Submitted electronically via ERA@hq.doe.gov

November 28, 2022

Re: **Request for Information on Energy Improvements in Rural or Remote Areas (DE-FOA-0002841_RFI)**

To Whom It May Concern:

The National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA) respectfully submits the following comments in response to the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) request for information (RFI) on its program implementation strategies and funding processes to support Energy Improvements in Rural or Remote Areas (DE-FOA-0002841_RFI).

NRECA is the national trade association representing nearly 900 local electric cooperatives and other rural electric utilities. NRECA's member cooperatives include 62 generation and transmission (G&T) cooperatives and 831 distribution cooperatives. The G&Ts generate and transmit power to distribution cooperatives that provide it to the end of line co-op consumer-members.

America's electric cooperatives are owned by the people that they serve and comprise a unique sector of the electric industry. From growing regions to remote farming communities, electric cooperatives power one in eight Americans and serve as engines of economic development for 42 million Americans across 56 percent of the nation's landscape.

Electric cooperatives operate at cost and without a profit incentive. Collectively, cooperative G&Ts generate and transmit power to nearly 80 percent of the distribution cooperatives in the nation. The remaining distribution cooperatives receive power directly from other generation sources within the electric utility sector. Both distribution and G&T cooperatives share an obligation to serve their members by providing safe, reliable, and affordable electric service.

We appreciate the opportunity to provide DOE feedback on the topics raised in the RFI for the Energy Improvements in Rural or Remote Areas Program.

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Category 1: Respondent Characteristics

Question 1.1:

What type of organization do you represent, or are you responding as a private citizen? To help DOE categorize responses, please use one of the following respondent classifications: private citizen, government, community-based organization, labor union, energy provider, American Indian Tribe and Alaska Native Village, or other tribal organization, for-profit company, other type of non-profit entity, or other. If other, please specify.

Response 1.1:

NRECA is a non-profit entity representing 900 plus community-based organizations that provide energy and other services (*e.g.,* broadband). The provision of affordable and reliable electricity is the mission of electric cooperatives and NRECA. Democratic member control, education, training and information, and concern for community are three of the seven cooperative principles under which NRECA and its members operate. Electric cooperatives have always been dedicated to improving the quality of life in their communities.

Question 1.2:

What role would you or your organization play in an energy project conducted through this program?

Response 1.2:

For over 20 years, NRECA has worked in partnership with our members to leverage our extensive internal expertise and established industry collaborations to develop and demonstrate new technical capabilities that directly address challenges and opportunities of the future electric grid.

NRECA, through its wholly owned not-for-profit subsidiary NRECA Research, makes the best use of funding from federal agencies and electric cooperative member dues as cost share. Research projects are frequently conducted in collaborative partnerships with universities, national laboratories, utility vendors, the U.S. military and electric cooperatives. This inclusive approach optimizes awareness, interest and opportunities of key industry stakeholders.

In response to the passage of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), NRECA established five different member consortiums, each intended to serve an important facilitation and collaboration role in the pursuit of assisting our members to navigate various funding and research opportunities and to build momentum for electric co-op efforts in the areas of electric vehicles, microgrids, cyber and physical security, natural hazards, and smart grids and data. For example, NRECA's microgrid consortium represents a coalition of the nation's rural electric cooperatives seeking to develop resilient, reliable, and economically beneficial microgrid and storage projects for their communities. The intent of this consortium is to partner with federal, state, and local stakeholders to identify funding opportunities and to develop replicable pathways for advanced microgrid deployment in rural communities. In addition to easing the application process, the consortiums serve as forums for electric co-ops to share lessons learned, identify opportunities for collaboration, network with other co-ops, and gather knowledge from microgrid experts. Consortiums present DOE with a favorable avenue to fund smaller projects in communities that otherwise may be hard to reach.

In addition to enabling deployment, demonstration, and research, NRECA believes its "consortium

approach" will generally enable participants to build on shared information to create their own outcomes – either through continued joint collaboration and consortium proposals, teaming with NRECA, or individually. NRECA will manage each consortium to maximize its impact and benefits to the overall goals of DOE and its programs —and will assess their success in terms of their contributions to the success of those projects or transition or refocus the consortiums to more relevant trajectories.

NRECA will also assist those members who form their own partnerships or apply to DOE to participate individually, in navigating IIJA opportunities, such as the instant rural and remote energy improvements program. NRECA will provide resources and guidance to these cooperatives as well.

