



# Sonoma County Regional Climate Protection Authority

A White House Climate Action Champions Case Study

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## **Executive Summary**

The communities of Sonoma County are employing regional collaboration, innovative governance, and efficient use of resources to ensure that the benefit of climate action by individual entities is greater than if each city or the county tackled climate change alone. The Regional Climate Protection Authority, and its Climate Action 2020 project, are models for small and medium sized communities banding together to create value from solutions to climate change. This model helps overcome the disconnect between state and regional policy goals and the needs and capabilities of local communities. Our goal of connecting regional policy and local policy makes Sonoma County a model for other communities facing similar challenges.

## **Local Climate Action History**

Sonoma County communities have a tradition of strong leadership in stewardship of health and prosperity, proactive investment in infrastructure, and protection of agricultural and natural heritage. The local response to climate change is no exception; many leaders in business, government, and non-profits have recognized that action on climate must be swift and effective at scale in order to protect community health and prosperity long into the future. Ambitious greenhouse gas reduction targets have been the foundation of many actions in Sonoma County communities to date: in 2005, all ten local jurisdictions committed to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions to 25% below 1990 levels by 2015.

Many policies and programs have been deployed in Sonoma County communities to pursue these targets including Property Assessed Clean Energy (PACE) financing, Pay as You Save (PAYS®) on-bill repayment for resource efficiency, community choice energy, carbon-free water, electric vehicle fleets and infrastructure deployment, green building code, and more. Residents and businesses have integrated energy and water-use efficiency, renewables, waste reduction, and other sustainability strategies into their homes and businesses.

## **Local Climate Action Challenges**

However, despite many early actions and success in achieving significant reductions below historic levels, it is clear that emissions will rise again without further actions. Population growth, economic growth, housing pressures, social disparities, and aging infrastructure are exacerbating challenges in meeting local climate action goals.

The local impacts of climate change are accelerating. Average monthly maximum temperatures are steadily rising, as is the annual number of extreme heat days. The multi-year drought has been punctuated by extreme precipitation events and flooding. Wildfires in Sonoma County and neighboring counties have caused historic impacts to landscapes and communities. People see and feel these trends, and many acknowledge the need to proactively respond to them. However, most people don't know where to get reliable information about local climate risks, what is happening on the ground, and how to address these risks most effectively.

To meet these challenges, the State of California has enacted a plan to reduce emissions through 2020 that will help Sonoma County Communities achieve local goals. The State's plan advances broad strategies that will reduce emissions in Sonoma County, but it also relies on reductions from community

level actions. Without a plan to understand how local actions can complement State actions, the communities of Sonoma County were navigating climate challenges without a map. This created difficulty for elected officials and staff in prioritizing actions, guiding growth in communities consistent with a climate smart vision, and ultimately in achieving GHG reduction targets. Efforts such as Climate Action 2020 were created to address these challenges and create a roadmap for GHG reduction in Sonoma County.

### **Climate Action Champion**

#### **The Regional Climate Protection Authority (RCPA)**

The Regional Climate Protection Authority (RCPA) was created by the ten local jurisdictions of Sonoma County – Cloverdale, Cotati, Healdsburg, Petaluma, Rohnert Park, Santa Rosa, Sebastopol, Sonoma, the Town of Windsor, and the County of Sonoma – in 2009. The primary purpose was to address these challenges collaboratively and efficiently by charging the RCPA to coordinate countywide efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions (GHGs) and become more resilient to climate change.

The RCPA is a local government agency overseen by a Board of elected officials from each jurisdiction, the same Board that oversees the Sonoma County Transportation Authority (SCTA). It actively partners with the SCTA and three other local and regional agencies that are responsible for essential aspects of local climate action: the Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District, Sonoma Clean Power, and the Sonoma County Water Agency.

The RCPA builds from SCTA capacity to collaborate on long term planning and oversee major capital projects to provide a forum for regional policy dialogue and a framework to pool and align resources. RCPA provides an opportunity for small actions to become collective and to coordinate regional policy in a way that would be impossible for local governments alone. It strives to support, expand, and replicate successful programs being implemented by members and partners, and to fill gaps in local climate response.

