Institutes for Rural Partnerships Consortium

Fourth Annual Consortium Report

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University of Vermont

Leahy Institute for Rural Partnerships

Wisconsin Rural Partnerships Institute

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AUBURN UNIVERSITY

Rural Partnership Institute

Introduction

Since their inception in 2022, the Institutes for Rural Partnerships, located at Auburn University in Alabama, the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and the University of Vermont, have worked to develop novel and high-value opportunities for their respective land-grant institutions to bring research and faculty expertise to bear on critical needs in rural communities and economies. Through the widespread engagement of stakeholders, the three universities are identifying, piloting, and developing collaborative solutions to rural challenges across the three regions. Institute grants are funding innovative partnerships to advance technology, increase knowledge, and provide services to support vibrant and resilient rural communities.

In this 4th annual report of the Institutes for Rural Partnerships, we summarize the accomplishments of the three Institutes for Rural Partnerships through partnerships, stakeholder engagement, and grantmaking, and identify the ways the three Institutes have aligned programming with USDA priority areas. In this report, we also explore the learnings from three years of experience that have occurred across the Institutes for Rural Partnerships consortium, and the novel value proposition for this model of community-university partnerships.

This report concludes with a look to the future, including opportunities for continued collaboration and growth in the realm of the Institutes for Rural Partnerships, in an effort to advance the land-grant university mission and better meet the needs of rural communities.

Consortium Collaboration

Between October 2025 and September 2026, the consortium interacted and shared ideas through monthly online meetings and an annual in-person gathering in Madison, Wisconsin. The monthly meetings involved sharing updates about each RPI, discussing and troubleshooting challenges, and brainstorming on collaborative opportunities between the three RPIs. We have continued to strengthen the unique and shared focus areas of the Institutes for Rural Partnerships. These meetings demonstrate our collective commitment to community-engaged projects and partnership, and the amplification of the land-grant mission.

Additionally, the consortium convened once in the past year at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Wisconsin Consortium Meeting

The annual meeting of the Institutes for Rural Partnerships was held at the University of Wisconsin-Madison from July 15-17, 2026. Each year, the full consortium gathers to share updates about their respective work, seek out synergies, and explore collaborative opportunities. This year, the focus of the meeting was how we could capture the individual and shared learnings and impacts of each Institute for Rural Partnerships.

The meeting began with a keynote talk from Dr. Jay Akridge, Trustee Chair in Teaching and Learning Excellence, and Professor of Agricultural Economics at Purdue University about the importance of community-university partnerships. Throughout the week, there were multiple focus groups held that addressed the topic of measuring impact, and exploring the principles of effective community-university partnerships. Participants had the opportunity to participate in hands-on workshops on Indigenous food systems and the dairy industry, and we concluded with a keynote presentation from Dr. Loka Ashwood on the topic of the ACRE Justice Initiative and rural life in the United States.

The leadership from each of the Institutes for Rural Partnerships provided overviews about the unique approaches that their respective institutions take to rural capacity building through community-university partnerships. The intention of this meeting, in addition to providing generative time to gather and discuss the work being done at the Institutes for Rural Partnerships across the country, is to develop written products that speak to the models, impact, and learnings that have occurred over the last three years of work.



Fig 1. Indigenous corn varieties, taken at the University of Wisconsin-Madison during the Institute for Rural Partnerships Consortium Meeting, July 2026.



Fig 2. Focus group discussions, taken at the University of Wisconsin-Madison during the Institute for Rural Partnerships Consortium Meeting, July 2026.



Fig 3. Collaboration in action, taken at the University of Wisconsin-Madison during the Institute for Rural Partnerships Consortium Meeting, July 2026.



Fig 1. Launching the meeting, taken at the University of Wisconsin-Madison during the Institute for Rural Partnerships Consortium Meeting, July 2026.

Grantmaking and Partnerships

A cornerstone of the Institutes for Rural Partnerships' work is outreach, engagement, and grantmaking in support of community-university partnerships addressing rural challenges in each respective state. The following section outlines the ways these partnerships have manifested across the different institutions in the past year, and the unique approaches of each Institute for Rural Partnerships for collaborative, rural problem-solving work. The consortium lays out high-impact partnership examples from each institution, shows

alignment with the USDA priorities, and provides some snapshots of how our work impacts communities through conferences, news stories, and more.