By way of background and context, NRECA is currently involved in a number of related initiatives:

- NRECA's Advancing Energy Access for All initiative focuses on supporting electric cooperatives in offering programs, business models, and technologies to serve low-and-moderate income (LMI)members and communities. These have included solar energy projects, energy efficiency programs, innovative rate designs, and community development efforts.

  The flagship project of this initiative is the DOE-funded ACCESS (Achieving Cooperative Community Equitable Solar Sources) project, which has supported members seeking to develop solar PV in low-to-moderate income communities and shared information on these projects and related topics through case studies and reports. Partners include CFC and CoBank, GRID Alternatives (an LMI solar developer), and the Pacific Northwest National Laboratory. The project has highlighted community-scale solar+battery microgrids in California (Anza Electric Cooperative) and Washington state (Orcas Power & Light Cooperative), a solar park and learning center at a school in Oklahoma (Oklahoma Electric Cooperative), and efforts by a North Carolina cooperative to leverage an existing on-bill financed efficiency program to develop community solar projects while supporting land-retention for LMI members (Roanoke Electric Cooperative). These four case studies can be found at https://www.cooperative.com/programs-services/bts/access/Pages/default.aspx.

- The DOE-funded Rural Energy Storage Deployment Project (RESDP) may also be of interest. Poudre Valley Rural Electric Association's microgrid project in the village of Red Feather Lakes, Colorado offers an interesting model for reliability, resiliency, and leveraging renewable energy and storage in a small and isolated (pop <600) rural community to maintain essential community services (e.g., shelter, broadband, first response) during outages of the community's one 69 kV transmission feeder. Red Feather Lakes is remote and rural and the type of project could be replicated in other communities that are facing similar reliability and resiliency challenges. A case study on this project can be found here: https://www.cooperative.com/programs-services/bts/Rural-Energy-Storage-Deployment-Program/Documents/RESDP-Case-Study-PVREA-July-2021.pdf

Category 2: Potential Project Details

Section 40103(c) of the BIL provides that federal support, including financial assistance to rural or remote areas, may be provided for the purpose of:

A. Improving the overall cost-effectiveness of energy generation, transmission, or distribution systems;

B. siting or upgrading transmission and distribution lines;

C. reducing greenhouse gas emissions from energy generation by rural or remote areas;

D. providing or modernizing electric generation facilities;

E. developing microgrids; and

F. increasing energy efficiency.

Questions in this category relate to understanding the types of projects that would fit within these purposes.

Area Definition (AD):

Question 2.1:

In Section 40103(c), "rural or remote area'' is defined as a city, town, or unincorporated area that has a population of not more than 10,000 inhabitants. Would you characterize the area you represent or have in mind regarding this program as being rural or remote? If so, why? If you are considering many areas (e.g., as a governmental body or non-profit), what characteristics would be indicative of communities fitting this definition?

Response 2.1

Each of NRECA's 831 distribution electric cooperative and public power district (PPD) members serve one or more "city, town, or unincorporated area that has a population of not more than 10,000 inhabitants."

Question 2.2:

Would you characterize this area as underserved, overburdened, disadvantaged, or as having environmental justice concerns? If so, why and with what metrics? In what ways, if any, does being rural or remote shape these challenges?

Response 2.2:

A preliminary analysis shows that 586 of NRECA's distribution members serve one or more rural or remote area (as defined in Section 40103(c)) located in census tracts considered disadvantaged for clean energy and energy efficiency based on the Justice40 criteria in the Council on Environmental Quality's Climate and Economic Justice Screening Tool. While this is not the only Justice40 category that might be applicable, it does show that the large majority of NRECA's distribution cooperative and PPD members serve eligible rural or remote areas.

Nationwide, NRECA members provide electric service in 364 (92%) of the Persistent Poverty Counties identified by the U.S. Treasury Community Development Financial Institutions Fund (CDFI). More than 250 distribution cooperatives and NRECA-member PPDs serve an estimated 4.2 million people in these counties, with poverty rates ranging from 20% to over 60%. Many of the Section 40103(c) areas mentioned above are located in these counties, though the census tracts containing these communities are also found outside of these counties.

Rural and remote areas are inherently difficult to serve due to their low population density and often challenging physical terrain, requiring significantly more capital investment per consumer to serve. These areas include isolated microgrids serving remote native-Alaskan villages, or areas with limited transmission access (including islands) that are vulnerable to outages due to extreme weather, wildfire, or accidental damage. A RADWIND case study on Kotzebue Electric's hybrid generation microgrid that includes wind, solar, and battery storage and traditional diesel generation may be found at: https://www.cooperative.com/programs-services/bts/radwind/Documents/RADWIND-Case-Study-Kotzebue-Nov-2021.pdf

In general, electric co-op revenue per mile of distribution line is only 20 percent of the overall utility average. Co-ops have no equity investors to share the financial burdens and, ultimately, all costs of grid investments are borne by the co-op member-owners at the end of the line.

