



FORCES FOR CHANGE: A YOUTH GUIDE TO THE NEW YORK STATE CLIMATE SMART COMMUNITIES PROGRAM

THE W!LD CENTER



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The Case for Climate Action

Everyone, including you, can join the fight against climate change. We need action on every scale, from the global to the local, to prepare and respond to this crisis. Climate change is not only a future issue—it's happening right now, in our communities.

In New York State, we are already experiencing **warmer seasons, increased rainfall** and **sea level rise** due to climate change. Low-income communities, communities of color and rural communities are hit the hardest by these issues. This means that these groups (and young representatives from them!) should be at the center of selecting and implementing climate solutions. You need and deserve to be a part of decisions that impact your future. When your skills and enthusiasm are paired with the influence of local government, you can be a force for positive change.





Who Is This Guide For?

Are you a high school student who...

- *Wants to act on climate change but doesn't know where to start?*
- *Has worked on environmental projects at school but wants a broader impact?*
- *Is interested in civics, policy or local government?*

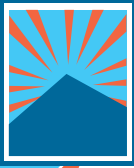
If you answered “yes” to any of these questions, you’re in the right place.

The purpose of this guide is to equip young people, their adult allies and local governments with the background, knowledge and skills necessary to build climate-resilient communities. We use the New York State Climate Smart Communities (CSC) program as a roadmap for how to form and sustain these partnerships. Even though this guide is New York State-focused, there are many useful resources for young people anywhere to use in their own states and communities. See our companion guide, *Find Your Voice: A Youth Guide to Tackling Climate Change with your Local Government*, for more.

(Note: This guide was written for, with and by young people, so the use of “you” throughout assumes a youth audience. The terms “youth” and “young people” refer to high schoolers ages 13-18.)

DO YOU LIVE OUTSIDE OF NEW YORK STATE?

- See if your state is a part of [The Sustainable States Network](#). States in this network have programs similar to CSC.
- Join an existing climate task force, or approach your village/town/city government and suggest starting one.
- See if there is a [Youth Climate Summit](#) in your community. Summits can be catalysts for youth and local government working together.
- The [U.S. Climate Resilience Toolkit](#) is a great resource if you are just getting started.



BACKGROUND: CIVIC ENGAGEMENT & THE WILD CENTER'S YOUTH CLIMATE PROGRAM

The Wild Center is a natural history museum and science center in the Adirondacks. Located in northern New York, the Adirondack Park is a 6-million-acre state park—bigger than Yellowstone and Yosemite combined. All of us here know what's at stake because of climate change. From the disappearance of the maple industry to less snow and ice for ice fishing and skiing, climate change threatens the winter culture that defines this special place. That's why we launched our first Adirondack Youth Climate Summit more than a decade ago. Since then, we've established the [Youth Climate Program](#), which works globally to empower young people to take climate action in their schools and communities. To accomplish this, we've helped thousands of students through Youth Climate Summits. These events promote youth-led climate action plans and the elevation of youth voices in the climate movement.

Since the first Youth Climate Summit, we noticed that young people wanted to address climate change by working with their local governments. We saw a great opportunity for youth to get involved in a New York State-based climate initiative called Climate Smart Communities (CSC), so we started talking about CSC at Youth Climate Summits across the state. Soon young people began collaborating with their local governments to implement this program. Young people who got involved in CSC, along with their adult allies in their schools and communities, acted as key consultants, advisors, authors and editors of this guide. [Check out this video](#) to learn more about the young people in New York State who have worked with CSC programs in their communities.



"It ended up being a perfect partnership. As students, we have free time to devote to something like Climate Smart Communities and the village board and the mayor had the experience to guide us through the process ... Even the small village of Homer, N.Y., can make an impact on this global problem. I think the really exciting thing is if we could encourage other municipalities across the state to do the same thing."

**– Andrew Fagerheim, Homer, N.Y.,
CSC Coordinator and Youth Climate Leader**





PART 1: NEW YORK STATE'S CLIMATE SMART COMMUNITIES PROGRAM

Why Participate in the CSC Program?

Local governments can do a lot to prepare their communities for climate change. By joining the Climate Smart Communities program, they can turn **climate change awareness into action**. The program also helps municipalities create short-term and long-term goals for building **climate resilience**.