### **Project Spotlight**

#### **Climate Action 2020: Coordinated and Comprehensive Climate Action Planning**

Climate Action 2020, and beyond, is a regional program for Sonoma County communities to build a countywide framework for responding to climate change by identifying short term priority actions and establishing long term goals.

The project began in 2013 because each city and the County of Sonoma were in need of a roadmap to respond to climate challenges and the RCPA model afforded a way to develop one that was efficient, consistent, and comprehensive. The primary project goal is a communitywide climate action plan, governing ten local jurisdictions, that outlines the role of state, regional, and local actions to reduce emissions, prepare for climate impacts, and harness community co-benefits.

The project is being implemented by a team of planning staff from each of the ten jurisdictions, under the direction of the RCPA Board of elected officials. Input is being solicited from a community wide Stakeholder Advisory Group, public workshops, community group presentations, fair and event

outreach, and online survey platforms. The RCPA has managed project coordination between all of these stakeholders and technical consultants who were hired to support components of the project.

In addition, several community based organizations and non-profits contributed essential research to the project, including the Center for Climate Protection who authored a white paper on [Proven and Promising Climate Measures from U.S. Communities](#), the North Bay Climate Adaptation Initiative which authored a [Local Climate Hazards and Vulnerabilities Assessment](#), and Sonoma State University who is working with students to develop communication tools related to local climate action.

The regional approach allowed local governments to leverage their contributions to the RCPA (which range from \$1,700 to \$41,000 annually) into a \$1 million planning grant from the State’s Strategic Growth Council. This grant provides funding to support each members’ staff involvement, project management services from the RCPA, and technical deliverables and communications tools that are applicable to the entire county and customized for each community. Each RCPA member will emerge from the project with a roadmap for how to leverage state and regional programs, and how to focus on complimentary local actions that must occur at a city level.

**Building from Existing Programs**

Climate Action 2020 reveals that prior efforts have put Sonoma County communities well on their way towards local GHG targets. Emissions in Sonoma County are already about 8% lower than 1990 levels, but there is a long way to go to meet the near-term target of 25%, which has been extended to 2020.

Looking forward, state actions create a foundation for local actions, delivering over 50% of the reductions needed to achieve the local target. The rest will be achieved by strategies implemented by cities, the county, and countywide agencies like the RCPA, Sonoma Clean Power, the Sonoma County Water Agency, and the Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District. The project has identified 17 goals for local climate action and specific measures to advance them that can be carried out under local governance:

<b>Climate Action 2020 GHG Reduction Goals:</b>	9. Increase the capture & use of landfill methane
1. Increase energy efficiency	10. Increase water use efficiency
2. Increase renewable energy use	11. Increase recycled water & greywater use
3. Promote efficient land use	12. Increase the efficiency of water & wastewater systems
4. Increase electricity use for transportation	13. Increase renewable energy use in water & wastewater systems
5. Encourage alternative & active modes of transportation	14. Increase capture & use of methane from wastewater treatment
6. Increase the fuel efficiency of vehicles	15. Reduce emissions from livestock operations
7. Reduce idling of vehicles & equipment	16. Expand sustainable agricultural best practices
8. Increase solid waste diversion	17. Reduce emissions from new development

The local strategies identified to advance these goals will generate GHG reductions of over 700,000 metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent (MTCO2e) per year by 2020, enough for the communities of Sonoma County to achieve their regional target of 25% below 1990 levels.