Auburn University

The following partnerships have been key to the work of the Auburn University Rural Partnership Institute (AURPI). First, the Biobased Rural Innovation for Domestic Growth and Economic Security (BRIDGES) project is a NSF ENGINE project that was funded during the summer of 2026. Two AURPI members are part of this project and their BRIDGES contribution will complement AURPI projects. BRIDGES will receive up to $160 million over 10 years to address critical challenges facing the Southeast, where communities need stronger agricultural markets, economic diversification and quality job opportunities. The overall goal of BRIDGES is to revolutionize rural regions in Alabama and Tennessee so that they become global leaders in biobased manufacturing. This work is co-led by HudsonAlpha Institute for Biotechnology, Auburn University, the University of Tennessee, Volkswagen Group of America, and AGgrow Tech LLC.

Second, as a result of the research being conducted by AURPI personnel, the Alabama Department of Environmental Management (ADEM) is currently evaluating permit regulations regarding the application of DAF (Dissolved Air Flotation) on lands and fields. DAF is the suspended solids and fats waste from poultry processing operations. About 68 billion gallons of processed wastewater that contains over 157,000 tons of DAF is generated annually from poultry processing operations in Alabama. DAF is currently land-applied and causes nuisance odors, eutrophication, and can contain pathogens. AURPI personnel is involved in upcycling the nutrients present in DAF into value-added bioproducts.

A partnership with the Alabama Community Colleges system is aimed at exposing mechatronics to students in the Alabama Community Colleges system to opportunities in poultry and forestry industries regarding the applicable of their training and skills to poultry and forestry production and processing industries. The 2-day workshop exposed the students to technologies used for forestry, poultry, agricultural production and drones. Two of these workshops were conducted at two institutions in 2026. Discussion was finalized with three additional partner institutions in 2026, and similar workshops will be conducted at five partner institutions in 2027.

Finally, a summit was held to focus on water systems in the rural part of Alabama. Over 100 attendees participated, and included those who run the water plants with government, industry and academic leaders. The summit focused on helping those managing our water

systems access the tools, funding and knowledge they need to protect their systems. Water systems are essential to Alabama's communities, providing clean drinking water and supporting industries such as agriculture, manufacturing, and energy production. However, these systems are increasingly vulnerable to cyberattacks from ransomware gangs, cybercriminals, and nation-state actors. The summit also provided 6-hour professional development training to water department operators certified by the ADEM. The cyber personnel of AURPI is also partnering with Southern Company to identify vulnerabilities in the utilities of rural industries and municipalities. Southern Company is the largest provider of electricity in the United States, and supports 9 million customers and businesses nationwide, primarily providing electric utilities in three states (Alabama, Mississippi and Georgia) and natural gas distribution utilities in four states (Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, and Virginia).

Alignment with USDA Priorities

- Increasing Profitability of Farmers and Ranchers: Understanding the challenges faced by farmers through interviews and surveys is crucial to developing policies that can lead to increasing profitability of farmers and ranchers. The social science team has been conducting annual interviews/surveys/polls of farmers and citizens in Alabama and beyond in the last 2 years. Examples of other projects related to this theme include a) improving freeze tolerance of southern pines, b) improving broiler mortality disposal with composting, c) assisting pines thrive on salt-affected rural lands, d) sensors for continuous improvement of poultry and forestry operations, e) addressing cyber risks for rural infrastructure, rural utilities and poultry and forestry operations, f) data dashboard for improved poultry enterprise decision making, and g) addressing wood supply logistics and emission challenges faced by forestry industry.
- Expanding Markets and Creating New Uses of U.S. Agricultural Products: Examples of projects include (a) upcycling of waste streams from poultry processing operations, b) sustainable wood adhesives from pulp industry byproducts, c) mass timber housing with Rural Studio.
- Promoting Soil Health to Regenerate Long-Term Productivity of Land: Examples of projects include a) developing new uses for poultry wastewater and DAF, b) reducing emissions and phosphorous runoff from broiler litter, and c) improving rural wastewater with septic demos and drones.