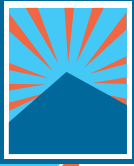
The Climate Smart Communities certification program is:

- **Structured:** Climate change is a daunting challenge. The certification program allows communities to approach it as a series of manageable, localized tasks. Participating communities can draw on advice and experience from state-level experts.
- **Adaptable:** The CSC certification process includes big and small projects you can tackle, from clean energy to habitat management and infrastructure to climate education. No matter how small your community (or budget) is, the program can be tailored to meet your needs.
- **Collaborative:** Because the program is so comprehensive, it encourages building community partnerships. This provides a perfect opportunity to bring a new generation into public service. Adding youth to the mix diversifies and strengthens the task force.
- **Rewarding:** CSC participation makes it easier to access grant funding and technical assistance and can lead to state-level recognition.

Your job is to help persuade your local government to join CSC. As local governments weigh whether to participate, officials will evaluate the pros and cons. They will most likely be interested in understanding costs associated with joining (resources, money, time, etc.) As you begin the CSC process, keep the benefits in mind.

CSC CERTIFICATION PROGRAM BENEFITS TO LOCAL GOVERNMENTS:

- **Money.** Participating in the CSC program boosts your community's chances to win CSC grants and other state awards.
- **Resources.** The program offers communities technical assistance, training, tools and mentorship to achieve their climate goals.
- **Community Health.** Leads to increases in air quality, walkability, green spaces, energy efficiency and investment in the local economy.
- **Climate Resilience.** Helps communities adapt and prepare for extreme heat, flooding and other climate impacts.



WHAT IS THE NYS CLIMATE SMART COMMUNITIES (CSC) PROGRAM?

By 2040, all the electricity produced in New York State is expected to come from zero-emissions sources. The state's ambitious goals were set in 2019, when legislators enacted the [Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act](#) (also known as the Climate Act).

Participating in the [New York State Climate Smart Communities \(CSC\) program](#) is one of the most important ways you can contribute to this monumental effort. Since launching in 2009, more than 375 communities have registered to join CSC, and more are joining each year.

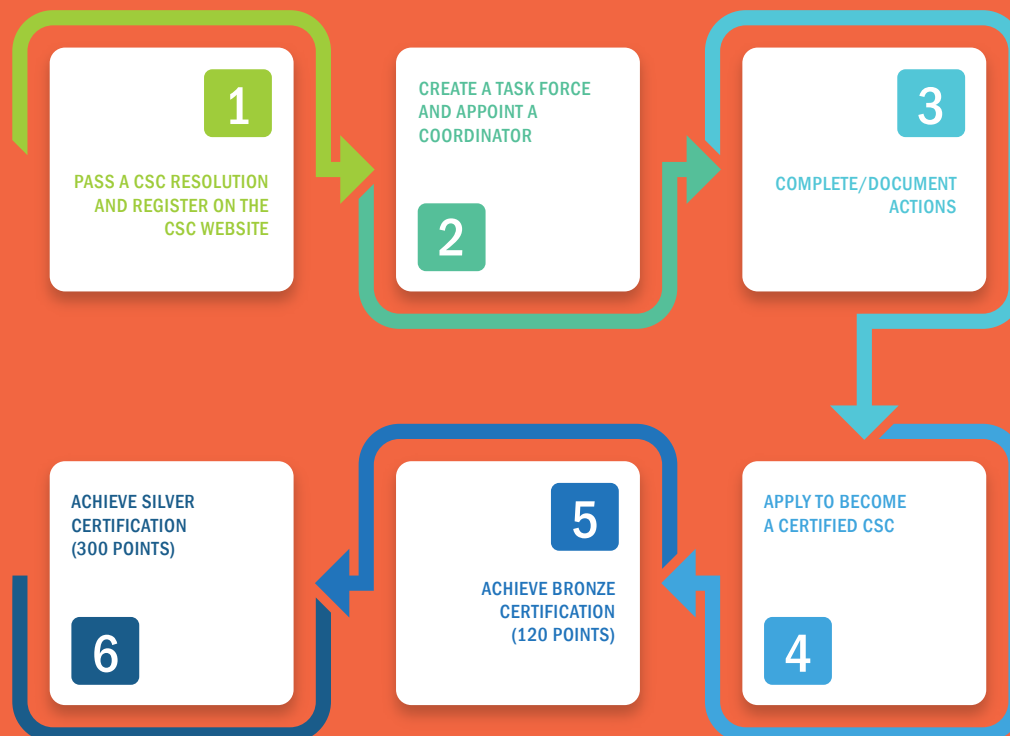
Taking climate action can be straightforward, practical and even fun! Through the CSC Certification program, local governments complete and document climate actions that earn points.

