

Gold Leaf Challenge

Welcome Guide



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Overview

What is it?

The Gold Leaf Challenge focuses on voluntary pathways for communities to take local climate action. Using the GreenStep program resources, this new program aims to challenge, assist, and recognize your efforts for completing any NEW actions from:

[44 high-priority, high-impact climate actions](#) under the categories of:

- Climate mitigation
- Climate planning
- Climate adaptation
- Community connectedness for Minnesota's changing climate

Read more about the background, process, and program goals in the [Gold Leaf Challenge Report](#).

How does it work?

The Challenge identifies [44 best practice actions](#) that result in greenhouse gas emissions reductions, improve community resilience, and plan for climate impacts. The Challenge provides a menu of climate actions to help a community prioritize planning and actions. The goal is to newly accomplish as many of these actions as possible each year.

While participating communities are free to self-select the actions they take, the Gold Leaf Challenge asks participants to [start with a "Green Team"](#) that can support their climate work. Communities are also encouraged to [integrate their own climate goals and the State of Minnesota's Climate Action Framework goals](#) to their Gold Leaf Challenge actions. As communities accomplish and report on actions they are acknowledged with a *leaf* award. When one of the integrated goals is achieved, a *gold leaf* is awarded. As communities accrue leaves, they will build a tree showing their climate actions and accomplishments.

Who can join the Gold Leaf Challenge?

The Gold Leaf Challenge is open to a wide variety of community types because all communities and levels of local, Tribal, and regional governance are faced with a changing climate and can take action to prepare for climate change, build resilience, and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Additionally, involving all levels of governance will break down artificial silos and barriers that so often impede effective planning, coordination, and action.

You DO NOT need to be a participant of Minnesota GreenStep (Cities, Tribal Nations, or Schools) program to join the Gold Leaf Challenge.

Community types that can join: (If you don't see your community type here, please reach out!)

- Tribal Nations
- Regional Organizations/
Government
- Counties
- Cities
- Towns/ Townships
- Neighborhoods
- Homeowners Associations (HOAs)
- Conservation and Watershed
Districts/ Organizations
- County/State fairgrounds
- Educational Institutions
- Etc.

What are the benefits of joining?

- **Continuous improvement** pathway for communities to take climate action and **helps you track progress** for completing ambitious, multi-year climate projects.
- **Saves staff time** in researching proven, cost-effective actions for cutting energy use, decreasing your carbon footprint, and accomplishing other climate goals that exceed regulatory requirements.
- **Publicly recognizes** the good work being done by Minnesota communities on tackling climate change, and helps them communicate that progress. (See "[Recognition](#).")
- Provides opportunities for **peer learning, partnerships, and grant collaboration**.
- Provides **technical assistance and information** on how to complete all 44 actions, which are continuously updated with Minnesota-specific information, with **comprehensive support** from GreenStep staff to ensure you have what you need. (See "[Support](#).")
- **Open to many community types**, which helps to break down silos between various government types and foster collaboration, **while still allowing for flexibility** and program adjustments to ensure that all community types can participate.
- Each action delivers **co-benefits** to communities beyond climate action, such as social, economic, and financial benefits, and positions you to more easily **apply for competitive grants** and assistance programs.
- **Home-grown, independent program** tailored by and for Minnesota communities that provides maximum flexibility and total control in how to implement a proven best practice.
- **Challenges participants** to be ambitious in taking climate actions by integrating community and state climate goals into the program, and it helps communities **hit greater climate targets** they may have signed onto (i.e. U.S. Mayors Climate Protection Agreement, or Sustainable Development Goals).

- Provides **leadership and action roles** for community members, students, businesses and institutions so as to stretch limited public funds and strengthen a civic culture of engagement and innovation.
- Provides a targeted **menu of actions** for communities to pick from and a **framework to prioritize** those actions.
- **Serves as a climate action plan** if your community doesn't have one, as it provides a ready-made, prioritized list, with resources, to take climate action.
- **Utilizes the existing GreenStep reporting program**, so there isn't an added burden on communities for participating in both GreenStep and Gold Leaf.
- **Incentivizes reporting** climate actions, expanding an ongoing **repository of examples for peer communities**.

How do I join and get started?

How to join:

1. Contact GreenStep staff (greenstep@state.mn.us) with any questions about the Challenge, if needed.
2. Let us know you want to join the Challenge by [filling out this form!](#)
3. If necessary, get the approval of your council or other governing body. We do not require you to have a formal resolution. If needed, there is a [sample resolution](#) available.

