

**1. Project Description:** Please give a short description of this project that will inspire a potential supporter or collaborator. Be specific: describe the approach you're taking and the results you want to accomplish. Specify here which of the Sector Strategies outlined in the Regional Roadmap, part 2 document your project aligns with most closely. (572/500 words)

The County of Mendocino Home Hardening Market & Workforce Analysis project is the first step in addressing the emerging market and employment sector for fire-resilient building and retrofitting, an industry that is highly underrepresented in the region. This involves identifying current needs, future opportunities, and barriers to growth to establish justification and catalyze the development of a skilled workforce to address the county's increasing wildfire resilience needs—while also creating economic opportunities that support low-income households and underserved communities. According to the California Department of Insurance's 2024 list of distressed counties, Mendocino County is considered distressed due to more than 20% of its homes being at a high fire risk, prompting a need to increase efforts to safeguard residents. Census data also indicates that a significant portion of the population lives in poverty (12.2%) with an employment rate nearly 10% lower than statewide (51.7%). As such, this grant will be key in unlocking larger-scale efforts that address both the region's wildfire resilience challenges and its economic disparities, offering a pathway that strengthens the community on multiple levels.

Project approach includes using qualitative and quantitative research and collaborative engagement to examine the current home hardening industry in Mendocino County and surrounding regions which will result in actionable insights for local stakeholders to guide decision-making, prioritize training and educational initiatives, address workforce gaps, foster partnerships, and enhance the region's ability to respond to wildfire risks through fire-resilient construction practices. Outcomes include (1) a Market Analysis report that considers the unique challenges faced by our rural communities, (2) a detailed Labor Market Projections report so future workforce demands can be met and investments justified, and (3) a Feasibility Study report for developing local training programs that create sustainable career pathways. Data findings will be shared and available for others in the region, establishing a replicable blueprint that can guide future efforts in other communities.

Work activities for each outcome include:

- **Market Analysis:** Conduct a demand analysis, assess the competitive landscape, develop a growth forecast, and conduct a rural needs assessment to identify the needs of communities most vulnerable to wildfire risk.
- **Labor Market Projections:** Identify and assess the current availability of industry professionals, evaluate workforce conditions via survey, identify skills gaps, and provide a forecast for labor demand.
- **Program Feasibility:** Assess the capacity of County educational institutions and nonprofits to design and deliver training programs, identify potential partnerships to develop and implement programs, and evaluate available resources to support workforce training.

The project aligns with Key Enabler 6 - Workforce Development by pursuing avenues to expand wildfire resilience in priority communities and creating pathways to skilled careers in home retrofitting, defensible space management, and fire-resistant construction. Under this sector, the project meets Strategy 2: Foster Regional Cooperation on Workforce Strategies through proposed cross-sectoral partnerships with Mendocino College, an identified Regional Asset per the RRRISE Regional Plan Part 2 (p. 144).

Mendocino County represents several priority populations per the program guidelines, including individuals that live in extremely remote/rural areas in the Redwood Coast Region, low-income households, non-English speaking households, Tribal Citizens, and 10 federally-recognized Tribal Governments. The County plans to engage these populations through targeted outreach, listening sessions, and online surveys to ensure equitable access to resources, collaboration in wildfire resilience planning, and culturally relevant engagement. As such, this project also aligns with Catalyst Fund Priority 2: Leadership from Priority Communities by seeking to expand and mobilize home hardening workforces across the county, including priority populations.

**2. Success:** How will you know your project is successful? What will measure to demonstrate impact? (e.g., Numbers of participants, completed infrastructure, jobs created or saved, family or business income growth, etc.) (131/300 words)

Success for the pre-development portion of this project will be measured by the generation of three (3) reports:

- 1 Home Hardening Market Analysis Report
- 1 Labor Market Projections Report
- 1 Workforce Training Feasibility Study Report

Following completion, project impact will be demonstrated by the extent to which these reports catalyze activity across the region and guide other entities to adopt the findings, pursue additional funding, and work toward shared goals in wildfire resilience. Metrics to measure the impact of these reports might include the number of regional stakeholders who reference or utilize the findings, the amount of grant funding secured using this analysis as justification, the number of workforce training programs launched as a result of the study, and the amount of funding leveraged for home hardening efforts in Mendocino County.