Becoming a **REGISTERED** community means your local government has signed the CSC pledge and promises to take action.

Becoming a **CERTIFIED** community means that your local government has actually implemented solutions to address climate change. This award signifies that your community has practiced what it preached with the CSC pledge and is now becoming a state leader in climate change action.

The time frame for achieving certification is different for every community. It depends on prior climate actions, available volunteers and other resources. This is an ongoing, collaborative project that can often take a year or more. Climate change is a huge challenge, and addressing solutions and impacts requires perseverance.

A SIMPLIFIED OVERVIEW OF THE CSC CERTIFICATION PROCESS



PART 2: THE 10-STEP GUIDE TO GETTING YOUR COMMUNITY INVESTED IN CLIMATE SMART COMMUNITIES

Becoming a certified Climate Smart Community takes time. Competing priorities and limited funds and staff often get in the way of action, especially in small, local governments. That is why outside help is so essential. We are all busy, but by transforming passion into action and staying involved, you can help your community move forward and plan for the future.

The following steps outline how to get your community invested in the CSC program and move toward certification. Young people can be (and long have been) involved in any and all parts of the CSC certification process. You may live in a community that is not yet registered, one that is already registered or one that has achieved certification. We recommend you read through the following steps and start wherever makes sense for your community.

“Youth are playing a critical role in developing community resilience. They are engaging their leaders, they are building more capacity in those communities to actually do the heavy lifting of, say, vulnerability assessments or greenhouse gas assessments.”

**– Frank Niepold,
National Oceanic and
Atmospheric Association (NOAA)**





STEP 1: UNDERSTAND YOUR COMMUNITY

Start here if your community is not yet registered! Otherwise, start at Step 8.
(Find out if you live in a registered community [here](#))

While the CSC Certification program is used as an overarching example, many of the practical actions in this step can really be applied to any topic you might want to address with your local government. Note: The steps in this section were inspired by steps in the [U.S. Climate Resilience Toolkit](#).

ACTION STEPS



Identify the things your community cares about.

How does becoming a CSC align with local concerns?

- Brainstorm some **traits that define your community**. What does your region/community define itself as? A tourist destination, an eco-conscious village, an agricultural community, a charming, small town?
- Brainstorm some **values of the people in your community**. For example, do people value knowing their neighbors, investing in small businesses or being active outdoors? What does your community care about?
- **What features, services and opportunities** make your community a good place to live and work?
- **What neighborhoods, historic sites, schools, tourist attractions and/or retail centers make your community special?** Consider physical, social and economic assets in your area.



Explore current and future climate hazards that impact your community (i.e., flooding, extreme heat, extreme weather and impacts to public health such as Lyme disease or heat-related illness). You can use the [Climate Mapping for Resilience and Adaptation Map](#) to find hazards in your area.

- How might these threats interact with the defining traits and values listed above?
- How can the local government address these through the CSC certification program?



Research your municipality. As you answer the following questions, document what you find. These questions can help you determine where to start and how existing efforts can be supported by joining CSC.

- Is your community already involved in CSC or climate action? You can find out by viewing the map of participating communities [here](#).
- Is there a municipality nearby that is participating in climate change action or CSC? Can it serve as an example to your community?
- Do you have any existing connections to a local government that could help you? Do any public officials work with youth or schools already?
- Is there an employee or volunteer dedicated to climate, energy, environment or the CSC program already? What about a community planner or community development director?



Contact your [CSC coordinator](#). Learn more about getting involved in the program and get additional information about your community's involvement in climate initiatives.



Build a team. What groups or individuals might want to help with CSC in your community? Include CSC coordinators, local organizations, students and other community members. Also consider who will be most impacted by climate change in your community and make sure their voices are represented on your team.



Define your scope. Through your research about your community, decide which level of local government you want to engage with the CSC program. Will you reach out to your town, village, city or county? Why?