- Improving Human Health Through Precision and Food Quality: Several AURPI personnel are working on poultry production and processing. Example projects include: a) robotics for improved management of broiler production, and b) data dashboard for improved poultry enterprise decision making to prevent contamination of poultry products, increase quality of poultry products, and ensure the poultry products meet regulatory standards.

Other Work of Relevance

In the last year, AURPI has attended many conferences, continued to facilitate partnerships, and has launched initiatives related to public communication. In 2026, AURPI presented at the Auburn University Rural Solution Hub Inaugural meeting, Auburn University Engaged Scholarship Symposium, Southeastern Society of American Foresters, Rural Sociological Association Annual Meeting, Southern Rural Sociological Annual Meeting, and ALFA Farm and Land Conference. Members of the AURPI team were hosted on the MeatingPod Podcast, and provided guest lectures to Cattle Connect, Alabama AgCast, ASABE Annual Meeting, and the Utility Technology Association Fall Meeting.

AURPI launched their new website and social media platforms, and also supported the launch of the new Auburn Rural Solutions Hub, which included AURPI as one of Auburn University's rural initiatives. AURPI was also covered in ALFA Neighbors Magazine in December 2025.

AURPI also sustained important partnerships across Alabama, including:

- Community Colleges in Alabama and Other Workforce Development Programs in Higher Education Institutions
- Water Departments in Rural Communities
- Alabama Rural Water Association
- Agricultural Stakeholder Groups (ALFA, Alabama Forestry Association – AFA, Alabama Poultry and Egg Association - APEA)
- Regulators such as ADEM, NRCS
- Forestry Logging Business Owners, Mill Owners, Workers, Truck Drivers, and Landowners
- Agricultural Business Owners and Workers
- Ag and Forestry Equipment Manufacturers and Technology Providers (John Deere, CNH, Raven)

University of Wisconsin-Madison

Through our 10 funded projects at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (UWM), we have been able to develop several strong and sustained partnerships with external stakeholders. We continue to engage in a strong partnership with farmers, growers and producers within the state by way of our weather-themed work which consists of three parts: a series of 72 weather stations across the state (Wisconet), a state climatology office, and a group dedicated to understanding and working on community solutions to Extreme Weather events. In addition to serving farmers, growers and producers throughout the state, we also partner with the National Weather Service, the public, and local government offices. A great example of these partnerships is our work with county emergency management professionals regarding extreme weather and planning. Our researchers are developing database tools that assist small rural county planners in developing updated, sustainable plans for weather-related emergencies, that are well-informed and save time, which is important to smaller communities with limited resources.

A second strong partnership our work has developed is with 9 different Wisconsin tribal nations, including the Ho-Chunk, Ojibwe, Menominee, Fond Du Lac band of Lake Superior Chippewa, and Ohelaku (Oneida) tribes. Examples of our Indigenous Food Resilience work include the collaborative testing of soil, water, and manoomin (wild rice) plants and seeds for contaminants including heavy metals and PFAS with Objiwee partners. This approach can help ensure the purity of manoomin harvested in this area. Mark McConnell, a Chippewa elder, says of this work: “To look at the data that has come from this, it really makes me feel good that things are cleaning up and that it’s safe to eat again,” he says. “And finding the rice coming back in such abundance… it makes me happy.”

Another partner, Jeff Mears, Executive Director of the Wisconsin Tribal Conservation Advisory Council, and member of the Oneida tribe said, “In partnership with the Wisconsin Rural Partnerships Institute’s Indigenous Food Systems Resilience project, we have significantly expanded training opportunities for staff and producers from Wisconsin Tribes. Food sovereignty is a priority for each Tribe, and together with the UWM project team, we are building an educated community of Tribal producers.”

We also made significant headway this year in developing new partnerships with rural schools, industry and rural healthcare entities. Our Wisconsin Rural Scholars program brings high school teachers and students to campus for one week each summer to explore different aspects of college access. This year we increased the number of schools we engaged with. We are piloting a new approach to meet students and teachers in their own areas by developing Rural Regional workshops. We have held two of these in Rio and

Abbottsford, Wisconsin. In addition, rural regional employers, such as our new partners Organic Valley (a cooperative for organic dairy in LaFarge, WI) and Sanford Medical in Marshfield, WI, are hosting our new regional workshops for high school students and teachers. These new partnerships allow us to assist with workforce development efforts that interest these rural employers. We have also initiated an effort to assist UWM students interested in completing required shadowing experiences in rural WI, to further support developing this important, and critical pipeline.