Question 2.3:

What, if any, energy challenges does the rural or remote area have? What are the community's priorities among these challenges? Has the area considered specific solutions and, if so, what progress has been made to implement the solutions? Answers can cover both a specific community you represent as well as broader categories or types of relevant communities.

Response 2.3:

The long-term entrenched nature of poverty in the Persistent Poverty Counties presents significant challenges to electric co-ops serving there. Extreme poverty is often geographically concentrated in only a portion of a county, including communities in counties where the overall poverty rate does not meet the Persistent Poverty threshold. Keeping electricity affordable is especially important for low-income consumer-members who are most vulnerable to energy poverty. High poverty rates are often reflected in less efficient housing stock, such as older manufactured housing, which can lead to wasted energy and disproportionately high bills for those who can least afford it. These households often lack the resources to make energy-saving improvements to their homes. To assist, co-ops have developed programs to help repair, weatherize, and install cost-efficient appliances.

<u>Project Priorities:</u>

Question 2.4:

Given the purposes referenced above (bullets A-F), what types of energy projects would be most impactful?

Response 2.4:

All of the potential project types identified above have been deployed by NRECA's distribution and G&T members and could potentially be impactful in rural and remote communities. NRECA's membership is diverse, and the most impactful type or types of projects will vary significantly depending on the unique situation in each community. NRECA will play a supporting role for our membership to assist and aggregate resources but would defer to the members who best know the communities they serve as to the specific types of energy projects that most suit their needs.

Question 2.5

Would this type of project(s) address energy burdens, economic burdens, environmental impacts, lack

of quality jobs, or other energy equity and environmental justice considerations? If so, how?

Response 2.5:

As discussed above, the appropriate project type will vary based on the needs of the community and the capabilities and unique electric service challenges faced by the local distribution cooperative or PPD.

Question 2.6:

What barriers have been encountered or would be anticipated for these types of projects or relevant analogs? What are potential paths to overcoming them? Provide specific examples of the types of barriers of interest in the categories of permitting, financing, community engagement, materials acquisition and construction, and operations and maintenance.

Response 2.6:

- The risk (or perceived risk) assumed by financial organizations for low-income communities can be a barrier to receiving financing for solar projects for communities in need.

- Reaching and educating members in Low and Moderate Income (LMI) communities can be challenging.

- Existing federal support programs (e.g., LIHEAP) often focus on relieving short-term energy burdens, while projects like renewable generation, battery storage, microgrids, etc. require long-term investment.

- LMI consumers often are not used to having energy options due to transient housing situations and split incentives related to rental housing (e.g., those who rent their housing may not pay their own electric bills/utilities, as it is included in the monthly rent).

- These types of projects should benefit these communities directly, as well as benefiting the cooperative as a whole. In this way, support can be built not just in the particular community where projects are developed, but also across the entire cooperative membership. Showing these wider benefits can also help make financing organizations more comfortable with a project.

Question 2.7:

What would equitable and meaningful community involvement look like for this type of energy project(s)? How can you incorporate perspectives from groups within the community who experience disproportionate socio-economic, environmental, political, or energy burdens? What support is needed to build equitable community engagement?

Response 2.7:

Electric cooperatives are community-based organizations owned by the people that they serve, making them a unique sector of the electric industry. Our members also have a strong track record of efficiently using their limited resources. To ensure that federal dollars reach these communities, an outcome key to this program's success, DOE should work proactively with NRECA and its member cooperatives as key stakeholders. In regard to the specific disadvantaged rural or remote areas within electric cooperative service territories:

- Communications and educational efforts are crucial if these communities are going to be active stakeholders in these projects.

- Existing membership communications, surveys, and opportunities like annual meetings can be used, but there are also opportunities to partner with trusted local community organizations and institutions to build trust and involvement.

- Local stakeholder advisory groups could be formed to participate and advise in project development and help inform their neighbors.

- There could also be a role for partnership with larger regional or national non-profits or advocacy groups with expertise in working with underserved communities. These groups (who might not have energy-specific expertise) could provide expertise to advise electric cooperatives.

Project Size:

Question 2.8:

For projects conducted within the community area in the past or that are being planned, what is the approximate size (e.g., measured in dollars, power rating, geographic benefit)? What size projects could this rural or remote area support in the future? Are there approaches to make projects scalable for future community needs?