- Your regional [CSC Coordinator](#) is a great resource for helping you understand the certification process at each of these levels and can help you decide which one makes the most sense.



STEP 2: BUILD YOUR CASE

ACTION STEPS



Note any CSC [actions](#) your government may have already completed. Even if your community has not registered as a CSC, officials might have done some of these actions already. This helps in two ways—first, they completed that action for a reason, demonstrating that they are already committed to taking climate action. Second, it shows they don't have to start from scratch in joining the CSC program.



List the **pros and cons** of joining the CSC program. What are the benefits? What are possible concerns? Why should your local government commit money and time to these actions?



Familiarize yourself with the [CSC registration](#) requirements.



Tailor the [example resolution](#) to fit your community.



Reference the [list of benefits](#) of becoming a registered CSC. Add any other relevant benefits or solutions that could save your local government money.



Identify your ask: Should your local government sign the resolution and become a registered CSC? Should officials create a task force? Should youth be part of the task force? Be specific.



STEP 3: OBSERVE A PUBLIC MEETING

ACTION STEPS



Find out the **meeting time and place** and make a plan to attend.



Review **meeting agenda** and any recent meeting notes.



Attend the **public meeting** to familiarize yourself with the meeting process.



Take notes during the meeting to help prepare for participating in a future meeting as a presenter or public commenter. Consider the following questions:

- How is the meeting structured (i.e., flow of agenda, who is allowed to speak, etc.)?
- How formal is it?
- What makes the officials pay attention/stay engaged?
- How long do people speak during a public comment period?
- Do officials respond after individuals make a public comment? Do they ask follow-up questions, or allow the public to respond?
- Are there environmental or climate related topics on the agenda or that come up in discussion during the meeting?
- Is there anyone else in attendance whom you know, or who might be a potential ally in CSC efforts in your local government?

PRACTICING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT WITH MOCK TOWN HALLS

Each year at Cape Cod Youth Climate Action Summit in Massachusetts, students practice communicating about climate issues during a [mock town hall](#).

At the 2022 Summit, students debated a fictional policy that would turn a local highway into a Venice-style boating canal in response to sea level rise. Students created statements for or against the policy which they then presented to select members of the town's board.

Students who participated in the mock town hall reported that it helped build their confidence to attend and speak at an actual public meeting and think creatively about real-world community climate impacts such as sea level rise.





STEP 4: MEET WITH AN ELECTED OFFICIAL



ACTION STEPS



Determine which local official(s) you will approach about the CSC program and get their contact information. Tip: Consider which one is most likely to champion a climate initiative based on past experience with environmental issues, working with young people, etc.



Draft an email/prepare talking points for an introductory call to your local officials.

- Introduce yourself or your group, explain why you are reaching out and ask about setting up a meeting to discuss further involvement.
- Share your why: Be sure to mention any past experiences that may help demonstrate your dedication, passion and responsibility to climate action (i.e., school projects, club involvement, attendance at community events, leadership experience, personal experience with a climate impact, etc.)
- Provide ways for that official to contact your group, such as email, phone, in person at an upcoming event, etc.



Schedule a meeting with your local official(s).

- **If your community is not yet registered:** Discuss what CSC is and why they should support it, including the benefits of joining. Let them know that signing a resolution is the first step.
- **If your community is already registered:** Discuss how you can support new or ongoing actions towards certification.
- **If your community is certified (Bronze or Silver):** Discuss how you can get involved with ongoing projects or start a new initiative under the CSC umbrella.



Ask your regional [CSC Coordinator](#) to support your efforts by attending a meeting with local officials.



Make a list of questions that you will ask the official(s) during the meeting that will help you understand how feasible CSC registration and eventual certification might be. Potential questions include:

- Do you know about the New York State CSC Program? If not, share a bit about the program, show the website and mention some of the benefits of joining.
- What is your perspective on the CSC program? Do you see it overlapping with other municipal projects or values?
- Do you think there is support for this program already?
- What questions do you see board members/other officials having?
- Is it possible for us to present about the CSC program at an upcoming public meeting (i.e., public comment, presentation, etc.)?