How to participate:

1. **Join the Challenge.**
2. Ensure your community has a Green Team that aligns with [Gold Leaf action CC1](#).
3. **Fill out the (optional) Workplan** we send you or organize yourself to figure out which Gold Leaf actions you want to accomplish this year (and down the road).
 - a. Once you've filled out the Workplan, send it back to us so we can update the [Community Projects Spreadsheet](#).
4. Figure out which "[Integrated Goals](#)" align with the Gold Leaf actions you have identified.
5. **Take [actions](#) and meet [goals](#)!**
6. **Stuck?**
 - Reach out to program staff at greenstep@state.mn.us or **651-757-2793**.
 - Use the **Gold Leaf Challenge Welcome Guide** as a tool for getting started and accessing additional guidance, program information, and more.
 - Connect to program technical resources and information provided in the [Gold Leaf action guidance](#).
 - Learn more about [support and resources](#).
 - Look at the **Workplan and Community Project Spreadsheet** to see what other communities are working and connect with them.
7. **Report your Gold Leaf actions and goals** at any time. Awards are based on the calendar year, so the last date to report actions for a year would be December 31.
8. **Receive [awards](#) for your hard work!** Awards will be shared early in the following year.

How do I report Gold Leaf actions and goals?

Using Workplans:

When you first join Gold Leaf, you'll receive a workplan with all 44 Gold Leaf Challenge actions in a spreadsheet. The workplan is an *optional* tool to help you plan out what actions the community is interested in, currently working on, or finished with. In addition, you may be interested to use the workplan in the following ways:

- Helps you think through how you'll accomplish a Gold Leaf Challenge action.
- Provides a space to list out the integrated goals you are ultimately aiming to accomplish. The Minnesota Climate Action Framework goals are listed in the Gold Leaf guidance documents and workplan already. However, you will need to list out your own community's goals on the workplan. Look at "[Integrated Goals](#)" for more information.

Staff will ask you to send us a copy of your workplan yearly (or whatever document you use as an alternative), which will allow for updates to the [Community Projects Spreadsheet](#).

Using the Community Projects Spreadsheet:

All participants have a column on their workplans that is meant to update the [Community Projects Spreadsheet](#). Program staff will update the spreadsheet for you! Use the spreadsheet to:

- see how other communities are accomplishing Gold Leaf actions and gain inspiration from them,
- identify which actions there is potential to partner with other communities on,
- find relevant Gold Leaf Actions by filtering participant communities by region, population size, and community type, and
- find contact information for peer-to-peer learning.

This spreadsheet is visible to other participants and the public. Please let us know if you would like to remove any information from it.

Gold Leaf Actions:

Start with a Green Team:

When communities choose to enter the Gold Leaf Challenge, the first action they commit to will be to create a Green Team if they don't already have one, or document that they already do. A "Green Team" is a flexible concept that refers to any established group of people who meet regularly to support sustainable changes in a community. This team could be made up of community members and/or staff members (a "Green Team") or a panel of appointed experts and community members (a "Sustainability Committee" or "Commission"). See Gold Leaf [Action CC1 \(Combined Green Team\)](#) for details.

Complete Gold Leaf Actions:

See a [list of all 44 Gold Leaf Challenge actions](#), additional information, annual reporting criteria, and guidance.

Actions can be reported and formally recognized as they are completed, without any specific annual reporting period. Additionally, many actions can be repeated in multiple years to encourage growth overtime. Actions will be tallied at the end of the year to see how many “leaves” your community has accomplished. Learn more under [Reporting Actions](#).

Each Gold Leaf action guidance document will list the annual recertification criteria that will achieve a reward. Some of these actions may take multiple years to complete. Because the Challenge aims to drive climate action implementation, the action will be awarded a *leaf* once the project is completed.

To help communities show the progress they are making, they can list relevant projects under the relevant Gold Leaf action as “in progress” on their workplans so other communities can learn from them and connect. This is also why many of the Gold Leaf actions can be accomplished per building or per year, so it can represent the cumulative progress communities are making.

Integrated Goals:

The Gold Leaf Challenge encourages participants to connect their actions to goals through the integration of local community-specific goals and/or statewide climate goals. Achieving these larger, integrated goals is a big accomplishment! Once a goal is met, participants receive a *gold leaf*.