**3. Who Benefits?** When the project is fully implemented, who / what will benefit most? You can discuss geography, specific Priority Communities, industry sectors, workers or entrepreneurs, age ranges, etc. (490/300 words)

The project is anticipated to generate countywide benefits by establishing concrete, empirical economic justification for entities and organizations to build the capacity needed to advance home hardening within their communities and increase overall resilience across Mendocino County. Generating the market analysis and feasibility report will document the need for this workforce, and, as such, will aid the County of Mendocino and entities such as the Mendocino County Fire Safe Council (MCFSC), Mendocino Community College, and other stakeholders to pursue funding to implement recommendations from the reports. According to a letter of support submitted by MCFSC, there is a critical need for more contractors skilled in home retrofitting, and that there are “currently almost no workers in Mendocino County” available to make these needed improvements. The successful implementation of workforce training opportunities is anticipated to expand job opportunities and increase marketable skillsets that address both the county’s persistent economic challenges and high wildfire risk.

The long-term benefit of this project is increased home hardening efforts and enhanced wildfire resilience. Mendocino County holds a population of 91,601 (2020) and is widely considered disadvantaged due to high hazard vulnerability and low income. Per the Climate and Economic Justice Screening Tool 2.0 (CEJST) by the Council on Environmental Quality, 11 out of 20 census tracts are disadvantaged due to exceeding the threshold for wildfire risk, projected building loss rate, and low income; these communities encompass 49,088 people and make up

over half of the county's population. Expanding the contractor workforce will help target these disadvantaged communities for retrofitting efforts, and contractors will benefit by building valuable, marketable skills in this growing sector.

Mendocino County and other entities within the county have been successful in securing grant funding to retrofit homes in the community, with the County having recently secured over \$50 million in 2022 FEMA Building Resilient Infrastructure & Communities (BRIC) funds to complete home hardening for vulnerable communities in the unincorporated Sherwood Corridor north of Willits. However, the lack of a skilled workforce to implement these funds consistently stalls progress. Providing a clear study of market conditions, economic forecasts, and other data generated in the deliverables proposed will encourage private investment, help justify further public funding, and generally accelerate the pace and scale of home hardening activities in Mendocino County and adjacent communities.

In addition, this project will establish a replicable blueprint for other communities in the region by sharing its findings and data through accessible platforms including the County website and public reports. These resources will enable local governments and organizations in neighboring areas to leverage the insights gained and support the development of their own workforce strategies and wildfire resilience initiatives. Mendocino is one of several rural counties in Northern California facing both high wildfire risk and economic challenges. It is anticipated that neighboring distressed counties like Del Norte, Trinity, Humboldt, and Lake, which face similar issues, can also benefit from adopting comparable workforce development models to strengthen their resilience efforts.

**4. Pre-Development Phase Workplan:** What tasks or activities do you need to accomplish, and on what schedule, to get through the pre-development phase and become ready for implementation dollars and project launch? Feel free to attach a separate workplan or business plan instead of entering content here. Address how you will raise additional funds or secure other resources needed to complete the pre-development phase. (483/300 words)

#### Task 1: Project Management and Oversight

Task includes time for County of Mendocino staff to oversee project activities, coordinate with the selected consultant, complete and submit grant progress reports and reimbursement requests, and ensure the project stays within the allocated budget and schedule throughout the project performance period.

#### Task 2: Consultant Procurement

County of Mendocino staff will draft and release a request for proposals to solicit qualified consulting firms to conduct the project. The County will release the RFP, respond to one round of questions from interested respondents, and then review proposals received and select the most responsive consultant to work with County staff to complete the project. The County will enter into contract with the selected consultant and initiate subsequent tasks.

#### Task 3: Project Kickoff

County staff and the selected consultant will meet to review the scope and goals of the project, discuss methodology, identify available informational resources, and finalize the project schedule.