Response 2.8

The size of a particular project will depend on the community being served, the scale of the local electric load demand, and the state of the local electric grid. Generally, a project scoped to serve a small rural or remote area might be relatively small if designed to serve local load. For example, Poudre Valley REA's Red Feather Lakes microgrid mentioned above has a combined capacity of 390 kW across its components (solar PV, battery energy storage, and propane backup generator) with a microgrid controller and serves 14 metering locations with approximately 90 kW of load. While the project is small, it was designed specifically to help prove out a largely standardized microgrid design that could be replicated in other small communities. A distribution cooperative could use OCED funding to produce multiple small microgrids across its territory, or work in partnership with other distribution cooperatives, their G&T, and/or NRECA to aggregate these projects into one larger deployment.

There are also opportunities for larger projects that might serve a wider area than just the local community. For example, a co-op could build a larger multi-megawatt solar array that could provide enough power for the local community while also exporting power to other parts of the cooperative's territory, or providing other grid benefits (e.g., peak demand reduction) that can lower the cost of power for all members. The local community would accrue the benefits of local economic development, tax payments, and employment opportunities while the project could have a wider benefit beyond those communities. Of course, this would need to be balanced with the local substation hosting capacity for a project, and the project would still need to be scaled to the community for equity purposes to ensure that there is community buy-in for these larger projects.

An example of this type of larger project can be seen in the efforts of the Navajo Tribal Utility Authority, an NRECA member, to deploy large utility-scale solar projects through its Together We Shine program. The first array is online and totals 55 megawatts, with two larger arrays planned in

the coming years. These will provide enough power for local needs, but significant excess generation will be sold outside of the tribal community, providing additional power sales, lease, and tax revenue.

Also, where applicable, there may be opportunities to combine grants with other federal programs to further reduce the cost of a project. For example, the tax credit extensions included in the Inflation Reduction Act include bonuses for renewable projects under 5 megawatts located in low-income or tribal communities.

Question 2.9:

How long would an envisioned project take to go from concept to operation?

Response 2.9:

The timeline would depend on each individual project, but additional time would need to be added in to ensure community involvement and buy-in in project scoping, development, and operation.

Question 2.10:

Is this project in the review or design stage, or is it ready to build? How do you assess readiness of the project?

Response 2.10:

No response provided.

Question 2.11:

Demonstration projects through DOE typically require a 50% cost share, in other words a minimum 1:1 match of private sector to federal funds. Do you anticipate challenges for a 50% cost share requirement?

Response 2.11:

Fifty percent cost share could pose a barrier to participation by some NRECA members. Not-for-profit electric cooperatives are often unable to participate in federal programs where a high cost share is required. We encourage DOE to consider allowing for a lower cost share for electric cooperatives, or eligible entities serving rural and/or disadvantaged communities. Overall, DOE should keep cost share to no more than 30% to prevent it being a barrier to participation by electric cooperatives. Requiring a higher cost share could disadvantage rural and underserved communities served by electric cooperatives. We urge DOE to be creative financially and temporally and equitable in how it defines and measures cost share.

- Getting modern but proven technologies to underserved areas is the goal, not necessarily demonstrating unproven or pre-commercial technologies. The right technology might be far from the first of its kind in general but would be the first of its kind in these communities. We urge DOE to focus on deploying infrastructure to underserved communities, rather than proving out proofs-of concept.

- Co-ops are not-for-profit businesses, and many have small staff that already wear a lot of hats. They might have difficulty providing cash or in-kind cost-share directly, which could deter them from pursuing projects.

- With this in mind, we recommend that DOE consider reducing the cost-share element significantly. This would be an added incentive to site projects in disadvantaged communities.

  Also, for monetary cost share, DOE should consider provisions that allow these costs to be forgiven or reimbursed after a project is successfully developed and operated for a period of time. This would obviously not apply to in-kind staff time spent on a project, but direct capital and labor costs.

Project Staffing and Long-term Sustainability:

Question 2.12:

Is your organization sufficiently staffed to develop a DOE funding application and, if awarded, manage the project? If not, what support could DOE or other organizations provide to enable your participation in the program?

Response 2.12

As part of its program to help members access the IIJA, NRECA has created guidance materials to help member prepare to secure funding, created a central hub where new funding opportunities are consolidated and disseminated, and has coordinated grant writing resources that members may use in support of their applications for federal infrastructure funding opportunities.