Alignment with USDA Priorities

- Increasing Farmer and Rancher Profitability: Wisconet, Extreme Weather, and the State Climatology Office are three related efforts to help farmers get access to high-quality weather data and information that informs critical decisions that impact yield and profitability. Our Central Sands project focuses on groundwater, which is a key component for potato and other farmers within WI. The project includes conducting field research to assess impacts from solutions that are both feasible for growers to adopt and economically viable, as well as providing area communities with research-based information on improving and protecting water quality. This research will also help farmers adopt processes that conserve agricultural inputs such as fertilizer and water, reducing their costs.
- Expanding Markets and Creating New Uses: Our Indigenous Foods Resilience work focuses on educating and collaborating with tribes on these products: maple syrup production, crops, livestock, and wild rice. These efforts help tribal producers expand their food production, and in some cases, this creates new uses of agricultural products.
- Promoting Soil Health: Our Central Sands and Indigenous Food Resilience projects, along with Wisconet data on soil, help stimulate knowledge on, and adaptation of processes to address long-term soil health.
- Protecting American Agriculture: Research focuses heavily on biosecurity to mitigate the threats posed by invasive pests and animal diseases. Within our Indigenous Food Resilience project, a focus on livestock promotes best practices with regards to animal and food safety.
- Precision Nutrition: Connecting agricultural commodities directly to consumer health outcomes and food quality. [1, 2] Our Indigenous Food Resilience project connects Wisconsin tribal members to the latest nutritional data, and best diet practices that are also consistent with tribal customs. Enhancing tribal member's nutrition is thus a key objective. Our Community Health Workers project places

Community Health specialists in positions to work on food and nutrition issues within rural communities.

Other Work of Relevance

Since 2023, we have had 26 news outlets publish stories on our consortium's work. Many of these stories appear in news or radio outlets that serve rural Wisconsin. In 2026, we had six news stories appear in the media. Two of these stories featured our Wisconet series of weather stations, with one story focusing on new capabilities in soil moisture measurements and data available to the public. The story details our "newly launched Plant Available Water data feature which helps growers optimize field management," along with "real-time water availability helps farmers protect both their bottom lines and the local environment." A radio story from Ohio news outlet WYSO discusses how Wisconet is protecting Wisconsinites, and how Ohio weather monitoring lags behind. In addition, a Mid-West Farm report podcast showcased our Weather Roadshows in three rural areas of Wisconsin during the past year, with a fourth virtual Roadshow as well. These events help our researchers better understand the weather information needs of communities across the state. The events, which included presentations and listening sessions, also gave organizers an idea of how extreme weather events are affecting rural communities. Attendees included local residents, Tribal representatives, local government officials and non-profit groups.

Four separate stories present data from our new Rural Livability project with titles such as Research: Some Rural Residents Are Trading Nutrition for Shelter, What's Driving Wisconsin's Rural Economy?, and The Livability Lens: Rural Communities Shape Their Future. During this past this project debuted an interactive map of all U.S. counties that visually presents county-based information across the United States representing three measures of livability: prosperity, quality of life and community assets. The map is housed on the project's new website, which can be found here.

We will be sharing results from this year at Oklahoma State University's Rural Renewal meeting in late October, 2026. Leadership also participated in a Federal Reserve of Chicago meeting on Rural Prosperity held in Madison on October 12, 2026.

University of Vermont

For the last three years, the University of Vermont's Leahy Institute for Rural Partnerships and Office of Engagement have worked to facilitate community-university partnerships in different disciplines at the university and sectors across the state. In the 2025-2026 period, we administered our third round of grants to collaborative partnerships, which included

sixteen grants to support partnerships between UVM and community organizations across the state, addressing a wide range of rural challenges and solutions.

In an effort to exemplify the varied and impactful nature of our partnerships, we are highlighting four collaborations. First, the Vermont Mesonet is a partnership between UVM's Water Resources Institute and a variety of state and regional actors across Vermont who are working to install and deploy weather monitoring stations in the most rural communities across the state. The Vermont Mesonet was inspired and supported by the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Wisconet project, and will meet critical needs around emergency responsiveness, community resilience, and agricultural planning.

