviews and in other engagement forums spoke about the importance of relying on trusted community voices to reach marginalized communities, and to create a safe space for community members to engage with new ideas.

A recurring theme of the comments received was the need for deeper engagement with individual communities, especially those that have historically not had access to climate resilience policymaking. Respondents and commenters repeatedly underscored the need to leverage trusted community leaders and advocates in designing and implementing equity-centered engagement for climate resilience, and that resources need to be provided to support that work. As a direct result of this input, the County designed a Community Engagement Strategy to Promote Climate Justice.

## Engagement Strategy for Community Climate Resilience

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Through this strategy, the County seeks to develop a clearer understanding of the climate resilience needs, priorities, barriers, and opportunities of diverse communities across Sonoma County, with a focus on unincorporated, underserved, under-resourced, and historically marginalized communities. The result of the engagement will be prioritized recommendations to the Board of Supervisors for future County actions to advance equitable climate resilience in Sonoma County communities. In addition, the County will seek to establish a forum for respectful collaboration and information sharing with representatives of the tribal governments in Sonoma County.



## Climate Equity Centered Engagement with Communities

The County will implement a yearlong equitable community engagement process to develop a clearer understanding of the climate resilience needs, priorities, barriers, and opportunities of diverse communities across Sonoma County, with a focus on unincorporated, underserved, under-resourced, and historically marginalized communities. Rather than simply seeking input on candidate measures and actions to promote community climate resilience progress, this engagement will focus on developing a greater understanding of how needs, priorities, barriers, and opportunities differ in communities across Sonoma County. This will require community engagement that is deeper in conversation and wider in reach, recognizing that communities on the coast may have different concerns and constraints than communities in the central Santa Rosa Plain, or in the wildland-urban interface of the coastal ranges and Mayacamas mountains. Similarly, residents in low-income communities may have different concerns and constraints, as might different occupational sectors; for example, farm-owners, farmworkers, businesses in the hospitality sector, and those who own or work in shops or construction businesses may each have unique challenges and opportunities. This engagement work will promote a clearer picture of these different needs and priorities to help the County prioritize the work and the resources it devotes to supporting equitable climate resilience progress in communities across Sonoma County.

### **PARTNERSHIPS FOR EFFECTIVE ENGAGEMENT:**

The County will coordinate on engagement efforts with RCPA and SCTA, cities, Sonoma Clean Power, and government partners who are undertaking climate resilience community engagement initiatives. The County will also partner with the RCDs to ensure effective engagement with farmers, ranchers, and landowners, and will seek opportunities to work with local labor, trade, and business groups.

The strategy includes an advisory committee of community-based organizations and leaders that will guide and help conduct engagement in diverse communities. The County will solicit members for the advisory group, and will provide stipends supporting their work as advisory committee members.

### **TRUSTED COMMUNITY VOICES:**

Partnerships with local organizations are vital, as evidenced through community engagement efforts throughout the last three years. CBO/Ps have earned the community's trust through years of dedicated service and engagement. The County can ensure that information about climate policies, resilience initiatives, and opportunities for public involvement reaches climate justice communities through extensive collaboration with advisory group members. The advisory group can help tailor climate resilience messages to their specific audiences, ensuring that the information is relevant, digestible, and impactful. More importantly, the advisory group can inform CARD on how to most productively engage with communities and

can help CARD staff develop a broader and deeper understanding of the different climate resilience priorities, barriers, and opportunities in communities across Sonoma County.

**CULTURALLY SENSITIVE INFORMATION SHARING:**

Effective communication is a cornerstone for ensuring that all community members are equitably informed about climate change and resilience efforts. The County's strategy for culturally sensitive information revolves around leveraging the advisory committee as a group of trusted local organizations, utilizing diverse communication channels, and developing clear, accessible materials.

**DIVERSE COMMUNICATION CHANNELS:**

Utilizing diverse communication channels is crucial for reaching the entire community. Social media platforms like WhatsApp, newsletters from community groups and nonprofits, community meetings, and local media outlets will all play a role in spreading information on climate resilience resources. Social media is particularly effective for reaching younger audiences and providing timely updates, while newsletters can offer in-depth information and regular updates to subscribers. Community meetings allow for face-to-face interactions and the opportunity to address questions and concerns directly. Local media outlets, including newspapers, radio stations, and television, can help reach a broader audience, including those who may not be active online. The County will work with the advisory group to determine the best mediums for distributing information about events and general climate education resources.

**CLIMATE EDUCATION RESOURCES:**

Ensuring that information is accessible in multiple languages is a top priority. Providing information in multiple languages, like Spanish, Farsi, and Mandarin, creates space for non-English to engage on important conversations around climate resilience. County staff will work with the advisory group to translate informational materials, hire bilingual staff, and work with translators for live events and meetings. Accessibility also extends to ensuring that information is available in various formats, such as written documents, videos, infographics, and audio recordings, so that people with different disabilities and preferences feel safe and comfortable to participate. The County and the advisory group will coordinate efforts to ensure that all communities have access to information in languages most comfortable for them.

Developing clear and concise materials is essential. The County and the advisory group will create easy-to-understand resources that explain the County's climate resilience goals, strategies, and the role of community members. These materials will cover key topics such as the impacts of climate change, the benefits of resilience efforts, and how communities can get involved. Visual aids, such as infographics and maps, will help convey complex information in an accessible way. These materials



will be translated as needed and distributed through advisory group members, public spaces such as libraries and community centers, and online platforms to maximize reach to those most impacted by climate change hazards.