Community Goals:

Setting your own goals is also an action ([see Action CP6](#))! If your community has climate goals that align with the Gold Leaf action you want to accomplish, list them out in your workplan and include information about the goal in your Gold Leaf action report. These goals may come from your community’s climate action plan, comprehensive plan, other related community-specific plan, or council resolutions. Goals should be formally adopted by your community or organization, and shared publicly. If your community doesn’t have relevant goals in place, check to see if there are region-wide plans that cover your community, such as an Regional Development Organization that has created a region-wide Climate Action Plan. Not sure where to start? Check out the [Sustainability Index](#), which has a list of relevant plans.

Minnesota’s Climate Goals:

For communities without their own goals identified, the [Minnesota Climate Action Framework](#) (State of Minnesota, 2022) can serve as a guide for goal-setting. In addition, these statewide goals are helpful for communities to connect with and align their own goals, when possible. Participants will find the relevant statewide goals listed in the Gold Leaf action guidance.



Modifications for different community types:

The Gold Leaf Challenge is open to many different community types with diverse needs and types of governments. Because of this, each of the Gold Leaf actions has a section addressing potential modifications various community types could make to ensure the action fits their community. Please contact program staff if you think an improvement could be made so that these actions fit your community. This is a purposefully flexible program so it is responsive to the participants, and staff will continuously take feedback into account to improve the program for all our participants.

Reporting actions and integrated goals:

Once a Gold Leaf action is ready to report, use the following tools. The basic reporting methods are listed below. If you would like more options for sharing your actions, check out [Gold Leaf Reporting Options](#).

For current GreenStep participants:

- **Who:** For current GreenStep Cities and Tribal Nations with an online account. Typically, the GreenStep Coordinator writes and submits an action report.
- **What:**
 - **Scenario 1: Report a new Gold Leaf action** under a Best Practice Action on the GreenStep website. Using the Gold Leaf action guidance, identify the best GreenStep actions to report your efforts. Provide a detailed summary, date, contact, partners, documents, links, and any metrics or outcomes.
 - Make sure to check the “Request Gold Leaf Challenge Review” button right above “Save” on the bottom of the form.
 - **Scenario 2: Update a previously entered GreenStep Best Practice Action** so it will be considered for The Gold Leaf Challenge as well. To do so, click the action you’d like to update and go to “Edit.” Add to or edit the content in the GreenStep action to reflect your Gold Leaf action.
 - Scroll to the bottom of the screen and click the “Request Gold Leaf Challenge Review” button right above “Save.”

Request Re-evaluation
If you are editing an existing Action Report, click this button so that GreenStep staff know to review the update and provide the correct score.

Request Gold Leaf Challenge Review
Check this box if you are reporting this action for the Gold Leaf Challenge and would like to have it reviewed for credit.

- **Where:** Use the GreenStep Cities and Tribal Nations website to report actions. Refer to the [Website How-To guide](#) if needed.
- **When:** At any time following the completion of a Gold Leaf action. Remember, only new Gold Leaf Challenge actions accomplished within the current reporting year will be considered.

- **Why:** This is a great way to document your ongoing efforts in an already shareable format. Your reported actions also serve as a great tool for peer communities interested in learning about best practice actions!

For non-GreenStep participants:

- **Who:** For any communities that do not have a GreenStep program account. Anyone who was involved in implementing the action can fill out the form. This could include staff and interns, decision makers, community members.
- **What:** Summarize the efforts taken to implement the Gold Leaf action. Details should include a brief overview of the action, the timeline, engagement, and any outcomes to date.
- **Where:** [Google Form](#) (if you cannot access this, contact us at greenstep@state.mn.us)
- **When:** At any time following the completion of a Gold Leaf action.
- **Why:** This is an easy way to document your efforts and receive credit. Information used *may* be added as examples in the Gold Leaf and/or GreenStep programs later.

Integrated Goals:

Report achieving Integrated Goals the same way you would report any Gold Leaf action. Some of these goals are straightforward targets to hit. Others are qualitative or broadly defined. If you believe you have hit an integrated goal, you will submit a report showing how you've hit the goal. You may utilize metrics, a narrative story, or whatever other evidence or reporting method shows you accomplished the integrated goal.

How do I get recognized for Gold Leaf Challenge achievements?

- First year participants will receive a custom award display for leaves and gold leaves, following the report of a Gold Leaf action or integrated goal.
- Annually, participants will receive 'leaves' based on the Gold Leaf annual reporting criteria or integrated goals.
- Gold Leaf staff will prepare a statewide press release and provide press release templates for you to share with local media.
- Annual peer recognition at events.
- Your accomplishments will be visible on the GreenStep website, the most comprehensive website in Minnesota devoted to community sustainability.