PRO MEETING TIPS FROM YOUTH EXPERTS:

- **Demonstrate your responsibility, professionalism and determination** to see a project through. Officials need to know that there are people willing to follow through on actions and organizing.
- **Clearly state what you are asking** of the individuals you speak with and the entire local government. You may want them to gauge support for the program with other public officials, sign a CSC resolution, become a registered CSC community, create a CSC task force or invite young people to join an existing CSC task force. Be specific.
- **Keep calm.** You don't need to know all the answers, but you should always research and follow up on every question you are asked.
- **Thank people for their time** and provide contact information of someone who can answer any questions and concerns as they arise (ideally a student and a teacher/adult mentor).



STEP 5: PRESENT AT A PUBLIC MEETING

ACTION STEPS



Get on the next meeting agenda. If this process is not clear to you, a local government official who attends these meetings may be able to help out. This is a great role for an adult ally—don't forget to ask for help if you need it.



Submit any materials to the meeting facilitator well before the meeting. This could include printouts, slides or other visual aids.

- If you plan to use a digital presentation and equipment is available, plan for all possible problems—always be ready for technical difficulties. Make sure you have the slideshow downloaded to your computer and that you can present without a slideshow if needed.

Create your presentation. Use the following guidelines for your planning:



- If you plan to use technology, find out if equipment is available (projector, screen, computer, speakers, etc.)
- Decide how many people will present during the meeting. Remember to keep timing in mind and leave space for transitions if you will have multiple presenters.
- Structure & content: Make sure to include a hook, local climate impacts, introduction/overview to the CSC program, benefits of joining, any overlaps with existing local government projects/priorities and how youth will help with this effort.
- Include a thank-you slide with ways for people to contact you after the meeting.



Practice your presentation. Consider creating note cards or presenter notes to stay on track.



Conclude with your ask (i.e., signing the CSC resolution, appointing a CSC Coordinator, registering as a CSC, including youth on the CSC task force, completing specific actions for certification, etc.)

- If they say no, don't worry! It can be disappointing, but it may take a few meetings. Establishing contact with your local government and showing them that people care about this issue will only help when you return.
- Consider your next steps. Why didn't they say yes? Is there something missing from your presentation that might have helped convince them? Do you need to create a petition for community members to sign to show public support for this program? Ask for feedback from people at the meeting and figure out how you can improve your approach to make it a "yes" in the future.

PRACTICING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT WITH MOCK TOWN HALLS

In Rhinebeck, N.Y., students at Bulkeley Middle School took a civics enrichment elective which built upon previous community efforts to design safe routes to school. Students worked with local elected officials, CSC Task Force members and their teacher to create a proposal that four students presented at a public meeting. [Their presentation](#) included mapping existing sidewalks, crosswalks and bike lanes; making recommendations for where to fix or add pedestrian-friendly infrastructure; and a sign design for crosswalks regularly used by students.

This project aligns with several CSC Actions: PE6: Safe Routes to School; PE6: Planning for Biking and Walking; PE6: Infrastructure for Biking and Walking; and PE6: Complete Streets Policy.

Inspired by the Village of Rhinebeck and want to design safe routes to school in your community? Check out the [Safe Routes to School](#) webpage to get involved.





STEP 6: PASS A CSC RESOLUTION

The first step toward CSC certification is to pass a [CSC resolution](#). While some parts of the resolution can be changed to fit your community, all 10 points of the CSC pledge must be included. This resolution must be signed by the municipal clerk and then uploaded into the online portal.



STEP 7: SELECT A CSC POINT PERSON & REGISTER YOUR COMMUNITY

The CSC point person takes on the responsibility of leading the CSC effort on behalf of the local government. Typically, the CSC point person will complete tasks such as uploading the signed CSC Resolution, completing the online registration process and creating the CSC Task Force.

After the resolution has been signed and a CSC point person has been selected, the point person can register the community using the [online registration form](#).





STEP 8: UNDERSTAND YOUR COMMUNITY

Start here if your community is already registered!

If your community is already registered or certified, your regional [CSC coordinator](#) can connect you with your local CSC point person/task force to find out how you can get involved with ongoing projects.

The CSC task force will carry out the important work of selecting and completing actions to work toward certification. After receiving certification, the task force can help draft a local Climate Action Plan, create climate policy and continue to complete recommended climate actions.

ACTION STEPS



Determine the size of your task force (we recommend fewer than 12 people).



Create a contact list of possible members based on their skills, interests and ability to contribute to the CSC Certification process. Consider including individuals from different local government departments, such as energy, waste, planning and transportation; local business owners; students; educators; farmers; and elected officials.