Another program that the Leahy Institute has supported over the last three years is the Catamount Community Schools Collaborative (CCSC), which is a research-policy-practice partnership between the University of Vermont, the Vermont Agency of Education, and state and community partners. This work provides long-term university support to the collaborative management, research, and sustained improvements to the community schools approach, with a particular focus on Vermont's rural communities. We have funded programming around the development of this partnership, and have also supported programming related to rural healthcare that leverages the community schools partnership infrastructure that has been developed by the CCSC. Some of this work includes research on support for children with asthma in rural Vermont, and research and programming around solutions to chronic absenteeism.

In response to stated capacity challenges in our business community, we supported the development of the Vermont Innovation Accelerator (VIA) which provides student consultants in support of business development needs across the state. Teams of students work with companies to address real operational or business challenges, and work through structured, mentored engagements that deliver practical outcomes. In the last year, VIA has provided student consulting support to 8 businesses and non-profit organizations in Vermont, with plans to scale in the coming year.

Finally, we have continuously supported work to enhance the electrical grid's resilience in Vermont, first through a program called System Optimization and LiDAR for Vermont Energy Resilience (SOLVER), which helps to more accurately identify and prioritize risks to Vermont's electrical grid. This allows for more strategic repairs and updates to the system, which in turn has the potential to save millions of dollars and improve grid resilience. This work, supported by UVM's College of Engineering and Mathematical Sciences and Spatial Analysis Lab, worked in coordination with many electric utilities across the state. This work was built upon by the Flexible Optimization for Reliable Electrification and Sustainable Transition (FOREST) collaboration, which uses predictive analytics to better plan when to

deliver energy to specific parts of the grid. Each of these projects exemplify the rippling effects that grant funding from the Leahy Institute for Rural Partnerships has on the research enterprise and community wellbeing.

Alignment with USDA Priorities

- Increasing Profitability of Farmers and Ranchers: Multiple projects funded by the Leahy Institute for Rural Partnerships align with this priority. In the last three years, we have supported research to coordinate with farmers, and agriculture and watershed organizations, to transform their research needs into actions that boost farm production, income, and environmental health. Additionally, we facilitated a partnership between UVM's Spatial Analysis Lab and the Farm to Plate Network in Vermont to explore the food system supply chain via network analysis, and supported a novel maple syrup quality testing laboratory that would make maple products more competitive on larger markets.
- Expanding Markets and Creating New Uses of US Agricultural Products: We are supporting exploratory research to build capacity for goat dairy development in Vermont by identifying research and technical assistance needs. We are also supporting the UVM-founded startup, Burlington Bio, which leverages new technology to create nutritious food products from dairy processing waste.
- Protecting the Integrity of American Agriculture from Invasive Species: In an innovative partnership with UVM ecologists and a local Vermont electric utility, we leveraged research and student support to reclaim the banks of the Little River and Stowe, Vermont from invasive knotweed. The efforts set the stage for a more flood-resilient ecosystem and higher-functioning electric facility.
- Promoting Soil Health to Regenerate Long-Term Productivity of Land: Farmers and researchers partnering via UVM Extension, and with support from the Leahy Institute for Rural Partnerships, are evaluating and disseminating information about novel methods for measuring soil compaction to address Vermont farms navigating soil and water quality issues.

Other Work of Relevance

The Leahy Institute for Rural Partnerships engages in community-university partnership development across a range of activities. One such instance of this work is the annual Research, Innovation, Entrepreneurship, and Sustainability (RISE) Summit, which is hosted at the University of Vermont. Each year, we bring together academics, students, practitioners, and community members to learn about the innovative partnership work

happening at UVM. In the past year, the theme for RISE was *Partnerships for Rural Prosperity*. We had the opportunity to welcome over 600 participants to campus, and featured Vermont leadership like Representative Becca Balint, and national voices on rural development like Tony Pipa from the Brookings Institution.

This year, as in years past, we focused on how students can be central to supporting rural thriving across Vermont. We ran our third year of place-based summer internships, where a cohort of students lives and works in a rural Vermont community. This year, UVM students lived and worked in Brattleboro, Randolph, and Craftsbury, supporting local businesses and non-profits, as well as supporting the local economy and vibrancy of the places where they lived. We also recognized that community-engaged learning opportunities could be amplified through financial support for faculty and community partners. We ran our first year of Student Engagement for a Resilient Vermont (SERV) grants, and six faculty received $10,000 in funding to build out courses rooted in Vermont-based projects.