TIP: You can use the same action reports for both Gold Leaf and GreenStep!

Is there additional support available?

Tools:

- [Gold Leaf Actions and Resource Sheets](#) - Find all 44 of the Gold Leaf actions and their resource sheets.
- [Reporting Actions and Goals](#) - Find reporting options for current GreenStep Cities & Tribal Nations participants and for other communities.

- If you would like more options for sharing your actions, check out [Gold Leaf Reporting Options](#).
- [Workplans and Community Project Spreadsheet](#) - Workplans are an optional resource to help you identify, prioritize, and track Gold Leaf actions for your community. The Community Project Spreadsheet provides an overview of what other communities are working on and can help you find opportunities to connect and collaborate with each other.
- [Gold Leaf Challenge Development Report](#) - A report about the development of the Gold Leaf program. Learn more about program goals, process, pilot program, and more.
- [Additional Assistance](#) - Find more contact information, AmeriCorps programs, technical assistance programs, community-wide visioning and reports, funding, data, and more.

Summer Internship Program:

Summer interns were coordinated in partnership with the [Sustainability Corps](#) program through the University of Minnesota in 2023. Ten pilot communities hosted eight interns. Interns did a variety of work, including researching project ideas, supporting plan development, and community engagement opportunities. We expect there to be an ongoing opportunity each year. Contact us if you are interested in hosting a summer intern!

Virtual Open Office Hours:

[Virtual Open Office Hours](#) for Gold Leaf Challenge participants are available weekly. Hop in any time – no need to let us know if you are coming! You will enter a lobby and wait to join so that you are the only one "in" the office.

Contact us:

- Ask questions to better understand the Gold Leaf Challenge.
- Clarify where to find different types of resources on the website.
- Request a personal visit to your community.
- Ask for help in connecting volunteers to needed work in your community.
- Update your Gold Leaf contact information.
- Get help with documenting your accomplishments.
- Make suggestions for improving the program.
- Report errors on the website and identify broken web links.
- Contact information (phone and email) for the GreenStep Cities co-directors and best practice advisors

Frequently Asked Questions

1. **Do you have a glossary for all of these climate change-related words?**
Find common climate change-related [acronyms and a glossary](#) (Minnesota Climate Action Framework, 2022). Or don't hesitate to contact us with questions!
2. **Why is local climate action important?**
Communities are already seeing impacts locally - warming temperatures (especially during winter), drier summers, more severe precipitation events, and more. Often, communities have the tools to plan for and take action on climate change. Communities that act now are better suited to withstand and build resilience against impacts over time.

3. How is it different from the GreenStep program?

The Gold Leaf Challenge uses the GreenStep program as a guide for providing resources. The Challenge provides a targeted list of actions from the 181 GreenStep Cities & Tribal Nations actions to create a climate action 'road map' that your community (of any type) can focus down even further based on local needs and priorities.

Gold Leaf Challenge	GreenStep Communities
Voluntary	Voluntary
Focused on Hi-Impact Climate Actions	Defines Sustainability Broadly
Open to Many Community Types	Focused on Cities and Tribal Nations
No Barriers to Entry	City or Tribal Council Resolution to Join
Volume of Actions Rewarded	Rewarded by Step Community is on
Targeted Menu of Options	Broad Menu of Options
Starts With a Green Team	No Starting Best Practice
Emphasizes New Actions Taken	Rewards Past and Current Planning and Actions

4. When will Leaves be awarded?

Awards are based on the calendar year and will be awarded in the following year. Action reports can be submitted at any time throughout the year, ideally right after the action was completed.

5. When can I report Gold Leaf actions?

Actions can be reported and formally recognized as they are completed, without any specific annual reporting period. Additionally, many actions can be repeated in multiple years to encourage growth overtime. Actions will be tallied at the end of the year to see how many “leaves” your community has accomplished. Learn more at [Reporting & Recognition](#).

6. How often can I get recognized for the same type of Gold Leaf action?

Each Gold Leaf action guidance document will list the annual recertification criteria that will achieve a reward. Some of these actions may take multiple years to complete. Because Gold Leaf’s goal is to drive climate action implementation, the action will be awarded once the project is completed.

7. What are ‘integrated goals’?

Participants can earn a *gold leaf* when they can document that either a local or State climate goal has been achieved. By setting and tracking goals, participants can (and are!) meet these targets. The Gold Leaf Challenge acknowledges how difficult meeting goals can be and we want to recognize you for your achievement! Learn more about [Integrated Goals](#).