#### Task 4: Market Analysis

This task will consist of analysis of the existing fire-resilient construction industry in Mendocino County and surrounding regions, including conducting a demand analysis, reviewing and

summarizing the competitive landscape, developing a growth forecast for the industry, and completing a rural needs assessment to target the market analysis to a context aligned with Mendocino County's characteristics.

#### Task 5: Labor Market Projections

This task will include an analysis of the current construction labor market in the region, with data generated through workforce and employer surveys. The projections will also include a skills gap analysis and capacity assessment, to determine gaps in knowledge and training amongst local contractors and the capacity of existing infrastructure such as educational institutions and trade schools to fill those gaps. This task will finally conduct a labor demand forecast to develop a prediction of future labor demand in the fire-resilient construction industry.

#### Task 6: Feasibility Assessment

This task will take the results of the previous tasks and develop an actionable assessment of the capacity of Mendocino County and its institutions to develop and implement a training program focused on home hardening and ignition resistant construction trade skills. The assessment will examine potential partnerships and available facilities, funding, and expertise to establish such a program.

The total project duration is approximately 18 months based upon the following task durations:

Task 1: 18 months

Task 1: 3 months

Task 2: 0.25 months

Task 3: 5 months

Task 4: 6 months

Task 5: 5 months

Please note that Task 1 will be ongoing through the project period. Please also note that the conclusion of Task 2, Market Analysis, will overlap by approximately one month with initiation of Task 3, Labor Market Projections, and the initiation of Task 4, Feasibility Assessment, will overlap by approximately one month with the conclusion of Task 3.

The County of Mendocino is requesting all funds necessary to complete the project and would not require further funding from other sources if awarded.

**5. Pre-Development Phase Risks & Barriers:** What could, or does, stand in the way of successful implementation during your pre-development phase? How will you anticipate risks and overcome barriers? (248/300 words)

The primary challenge associated with the proposed activities will be the complexity and resource intensity of capturing on-the-ground data to generate the reports, as potential consultants have noted that gathering accurate and detailed information of local conditions and workforce capacity is the most time-intensive and difficult aspect of this type of project. To overcome this barrier, the project team will help to publicize the project, reach out to interested stakeholders, and encourage active engagement and participation from community members, contractors, and stakeholders in order to achieve an accurate and comprehensive understanding of countywide workforce needs and market dynamics. County staff expects to work collaboratively with the selected consultant to identify effective methods for outreach and engagement, including both in-person workshops and data capture through surveys.

In general, the Study proposed in this application has very few risks and overall barriers; there has never been a workforce analysis study with this focus conducted in Mendocino County and the surrounding region, and such justification is sorely needed to catalyze action in this industry. Though the need for a more robust and skilled workforce to conduct home hardening and ignition-resistant construction is obvious to residents and others familiar with Mendocino County, many federal and even state funding agencies do not fully understand the scope and scale of the issue. This analysis will provide firm footing for all local stakeholders, including local government, educational institutions, and the private sector, to pursue investment in this sector through both private and public funding sources.

**6. Equity:** How does your project demonstrate a commitment to equity when it comes to the region's Priority Communities, for example through trauma-informed and culturally sensitive decision-making, community participation/consultation, internal processes, and outcomes? (349/300 words)

The County will prioritize the needs of Priority Communities by conducting comprehensive and targeted outreach efforts aimed at disadvantaged groups, including but not limited to Tribes, Tribal Organizations, rural populations, low-income households, and non-English speaking residents. Mendocino County is home to 10 federally-recognized tribes, with the largest being the Round Valley Indian Tribes based in Covelo with an enrolled membership of 4,967. Rural communities include Leggett, which holds a population of 46 and a median household income (AMI) of \$15,577; Covelo, which has a population of 1,359 and a median income of \$45,162; and Laytonville, with a population of 552 and AMI of \$73,429. These communities represent a diverse range of economic conditions but share the challenge of being in rural areas where residents are more isolated from resources and face higher risks during hazard events like wildfires, which can further limit access to essential services and support.