In general, NRECA recommends DOE make the application process and requirements as simple and uniform as possible. Cooperatives have limited time and financial resources to dedicate to a complicated application process for grant funding or onerous reporting requirements for grant-funded projects. By keeping the application process and requirements simple and streamlined, DOE will help mitigate one of the largest barriers to cooperatives' participation - resource scarcity. This in turn will allow DOE to award funding for important projects that benefit disadvantaged rural and remote communities.

Question 2.13

Do you have existing partners to aid in funding applications and project management? If not, what could DOE do to facilitate these relationships?

Response 2.13

As explained above, NRECA makes the best use of funding from federal agencies and electric cooperative member dues as cost share. Research projects are generally conducted in collaborative partnerships with universities, national laboratories, utility vendors, military and electric cooperatives. This inclusive approach optimizes awareness, interest and opportunities of key industry stakeholders.

NRECA has many partnerships to aid in funding. Examples include:

- National Rural Utilities Cooperative Finance Corporation (CFC). CFC was created and is owned

by America's electric cooperative network. CFC is a nonprofit finance cooperative with more than $31 billion in assets that provides unparalleled industry expertise, flexibility and responsiveness to serve the needs of almost 1,000 member-owners across 50 states

- CoBank is one of the largest private providers of credit to the U.S. rural economy. The bank delivers loans, leases and other financial services to agribusiness, rural infrastructure and Farm Credit customers in all 50 states. CoBank's customers form the backbone of the economy in rural America — agribusiness, power, water and telecommunications. CoBank offers a broad range of competitively priced, flexible loan programs, leasing services and other financial services to meet rural America's changing business needs.

- The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Utilities Service (RUS) provides much-needed infrastructure or infrastructure improvements to rural communities. These include water and waste treatment, electric power and telecommunications services. All these services help to expand economic opportunities and improve the quality of life for rural residents.

NRECA, through both its consortiums and one-to-one approach, will provide project management expertise to support projects proposed by our members and funded by DOE. Over the last 10+ years, NRECA has been extremely successful in managing multiple federally funded projects, which have supported the development of solutions for cooperative needs.

Question 2.14:

Would you anticipate any challenges in operating or maintaining the energy project? These challenges could include factors such as hiring and retaining staff and long-term business models to ensure funding is available for operations and maintenance.

Response 2.14:

NRECA does not anticipate any challenges in our members operating or maintaining energy projects over the long term. Electric cooperatives and PPDs have long experience operating and maintaining local distribution grids and energy projects, and as the local distribution utility they are already situated in these communities. In addition, in many cases they have additional support from their G&T provider.

Over the last decade, electric cooperatives across the country have participated in the transition of the electric grid, more than tripling their renewable capacity owned or under contract between 2010 and 2021, especially wind and more recently solar. Solar growth was in part spurred by the DOE funded Solar Utility Network Deployment Acceleration (SUNDA) project that supported the deployment of multiple utility-scale distributed solar PV projects, including community solar projects, and similarly disseminated experience across the cooperative network. Co-op solar deployments at all scales continue to accelerate. NRECA has also led DOE-funded research in small hydro and distributed wind technologies.

Today, NRECA is supporting members deploying battery storage systems and microgrids, as well as electric vehicles, grid-modernization technologies, and cybersecurity. While many of these projects use newer technologies, they are designed to serve members and communities, serving as viable resources as well as pilot projects.

- Electric cooperatives have access to diverse financing including from the Rural Utilities Service, finance partners like CFC and CoBank, as well as relationships with local banks and credit unions.

- Around 100 co-ops across the country offer on-bill programs to finance energy efficiency improvements at members' homes, farms, or businesses. Some of these also offer support for solar PV. These have been successful in providing financing for improvements and splitting the cost-savings between the participant and the cooperative, a win-win solution, and default rates are very low.

- Community solar models have helped support solar development in rural communities, and these can be modified to serve LMI members (especially if the cost of projects can be reduced through grants or other mechanisms to ensure cost-savings from the energy produced).

- The community model could also utilize other technologies. For instance, a system combining solar and/or wind with battery storage could, with the right financing, provide low-cost power to the local community while also providing grid benefits beyond that community to the co-op as a whole.

- Some cooperatives have used revolving loan funds for community and economic development activities (not always specific to energy). As the loans are repaid by local businesses or institutions, funds are reloaned to support new projects.

Question 2.15:

Diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) is a priority for OCED-funded projects. If your organization already has a DEIA plan, what challenges, if any, do you face in fully realizing this plan? If not, what support do you need to create and carry out a DEIA plan?