Investing in these resources is crucial to ensure that all residents, regardless of language or socioeconomic status, have access to important information about climate resilience. Equitable information dissemination builds a foundation of awareness and understanding, which is necessary for fostering active participation and ongoing collaboration in climate resilience efforts. By leveraging the trusted community organizations on the advisory group, utilizing diverse communication channels, and developing clear, accessible materials, the County can ensure that all residents are well-informed and prepared to contribute to building a resilient future.

**OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTIVE PARTICIPATION:**

Active participation ensures that the climate resilience strategies developed are not only effective but also reflective of the community's needs and priorities. The County will work with the advisory group to foster active participation, which includes hosting interactive workshops and town halls, facilitating focus groups and listening sessions, and publishing digital media content.

**WORKSHOPS AND TOWN HALLS:**

Interactive workshops and town halls are pivotal for engaging residents directly. These events provide opportunities for community members to learn about climate resilience efforts, ask questions, and offer feedback. The County and TAC members will host these events in every District throughout Sonoma County to ensure that climate resilience information is accessible to all community members, including those in rural and climate change vulnerable regions. Town halls can be designed to be interactive, featuring presentations from experts, panel discussions, and breakout sessions for small group discussions. This format allows for a two-way exchange of information, where residents can voice their concerns and suggestions while also gaining a deeper understanding of the issues at hand.

**FOCUS GROUPS AND LISTENING SESSIONS:**

Facilitating focus groups and listening sessions with diverse community segments is crucial for capturing a wide range of perspectives. Many of these sessions will be focused on climate justice communities, such as low-income neighborhoods, communities of color, disabled communities, unhoused individuals, agricultural workers, frontline communities, and non-English speaking residents. By creating safe and welcoming spaces for these groups to share their experiences and insights, the County can identify specific needs and concerns that might otherwise be overlooked. These focus groups and listening sessions, primarily led by advisory group members, will be instrumental in ensuring that resilience strategies are inclusive and equitable. The County will also look to hold events in a diversity of geographic locations, recognizing that climate hazards have different impacts in different parts of Sonoma



County, and that communities in these areas may have different concerns, needs, and opportunities. The County will also leverage opportunities to meet with business groups, trade and labor organizations, and alliances, schools, clubs, and other convenings to further expand the breadth of perspectives that will inform actions supporting community progress on climate resilience.

### **ONGOING COLLABORATION:**

Sustained collaboration with community members is crucial for building long-term resilience. Ongoing collaboration ensures that climate resilience efforts are dynamic, responsive, and continuously improving based on community input and evolving circumstances. The County's approach to fostering ongoing collaboration includes developing community-based partnerships, supporting grassroots initiatives, and implementing a system for monitoring and evaluating engagement efforts.

Developing community-based partnerships will strengthen collaborations with local organizations, businesses, schools, and other groups. These partnerships can be joint projects, co-hosted events, and collaborative research. Community-based partnerships are effective because they leverage the strengths and resources of multiple organizations, creating synergies that enhance the overall impact of resilience efforts. Supporting grassroots initiatives by providing funding and technical assistance will empower local leaders and innovators. Grassroots initiatives often have unique insights and solutions that complement broader strategies. By offering grants and technical support, the County can enable these initiatives to scale up and reach more community members. Supporting these initiatives not only enhances resilience but also fosters a sense of empowerment and agency among community members.

## **Inviting Consultation with Tribal Representatives**

Following up on the recommendations from consultation with tribes during the development of the Climate Resilient Lands Strategy, the County will invite local tribal leaders to consult regarding the development of a working forum for the County and local tribes to discuss shared interests in climate resilient land management, opportunities to expand collaboration and coordination in land management activities, and other climate resilience issues of mutual interest. The goal of this consultation will be to agree on the structure and operation of the working forum, what scope and objectives it should address, and other issues to support a successful shared engagement. The County would also welcome opportunities to meet with tribal members, in a manner they find comfortable, to broaden and deepen the County's understanding of their perspectives, goals, and priorities for climate resilience on their lands, in their lives, and across Sonoma County.

## Implementation Timeline

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The County intends to solicit members for the advisory group in October 2024 with applications due before the end of the calendar year. The advisory group will begin meeting by March, 2025, reviewing a refining the Engagement Strategy. Engagement activities will begin in April or May and run through the Fall of 2025. Engagement will be coordinated with Permit Sonoma, RCPA, and Sonoma Clean Power to maximize reach and minimize duplication. With input from the advisory group, the County will prepare an initial draft of prioritized measures and actions that would support community climate resilience progress, and with the advisory group will solicit comments from communities on the draft and refine the prioritized measures and actions. The prioritized measures and actions will be presented to the Board in the Fall of 2026.

## Conclusion

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The County's commitment to community engagement in climate resilience is rooted in a history of collaborative efforts and a recognition of the diverse needs and perspectives within the community. By leveraging trusted local organizations, utilizing diverse communication channels, and fostering active participation and ongoing collaboration, the County can ensure that all residents are informed and involved in building a resilient future. Incorporating equity and justice into these efforts will help address disparities and empower all community members to contribute to and benefit from climate resilience initiatives. As the County moves forward, continued dedication to inclusive and effective community engagement will be essential for achieving a sustainable and resilient future for all.