The County plans to robustly engage Priority Communities through a combination of approaches designed to connect with residents in an accessible and inclusive way and ensure broad participation. Efforts will include (1) community meetings with a focus on listening sessions and needs identification to ensure voices of all backgrounds are heard, (2) a mix of in-person and virtual formats to ensure accessibility, (3) a dedicated page on the County's economic development site that provides real-time project updates and information to the community, and (4) online surveys to gather input from a wider range of community members. The County is also committed to providing materials in multiple languages and will ensure that outreach efforts are culturally relevant and accessible to all.

The completion of this pre-development project will help ensure that future home hardening efforts directly benefit Priority Communities. The market analysis will provide the County and other organizations with the data needed to initiate grant-funded projects backed by this study, with a focus on addressing the specific needs of priority communities. Furthermore, preserving housing from wildfire will reduce pressure on the housing market and help stabilize rent and home prices, making it easier for priority populations to secure and maintain housing.

### Goals Alignment

*This section helps applicants emphasize the connection between their project and the Redwood Region RISE goals and Catalyst Fund priorities. **If you have addressed these priorities completely in the Project Narrative above, you do not have to explain anything separately below, and will not lose points; just enter "answered above."** However, we recommend completing the sections below that are not fully explained in the Project Narrative above. (100 words maximum for each section)*

- **How does this project help create thriving-wage opportunities for workers in our region ("quality jobs")? (97/100 words)**

This project will develop and make available a robust and comprehensive assessment of the labor market demand for ignition-resistant construction and home hardening services in Mendocino County and the surrounding region. Such jobs would traditionally be filled by contractors and skilled tradespeople, with thriving-wage compensation, union membership opportunities, and apprenticeship programs to make the industry accessible for job seekers. This, in turn, would help justify funding for training programs for this industry, grant funding requests to subsidize home hardening projects for vulnerable communities, and catalyze the growth of this industry in Mendocino County and the surrounding region.

- **How does this project pursue sustainable economic growth by diversifying our local and regional economies? (125/100 words)**

The analysis proposed within this project will help to establish local training programs for skilled tradespeople to retrofit existing homes and help build ignition-resistant new homes. There is a significant volume of older homes in areas of Mendocino County which are highly vulnerable to wildfire, and the demand to retrofit these homes to maintain and preserve housing stock into the future will remain high for years to come. In addition, as California's economy continues to grow, the need for new housing in all regions of the state, including Mendocino County, will grow in turn. The need for skilled tradespeople to build ignition-resistant new homes is also expected to grow into the future, emphasizing the long-term economic value of establishing local training programs for this industry.

- **How does this project advance California's goals for a climate-forward future (carbon-neutrality and beyond)? (100/100 words)**

Exploring workforce development opportunities lays the groundwork for reducing wildfire impacts in Mendocino County which subsequently reduces carbon emissions during wildfire events. Future efforts supported by this project aim to preserve housing stock, minimize rebuilding emissions, and protect the region's natural carbon sinks including redwood forests, oak woodlands, coastal seafloor, and numerous watersheds. Past wildfires such as the 2020 August Complex Fire released an estimated 13 million metric tons of CO<sub>2</sub>, and the 2018 Mendocino Complex Fire released about 8 million; preventing even a small percentage of these emissions would significantly contribute to California's goal of carbon neutrality by 2045.

- **How does the project empower communities that don't always participate in or benefit from economic development planning processes? (184/100 words)**

Having a market analysis that documents the confirmed need for home hardening services and workforce opportunities in Mendocino County is anticipated to be highly impactful for the county and surrounding counties—by not only bringing these services to priority populations, but giving these populations greater access to work. According to 2020 Census data, Mendocino County is home to a population that is increasingly diverse in race and language, as well as a high percentage of seniors, low income households, and individuals with disabilities. The county holds a notable percentage of Hispanic or Latino individuals (28.1%), American Indian or Alaska Native alone (6.5%) and Asian alone (2.4%). Furthermore, 14% of the population is foreign-born, and 45% of households in the county speak a language other than English at home. The

county's aging population continues to grow, with 25.4% of the total population including people aged 65+ years—compared to 16.2% statewide. The county's disabled population is 17.5%, compared to 11.7% statewide. Lastly, the county holds a poverty rate of 12.3% and an average median income (AMI) of \$67,454 which is 70.6% of the state AMI.