Response 2.15

NRECA members provide electric service in 364 (92%) of the Persistent Poverty Counties, and throughout its more than 75 years in existence, NRECA's mission has always been to serve and support underserved communities and develop programs that support underrepresented groups.

NRECA recognizes that understanding what elements need to be included in a DEI plan is an essential first step for creating competitive grant proposals. NRECA expects to help its members applying to this program submit a DEI plan that clearly articulates how the project team is committed to fostering diversity, equity and inclusion through specific goals and milestones. NRECA also recognizes that any DEI plan should focus on how the project outcomes will benefit underserved communities and how the project team will engage with underserved communities through participation.

Internally, NRECA has created the IDEAL Program. IDEAL stands for **Inclusion, Diversity, Equity Advocates and Leaders.** The vision of IDEAL is to instill a culture which embraces, respects and champions diversity for efficient and effective business solutions while empowering employees and harnessing their unique qualities, perspectives and experiences to ensure organizational success.

GOALS of the IDEAL Program:

Leadership Commitment: Leadership demonstrates its commitment and accountability by modeling behavior that advances diversity and inclusion.

Inclusive Culture: We have an inclusive culture that maximizes the talent, skills, and diversity of all at NRECA.

Diverse Workforce: We have a pipeline of diverse and qualified candidates with a wealth of experience and talents.

IDEAL Program

The NRECA IDEAL program focuses on the following areas of practice:

Talent Acquisition	• Source candidates through multiple channels to draw diverse applicants • Avoid language in job postings that might prevent underrepresented group from applying or being considered • Use an interview team to mitigate unconscious bias • Affirmative Action Plan (AAP) program with annual goals to identify areas of opportunity for diversity
Education & Training	• Deliver training for individuals and leaders to develop inclusive perspectives and behaviors • Communicate bi-weekly or monthly information about events and holidays relevant to different cultures, religious or underrepresented groups • Invite speakers to increase awareness around diversity and inclusion
Leadership Champions	• Sponsorship from the CEO and SVP of HR • Senior Leadership Team members engagement in events and identifying opportunities to mentor and develop employees
Workplace Policies	• Policies that articulate standards of conduct, promote inclusion and diversity, prohibit discrimination or bullying and promote staff training and development for all employees
Visibility	• Employees are highlighted in through newsletters and videos, show casing diversity of roles and demographics
Affinity Groups (WINs)	• Workplace Inclusion Network affinity groups (WINs) identify opportunities for networking, education and awareness that inform all areas of practice.

We Achieve Through WINs

NRECA has four Workplace Inclusion Network groups (WINs), which are voluntary affinity groups that collaborate to promote a diverse and inclusive workplace. Each WIN has two facilitators to lead the group and to coordinate within the IDEAL committee to programs events throughout the year. Their purpose is to:

- Embrace a culture of inclusion and build awareness and appreciation for diversity.
- Facilitate networking and career development opportunities by connecting members with similar professional and personal interest.
- Facilitate informal mentoring opportunities by providing guidance, advice and training, as well as sharing the exciting work being done throughout NRECA.
- Sponsor professional and personal development workshops, seminars and lectures featuring distinguished speakers.
- Ensure information about events or interests and members' achievements is effectively communicated throughout NRECA.

A DEI consultant helped NRECA identify an approach and best practices for establishing the WINs. All employees were surveyed to identify the affinity groups of greatest interest and employee volunteers came forward to facilitate each WIN. The new facilitators were trained to help launch, organize and lead the WINs. The Facilitators all serve on the IDEAL Committee to create programming for the entire organization by incorporating each WIN's activities and looking at IDE from a broader range of perspectives to include all employees.

Currently the four WINs are:

- Women in Energy
- Working Parents
- Black in America
- LGBTQ

Employee groups that are interested in formally creating a WIN may do so with support from NRECA HR leadership and the CEO.

Community Benefits Planning

Question 2.16:

Which entities would need to be involved in these energy projects for them to be successful? Please describe the roles of these entities.

Response 2.16:

In addition to NRECA and its member distribution cooperatives and PPDs, G&T cooperatives can be a valuable partner in deploying and scaling successful energy projects. Nearly 80% of NRECA's distribution members are part of a G&T cooperative. These organizations, which are owned and

managed by their distribution cooperative members, provide economies of scale for wholesale power supply including generation, transmission, and power purchases in regional and bilateral markets and can be important partners and aggregators on energy-related projects, especially as it relates to transmission line upgrades, deploying multiple multi-megawatt projects, or standardizing programs for energy efficiency across their membership. Other potential partners include the electric cooperative statewide organizations operating in many states. Each of these organizations exists to serve electric cooperatives within their respective state or states, and generally support co-ops by providing training, political advocacy, safety services and communications services, among certain other state-focused services. These organizations may have economic development programs and such expertise could be critical to successful programs.

