

Alliance for Western Excellence

Uniting Western Region land-grant university
research, extension, and education for a resilient future



The Alliance for Western Excellence is a collective strategic framework developed by Western Region land-grant universities to create meaningful, measurable impact through regional focus and purpose-driven collaboration. Adopting an AWE-inspired collective approach offers significant advantages, including enhanced problem-solving, shared resources and expertise, increased relevance and recognition, a unified voice for stronger advocacy, and broader reach.

This document outlines a five-year strategic framework for implementing collective efforts to amplify impact, strengthen financial resilience, and drive transformative change.

With commitment from extension, agricultural research and academic programs at

University of Alaska Fairbanks

Montana State University

American Samoa Community College

University of Nevada, Reno

University of Arizona

New Mexico State University

University of California

Northern Marianas College

Colorado State University

Oregon State University

University of Guam

Utah State University

University of Hawai'i at Manoa

Washington State University

University of Idaho

University of Wyoming

College of Micronesia Land Grant Program

In collaboration with

Western Administrative Heads Section • W-CARET members • agInnovation-West • Western Academic Programs Section • Western Extension Directors Association Western 1994 Land-Grant Institutions • non-land-grant Colleges of Agriculture • Community, State, and Federal Partners

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Vision

Rooted in the land-grant mission, we unite teaching, research, and extension across the Western Region to tackle critical challenges in agriculture, food, environment, and communities — driving bold action and measurable impact with national and global relevance.

The landscape

The Western United States is experiencing dynamic conditions that bring both complexity and promise. Shifting land use, evolving weather patterns, changing public needs, and rapid technological advances are transforming the region. These forces create unparalleled opportunities for innovation, resilience, and leadership. The Western Region stands as a national bellwether and a proving ground for solutions that will strengthen agricultural and food systems across the country.

Spanning a vast and varied landscape — from deserts and mountains to islands and coastal regions — the region's diversity fuels creativity and progress. Our land-grant universities lead the way in developing forward-thinking strategies that not only address today's challenges but also anticipate tomorrow's needs. We recognize our state, federal and Tribal partners as well as non-land-grant colleges of agriculture as important collaborators in this work. Through research, extension, and education, we are uniquely positioned to harness these opportunities — advancing water security, wildfire resilience, food systems, and economic vitality. Together, we ensure the Western U.S. remains a place of prosperity, sustainability, and well-being for generations to come.

Building on a decade of foundational insights and collaboration from the Western Perspective and Western Agenda (2015), this renewed framework affirms strategic priorities and collaborative approaches to enhance collaboration, drive innovation, leverage shared strengths, and expand access to emerging knowledge and resources throughout the Western Region.

Signature areas of focus

In alignment with national land-grant university efforts and APLU Board on Agriculture Assembly priorities, the Western Region is uniquely positioned to lead in four signature areas. These efforts are powered by robust research infrastructure, trusted extension networks, and top-ranked academic programs, and strengthened through a deliberate focus on technology and data-driven solutions, systems thinking, and transdisciplinary collaboration.

Strengthening agricultural and food systems

The Western Region encompasses the hottest and coldest environments in the U.S., the highest peaks and lowest valleys, and some of the most urbanized and rural communities. This diversity uniquely positions the region to address future shifts in animal and crop production. Land-grant universities leverage extensive research and extension networks to advance and protect agricultural systems while supporting producers in adapting to changing conditions.

These institutions also provide facilities and resources that strengthen food security. The West's varied growing conditions enable a wide range of food production, reducing vulnerability to widespread shortages. However, despite agriculture's role as a major economic driver, the region remains susceptible to reduced food availability and affordability during economic downturns. Building resilient regional food systems — ensuring consistent access to nutritious food, reducing waste, and improving supply chain efficiency — is essential to mitigating food insecurity.

Areas of emphasis:

- **Advance precision and digital agriculture technologies** (including AI-driven tools) to address current and emerging challenges in food and agricultural systems.
- **Integrate advanced technologies into academic and extension programs** to prepare a skilled, future-ready workforce.
- **Align education with industry needs** to ensure a strong pipeline of professionals in agriculture and natural resource industries.
- **Foster collaborative research** that leads to commercialized technologies, patents, and scalable innovations for Western agricultural producers.
- **Develop technologies to extend shelf life, minimize inefficiencies and reduce product losses** throughout the food system, from production to consumption.
- **Increase supply chain resilience** to support food safety and security, prevent disruptions and enable faster recovery after crises.
- **Prepare students to apply integrated knowledge and technologies** that strengthen food safety and security and regional food system resilience.
- **Support producers and distributors in adopting technologies** that enhance local food networks, improve distribution, create jobs, and spur new businesses.
- **Reduce food insecurity** by improving the effectiveness of food hubs, CSAs, and farm-to-table initiatives.
- **Advance research and innovation in “food for health”** by engineering crops and food products with targeted nutritional profiles to address chronic health conditions, improve wellness, and reduce health care costs.