In September of 2026, we launched the Vermont Data Collaborative, which is a platform rooted in providing data tools and services to bolster rural planning and decision-making. A news story was published about that work, which will continue to iterate and grow to support Vermont communities.

Impact and Learning

After three years of programming, grantmaking, and partnership development, the Institutes for Rural Partnerships are honing in on the way impact evaluation and learning/knowledge generation are captured and how this work can be replicated and amplified.

At the Wisconsin consortium meeting in July, we discussed the different spheres of impact, including impact on university, impact on students, impact on community, and impact on knowledge. We will continue to work together to hone and coalesce how we show the impact of the Institutes for Rural Partnerships work, and use these spheres as guides. In this section, we describe the ways the three institutions are currently measuring and tracking our impact and success, and set the stage for upcoming publications and reports related to the collective impact, and knowledge generated by the Institutes for Rural Partnerships.

Auburn University

At Auburn University, AURPI uses a variety of quantitative metrics to measure its impact, including analytics about how often their core websites and social media are visited.

Presentations at conferences, publications and research recognition, and speaking requests and podcast invitations are also indicative of impact in the rural development space. When community partners request datasets, reports, or training, and when technology that AURPI supported the innovation of is adopted, and the number of graduate students trained are also indicators of success.

University of Wisconsin-Madison

As the Wisconsin portion of this project focuses on research integrated with outreach, a chief measure for us is the research impact of relevant projects as measured by publications in peer-reviewed journals. We also assess the number, quality and attendance at our information-sharing events, and we value when research and these outreach events have a high-quality integration. We also use informal feedback from the public, and formal feedback twice a year from our external Advisory Board. Other important measures include the number and type of requests for interviews by news outlets, especially when they come from areas of rural Wisconsin. We are interested in the development of key infrastructure and people necessary to achieve goals within our projects. Examples include that we now have 72 weather stations installed in the state (as part of our Wisconet weather project) and three deployed community health workers (as part of our Rural Healthcare efforts). Many of our projects engage undergraduate and graduate student researchers, and so one measure we look at is student engagement across several disciplines and progression towards degree. A good example here is our Extreme weather project which engages students and staff from Extension, horticulture, engineering We utilize formal feedback, such as the recent feedback from the Oneida nation shared within this report.

University of Vermont

At the University of Vermont, we focus on both the immediate and long-term impacts of our work. As we fund a series of partnership grants annually, we co-create metrics with our partners that we track at the 6- and 12-month milestones of the project. Additionally, we seek out long-term impacts through continued engagement with partnerships, even after the conclusion of our funding. Often, the co-created metrics are mixed in nature, including quantitative measures like number of community partners or students engaged, publications, and/or tangible impacts. We also ask for qualitative impacts to be reported on, including changes in perceptions, policy implications, and sustained partnership opportunities.

As an institute more broadly, we track metrics of success via our work doing outreach and engagement activities across UVM's campus and across the state of Vermont. We work to

align outreach activities across our eight thematic areas, and work to be inclusive of all 14 counties in Vermont. On a monthly basis, we track wins of funded projects, the number of meetings held on campus and off, and evaluate the number of students engaged across projects.

Upcoming Collaborative Products

The last three years of the Institutes for Rural Partnerships have been place-specific efforts to amplify the way community-university partnerships can support rural communities. This has manifested in on-campus student internships and opportunities, grantmaking to collaborative partnerships, and participation in broader statewide conversations and initiatives related to rural development. During the summer of 2026, we convened to discuss the different ways impact manifests across the three Institutes, and will soon put forward a document that can guide impact evaluation for initiatives of this nature.

Future Endeavors

In the coming year, the three Institutes for Rural Partnerships will continue to build upon the collaborative work of quantifying the impact and telling the story of this program, in addition to continuing to support collaborative, partnership- based programming that impacts rural communities across their respective states.

During the summer of 2027, the consortium will re-convene in Vermont for our annual meeting. This will provide an opportunity for the consortium members to present their respective work and discuss collaborative opportunities.