Question 2.17:

What barriers exist for forming or strengthening relationships with any critical project partners for these demonstrations?

Response 2.17:

NRECA does not anticipate any barriers to forming or strengthening these relationships.

Question 2.18

Do you work with any regional or other partners you believe that would strengthen your ability to participate in this program?

Response 2.18:

NRECA partners with federal agencies such as the Department of Energy, the USDA's Rural Utilities Service, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) and many others. The organization would bring to bear these partnerships and the partners' expertise in supporting energy improvements in rural areas. NRECA members, in addition to benefitting from NRECA's national partnerships, have their own partners at local and regional levels. These partnerships can include state energy offices, state utility commissions, local chambers of commerce, local educational institutions and a host of other community organizations. The attached articles (Appendix 1) provide a sense of the types of local partnerships electric cooperatives have. Through these partnerships, electric cooperative projects will ensure a whole community, technically feasible, and efficient approach.

Question 2.19:

What potential impacts, positive or negative, could result from the type of energy projects over the full life of the project? What factors might influence how those impacts are distributed?

Response 2.19:

A number of positive impacts could result from the types of energy projects discussed above, including:

- Mitigation of natural disaster impacts.
- Increased reliability.

- Increased resilience.
- Reduced emissions.
- Increased energy efficiency.
- Increased energy savings.
- Local economic development, tax payments, and workforce development.
- Enhanced involvement of disadvantaged consumer-members in their local electric cooperative.

It is important to note that for energy generation and storage projects, plans will need to include decommissioning (or repowering) to avoid leaving inoperable equipment at the end of a project's useful life.

Outcomes and Replicability

Question 2.20:

What outcomes would the organization you represent prioritize for an energy project? What metrics would be appropriate to convey these outcomes?

Response 2.20:

NRECA and its members are focused on providing safe, affordable and reliable electricity. Affordability is measured by price; reliability can be measured using CAIDI, SAIFI, and other industry metrics, or project-specific metrics for addressing specific local issues (e.g., frequent outages of a vulnerable transmission feeder). Increased efficiency may be measured by decreased consumption. Mitigation and resilience may be more difficult to measure, but metrics could be set on a project-by-project basis to address unique challenges in the local community.

Question 2.21:

What attributes of the project(s) need to be demonstrated to support their replication for follow-on deployments? Example factors affecting replication could include attributes such as geographic context, business model, regulatory or permitting, community or ownership structure, or other contextual factors.

Response 2.21:

Demonstrations of project or program deployment in disadvantaged remote or rural areas should be developed with replicability in mind. Where possible, projects should favor technology and equipment that is widely commercially available and partners/vendors with a larger geographic presence. Where this is not possible, alternative suppliers or partners/vendors should be identified across similar projects or programs. NRECA will support these efforts to elevate and disseminate information on successful and replicable projects, and support members in filling in gaps across the country.

Question 2.22:

What are the key performance metrics or measures your organization would need insight about to have confidence in the technology, business model, or other elements of project structure and replicability?

Response 2.22:

While novel technologies or programs could be piloted as part of this program, NRECA would suggest that (where possible) already proven technologies and business models that have already been piloted or proven elsewhere be favored. As mentioned in Response 2.11, the goal of demonstration projects should be to show that leading-edge but replicable and commercially available technologies and business models can be successfully deployed or adapted to serve disadvantaged remote or rural communities.

Category 3: Program Structure

In addition to seeking information on the types of projects and attributes of communities that may seek assistance through this provision, OCED is seeking feedback and additional information on the structure of the Program, including the role of partners, states, and other organizations in supporting improvements in rural and remote areas.

Program Design

OCED recognizes the need for engagement, partnerships, financing access, and key outcome metrics as critical elements in its program design. These questions are specifically seeking local, regional, state, or national considerations for OCED to consider in finalizing program design.

Stakeholder Engagement: Stakeholder engagement is key for rural or remote areas. OCED is seeking feedback on gaps and opportunities to increase enhanced awareness on reaching these areas.

Question 3.1:

Are there best practices OCED should consider for engaging with rural or remote stakeholders?

Response 3.1:

There are several best practices for engaging with rural or remote stakeholders. These include holding engagement activities and meetings in the rural and remote areas in order to respect the limited resources these areas may have to use for travel. OCED should also be aware that zoom or other video-based meetings may not be possible due to the lack of broadband availability in many rural and remote areas.