## Preparing for Climate Impacts

The project also included the development of a roadmap to reduce vulnerability to local climate change hazards and bolster community readiness to face the unavoidable climate impacts already underway. Through a series of public conferences and stakeholder workshops, the RCPA and its partners were able to integrate goals for climate readiness into Climate Action 2020 as well:

<b>Climate Action 2020 Climate Readiness Goals:</b>	5. Protect coastal, bayside, and inland buffer zones
1. Promote healthy, safe communities	6. Promote food system security and agricultural climate preparedness
2. Protect water resources	7. Protect infrastructure: buildings, utility systems, and transportation systems
3. Promote a sustainable, climate-resilient economy	8. Increase emergency preparedness in anticipation of extreme events
4. Mainstream the use of climate projections in plans, designs, and budgets	9. Monitor the changing climate and its biophysical effects in real time

As with GHG reductions, many local actions are already underway to advance readiness goals. The RCPA and partners will be working to fill gaps in readiness in future years by developing and sharing local vulnerability assessment data products, supporting scenario planning, and pursuing funding to implement specific projects.

## Co-benefits for Sonoma County Communities

Implementing Climate Action 2020 will result in environmental and community benefits that go well beyond GHG emissions reductions. For example, many of the actions will improve public health by reducing air pollutants like ozone, carbon monoxide, and fine particulates. Measures to improve mobility and alternative modes of transportation will increase walking and biking, activities that substantially lower the risk of disease. Several GHG reduction measures directly target resource efficiency. Building energy and transportation actions will reduce electricity, natural gas, and gasoline usage, which can help lessen the impact to county businesses and residents from future energy cost increases. Reducing gasoline consumption also reduces dependence on foreign oil and the environmental impacts of oil exploration, production, and transportation. Recycling and waste diversion programs will also reduce material consumption and the need for landfill space. Water-use efficiency and conservation will continue to be vital as California struggles with an ongoing severe drought and adapts to the long-term hydrological effects of climate change. Resource efficiency and local energy programs drive job creation and utility cost savings that keep value in the local economy. Land use measures in the Climate Action Plan (CAP) will conserve natural resources and protect the long-term viability of natural and working landscapes in the county. Open space preservation also offers aesthetic and recreational benefits for community residents as well as habitat for native wildlife and plants.

## Ongoing challenges and lessons learned

The regional approach to Climate Action 2020 has been essential because the lift required to develop a comprehensive climate action strategy is large, and infeasible or inefficient for individual cities or

agencies to tackle alone. Moreover, the challenges of climate change extend beyond city limits, and must be handled regionally to be addressed effectively. The coordination brought by moving toward a regional planning model will be instrumental in syncing local action with regional programs.

The success of the planning approach will ultimately be determined by future GHG emissions levels. Program successes to date have been driven by early actors, voluntary actions, and creative but achievable policy decisions. To scale up strategies, communities will have to encourage much broader participation and tackle sources that are more difficult to address. Locally, transportation is both the largest source of emissions and the most difficult sector to address. Support from allies at regional, state, and federal levels, and private sector leaders will be needed to be successful in seeing low-carbon transportation at scale.

**Resources**

1. [www.sonomarcpa.org](http://www.sonomarcpa.org)
2. <http://sctainfo.org/>
3. <https://sonomacleanpower.org/>
4. <http://www.scwa.ca.gov/>
5. <http://www.sonomaopenspace.org/>

**Contacts**

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**Project Facts**

**Project Duration**

36 months

**Project Cost**

\$1,300,000

**Project Staff Required**

2 project management staff  
10 staff working group lead contacts

**Population Served**

495,000

**Community Type**

County and ten incorporated cities

**Partners**

- Sonoma Clean Power
- Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation & Open Space District
- Sonoma County Transportation Authority
- Sonoma County Water Agency
- Center for Climate Protection
- North Bay Climate Adaptation Initiative
- Sonoma State University

**Project Impact**

- New targets to reduce GHG emissions: 40% below 1990 levels by 2030 and 80% by 2050
- Local and regional measures identified to meet near term target of 25% below 1990 levels by 2020
- Annual GHG savings of over 700,000 MTCO<sub>2</sub>e with full implementation
- Adaptation goals identified
- Regional consistency across ten jurisdictions in approach to addressing climate change

**Project Costs and Funding**

*Climate Action 2020 was funded in part through a grant awarded by the California Strategic Growth Council as part of the Sustainable Communities Planning Grants and Incentives Program.*