Reach out to possible members. Provide background on the program, ask if they'd like to join, and tell them why their skills or perspectives are valued.

- Young people can help with this effort by approaching possible members and asking them to join the task force for them. This could be done in person, in an email, or in writing.
- Remember to include interested young people on the task force!



Finalize task force members and assign roles. You can let people decide what interests them and how they would like to contribute.



Create a task force structure. Find a meeting place and discuss when and how often you will meet. Decide whether you will always meet as a whole group, identify a core group that meets regularly with input from others, or create working groups/committees.



Have your first meeting. If your community has not done so already, a great first meeting topic could be to create a [Community Asset Map](#) focused on climate change impacts and resources.

TIP FOR ADULT ALLIES:

It may be helpful to assign students specific roles. These are examples of roles young people have had on task forces in the past:

Assistant Greenhouse Gas Inventory Coordinator:

Assist a city official in completing the Greenhouse Gas Inventory. This is a great task for a detail-oriented young person who likes numbers and spreadsheets. This role aligns with the following CSC Actions:

- PE2 Action: Government Operations GHG Inventory
- PE2 Action: Community GHG Inventory

Social Media Curator: create a social media account for your CSC chapter and post about the program, local actions, and upcoming events. This role aligns with the following CSC Actions:

- PE9 Action: Social Media

Community Outreach Specialist: spread the word about the Climate Smart Communities by tabling at local events & festivals. This role aligns with the following CSC Actions:

- PE9 Action: Climate Change Education & Engagement
- PE9 Action: Climate-related Public Events



STEP 9: COMPLETE THE CLIMATE ACTIONS

After registering, your task force will need to work together to complete selected actions outlined by the CSC Certification program. While there is no time limit to achieving certification, your task force should develop a plan so that you can do so in a reasonable amount of time.

ACTION STEPS



Determine which certification level you will try to achieve (Bronze or Silver).

Create a timeline for how you will achieve certification. Include the number of points you will need and create benchmarks for when you'd like to have a certain number of actions completed, submit for certification, etc.

Decide which [application cycle deadline](#) you will try to meet.

Review the [Action List](#) to determine any actions your local government has already completed. Make sure you collect and upload all necessary documentation to get credit for these actions.

Start selecting actions from the Action List that your local government will complete, beginning with the [Mandatory and Priority Actions](#). When selecting other actions, consider the following:

- Actions related to relevant climate impacts in your community that need to be addressed, such as flooding, drought or extreme heat.
- Actions that will save money for your local government and/or residents.
- Actions related to specific skills or interests of task force members.
- Actions that are easy to complete, including those that may be already in progress.

Add your selected actions to your timeline.

Assign task force members to work on each action.



“Young people should feel welcome to pick out actions that engage them, as well as look for actions they would like to learn more about. Each task force should leave space for youth members to shadow more experienced members in order to learn about the governmental procedure, policymaking, or any other aspect of the process they are interested in. My biggest takeaway from working on my CSC task force was getting to learn how local governments run and the ways that citizens can make change in that system.”

- Cedar Young, Former Saranac Lake CSC Task Force Member



STEP 10: APPLY FOR CERTIFICATION

ACTION STEPS



Ensure that you have **completed enough actions** to meet the requirements for your certification level.



Collect all needed summaries and documentation for each action from task force members. Tip: Use Google Docs or another collaborative platform where everyone can share access.



Make sure all documentation is **reviewed by the CSC Coordinator**.



Upload all documentation for completed actions into the online portal.



Submit your application package before the application cycle you've selected. Once you submit, you will not be able to access this again until it has been reviewed!



Wait for a response from the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation Office of Climate Change. The DEC may award certification, request changes or seek additional information.



Make any needed changes or additions to your application.



Celebrate your hard work to make your local government more climate-friendly! Make sure to let your community know about your great work.

“Youth can be great assets to their communities. I think young people in New York State are very concerned about the impacts they are seeing related to climate change. Now, thanks to the skill sets that they gain at The Wild Center’s Youth Climate Summits and the New York State Climate Smart Communities Program, they have a pathway to collaborate with their local leaders and actually work together to make climate solutions with local leaders in their rural communities.”

- Silas Swanson, Youth Climate Leader





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