Stewarding natural resources

Home to environments ranging from arctic to tropical, the Western Region offers unparalleled opportunities to study and advance natural resource management. This diversity creates a living laboratory for addressing complex ecological and environmental challenges. The region's land-grant universities leverage this unique setting to catalyze research, education, and outreach that sustain working landscapes and natural resources critical to the region's economic and ecological health.

Across this vast geography, students, researchers, and extension professionals are actively engaged in tackling persistent issues such as drought, flooding, freshwater scarcity, wildfires, invasive species, pest outbreaks, and evolving water and land use policies. This work combines scientific innovation with practical solutions to ensure resilient ecosystems and communities. By integrating research with hands-on learning and community partnerships, land-grant institutions help safeguard resources and support sustainable development for generations to come.

Areas of emphasis:

- **Build landscape-level resilience** to withstand weather variability and extremes.
- **Develop interdisciplinary, practical solutions** for complex natural resource challenges.
- **Design multipurpose landscapes** that produce food, fiber, and energy while conserving natural resources.
- **Create ecosystem management systems** to guide land and water use planning.
- **Promote management practices** that prevent watershed and water resource degradation from pesticides, chemicals, animal waste, nutrients, sediments, and pathogens.
- **Implement effective fuel management strategies** to reduce catastrophic wildfire risk.
- **Provide innovative approaches** to stabilize and restore rangelands, forests, and other resources after wildfires.
- **Advance integrated pest management** using long-term prevention techniques such as biological control, habitat manipulation, cultural practice modification, and resistant varieties.

Fostering community health and vitality

The Western U.S. spans some of the nation's most remote communities and largest urban centers. Both rural and urban areas face challenges such as population decline, limited access to health resources, decreasing school enrollments, and struggling businesses. At the same time, vibrant towns offer recreation and growing economies but often struggle to maintain essential services and affordable living costs. Major metropolitan areas serve as hubs for agriculture, technology, commerce, and trade — industries that depend on a strong agricultural foundation. Across the region, communities share priorities like safeguarding water resources, ensuring food security, improving health and well-being, protecting farmland, preserving natural resources, expanding broadband, and addressing other local needs.

Western Region land-grant universities are vital contributors to state economies and key industries. Through scientific innovation, community-based education, and an educational enterprise serving tens of thousands of students and professionals annually, these institutions drive prosperity, health, and resilience across the rural-urban continuum.

Areas of emphasis:

- **Expand innovative nutrition and physical activity programs** tailored to diverse age groups and communities.
- **Align food crop research, education and public health goals** to create new opportunities for producers and enhance community well-being and individual health outcomes.
- **Deliver trauma-informed, evidence-based mental and behavioral health education**, scaling high-impact programs regionally with toolkits and shared resources.
- **Partner with regional coalitions** to advance policies, systems, and environments that promote long-term health equity.
- **Provide targeted support for entrepreneurs** in agriculture, food, and natural resource industries through training, micro-grants, and mentorship.
- **Accelerate broadband access and digital literacy** via strategic cross-state or regional partnerships and university-led initiatives.
- **Equip local leaders with research-based tools and data** to guide decisions on land use, economic resilience, and community health.
- **Educate individuals and communities on emergency preparedness**, wildfire prevention, and risk reduction strategies to protect lives and property.
- **Co-create solutions with Tribal and Indigenous communities** that honor traditional knowledge of people, environments and ecosystems.
- **Contribute research-based recommendations** for placemaking, housing, and infrastructure strategies that enhance quality of life in rural and urban areas.

Building future-ready learners and leaders

Human ingenuity and resilience remain our greatest assets, and the promise of future generations drives our mission. Land-grant universities are investing in current and emerging leaders through programs such as 4-H Youth Development, FFA, undergraduate and graduate education, research opportunities, and professional training for agriculture and community leaders. These efforts ensure individuals are equipped with academic readiness, career skills, and leadership capabilities to thrive in a rapidly changing world.

The Western Region's cultural diversity and vast geography create a unique context for delivering accessible, relevant, and locally tailored educational programs. Through partnerships with schools, career and technical education, and youth development initiatives, land-grant universities reach nearly every county and school district, providing transformative K–12 experiences grounded in positive youth development. Combined with experiential learning in higher education and professional offerings aligned with the region's distinct industries and ecosystems, these university initiatives prepare students for the evolving careers of tomorrow and empower communities to thrive. Our collective focus is on creating pathways to education and career success while ensuring real-world relevance in all offerings.

Areas of emphasis:

- **Scale successful 4-H programming** for broader adoption through resource banks, toolkits and regional teams — focusing on programs and models that expand access and improve participant and volunteer retention.
- **Strengthen partnerships with schools** to deliver research-based educational programming for K–12 students before, during, and after school.
- **Develop cross-institutional credit, noncredit, and dual-credit courses** aligned with regional labor market needs.
- **Invest in leadership development programs** for communities and industries, led by universities or in collaboration with mission-aligned organizations.
- **Expand real-world learning opportunities** for degree-seeking students through research and extension collaborations, with a focus on retention and post-graduation job placement.
- **Scale successful practices and programs** that leverage land-grant universities' statewide networks to support educational pathways, boost high school graduation rates, and increase post-secondary enrollment.

Strategic imperatives

In alignment with institutional and national priorities, we seek to advance the region's collective research, extension and learning enterprise in these signature areas by:

1. **Increasing awareness** of our universities' collective contributions and impact with elected officials, decision makers and other key audiences.
2. **Enhancing public, private and partner support** for regional programs and initiatives.
3. **Building our capacity** for innovation, collaborative work and coordinated efforts.

Collective actions

We have prioritized the following actions to highlight the region's distinct contributions, build on existing strengths and capitalize on competitive advantages.

Note: Priority based on average of agInnovation-West, WEDA and APS top-3 rankings if item had more than one vote. Number of asterisks indicates number of sections that had item in their top 3.

General

1. Organize a Western Region Collective "Innovation Challenge"**
2. Establish Shared Regional Data and Resource Hubs***
3. Create a Cross-University "Grand Challenges Task Force"**
- Not ranked:
 - Launch a Regional Faculty and Extension Staff Exchange Program
 - Pilot a Collaborative Inter-University Course or Certificate Program

Impact reporting

1. Use Impact Narratives and Storytelling***
2. Standardize and Simplify Reporting Tools**
3. Shift Focus to Outcome-Oriented Reporting*
4. Align Reporting with Institutional and Regional Goals*
5. Highlight Interdisciplinary and Collaborative Contributions*
- Not ranked:
 - Incentivize Better Reporting

Strategies to leverage multi-state funding

1. Invest in Cross-Institutional Workforce Development Programs**
2. Develop Shared Infrastructure and Resource Hubs**
3. Prioritize Funding for Collaborative, High-Impact Projects*
4. Establish a Regional Innovation and Collaboration Grant Program*
5. Fund Pilot Projects to Test and Scale Innovative Solutions*

Implementation

Western Region leadership, working through the established structure of research, Extension, and academic leadership and their committees, will create a corresponding implementation framework.

This framework must not be prescriptive. Instead, it should:

- Provide shared visibility for successful regional work already underway.
- Support coordination on new initiatives and collective projects.
- Track progress and outcomes, leveraging existing systems and processes when possible.
- Empower individual institutions and sections to act in alignment.

Collaboration must remain at the center. While broad priorities for collective action have been identified, success depends on continued partnership across research, Extension, and academics. We must commit to a collaborative approach when selecting and supporting regional projects that will have the greatest impact and address the most pressing challenges and opportunities.

Next steps:

- Determine if an AWE implementation team or committee is needed, or if progress and accountability will be managed through existing processes and reporting lines.
- Engage the Western Region Evaluators Network (WREN) to define key metrics, establish baseline data, and create an evaluation plan for each of the three topline goals. Collective actions and projects should also include metrics and evaluation plans aligned with these goals.
- Engage Western Region Communicators (W-Comm) to develop a strategic communications framework, messaging, and materials to support institutional, multi-state, and collective efforts.

Our commitment, in action

Our commitment does not end with this plan — it lives through action, accountability, and advocacy.

We call on every Western Region land-grant university, partner organization, and stakeholder to champion this framework by embedding it into daily decisions, sharing progress openly, and celebrating collective wins. We will keep our commitment visible through regular reporting, joint initiatives, and unified messaging that demonstrates collective impact.

Together, we can transform challenges into opportunities and ensure the Western Region leads with innovation, resilience, and purpose.