- The DOE funded projects mentioned earlier have done a good job of leveraging public funding to facilitate projects and disseminate information on them.

- The most successful partnerships occur when they are not forced, when there is already an idea or interest in pursuing a project or technology rather than funding a specific technology first and then soliciting interest.

- Also, unless a project is explicitly designed to pilot cutting edge technology that is not commercially available, the economics matter. Projects should meet community needs rather than just technological needs, and provide a useful resource or program need.

Question 3.2:

Are there partners OCED should work with to engage with rural or remote areas in support of stakeholder engagement?

Response 3.2:

We encourage OCED to partner with NRECA to engage with these communities as our membership resides in rural and remote areas. NRECA can be a resource to make connections and leverage relationships in rural and remote communities across the United States.

- OCED – through outreach – can help connect organizations with expertise in working with these communities with applicants, including electric cooperatives. These organizations would not be the right ones to pursue energy projects but can advise on community-engagement and equity issues.

- Both OCED and potential applicants should prioritize early and frequent outreach to ensure that the local community is aware of potential projects and able to provide input on them so that they can be active stakeholders in ensuring that any projects best meet the communities needs and sensitivities.

- Ideally, outreach should begin during the scoping process so that community perspectives are incorporated BEFORE a project is announced.

- While electric cooperatives have done a lot of innovative energy work and NRECA helps to connect them, OCED can help to provide connections with other utilities and organizations that have pursued successful and replicable projects.

Community Readiness: While previous sections sought to detail projects ready for demonstrations, there are still gaps that exist in areas that may need additional support for these types of projects.

Question 3.3:

Are there any communities or entities that would struggle to or lack capacity to participate in the program, and how should OCED consider any additional resources to help these communities?

Response 3.3:

See responses above with regard to communities that struggle to participate, as well as recommendations on initiatives to address these issues.

Partnerships: Whether through direct federal partnerships or with local, state, regional, nonprofit, or for profit organizations could make projects successful. OCED is seeking more information on current partnerships or potential future partnerships to make these projects successful broadly.

Question 3.4:

Are there any considerations OCED should consider in the design of the program to incorporate challenges for communities not ready for a demonstration program? Are there partners who can help work alongside these communities?

Response 3.4:

No response provided

Question 3.5:

What existing Federal, Regional, and or State entities that are already engaging in rural and remote communities should OCED leverage?

Response 3.5:

As noted above, NRECA members are already engaging in rural and remote communities. We look forward to partnering with OCED on this important initiative.

Question 3.6:

What other partnerships or models could be useful for OCED to consider in advancing projects through this provision?

Response 3.6:

No response provided

Question 3.7:

Are there agencies or state-level organizations OCED should work with on implementation?

Response 3.7:

- Electric utility statewide organizations
- State Energy Offices
- State emergency management agencies
- State utility commissions

Financing: Access to capital for demonstration projects, as well as follow-on funding for project fulfillment will be critical for areas considering this funding. This could include attracting public and private sector capital for improvements in areas supported through ERA.

Question 3.8

How can OCED design the ERA Program to unlock other, non-Federal sources of capital for rural and remote energy projects?

Response 3.8:

See response 2.13 for a list of non-federal sources of capital widely used by electric cooperatives. In addition. OCED should provide resources and support to local or regional lenders, including credit unions and green bank/green financing organizations to increase their level of comfort in funding projects in disadvantaged remote and rural areas.

Question 3.9:

What existing Federal, Regional, and or State entities that are already engaging in rural and remote communities should OCED leverage?

Response 3.9:

See response to Question 2.18.

Question 3.10:

How can OCED design the ERA Program to best complement other Federal assistance for rural or remote energy projects?

Response 3.10:

In designing the ERA program to work well with other Federal assistance, we urge OCED to:

- Avoid duplicative information collection
- Avoid contradictory program requirements
- Allow electric cooperatives to combine multiple federal assistance programs, including tax credit provisions, to help further lower the costs of deployment and increase the benefits of siting energy projects in disadvantaged remote and rural areas, both for the communities themselves and for the entire service territory of the electric cooperative or PPD deploying the project

Question 3.11:

What are some of the broad challenges to accessing cost share that could be realized through this provision?

Response 3.11:

No response provided as we are unclear as to what "this provision" refers to.

Competitive Solicitations:

OCED may use several potential financial mechanisms and support programs to provide assistance to applicants and stakeholders.

Prize Competitions: As mechanism to reach new people, audiences, and communities, OCED is considering the use of prize competitions. This could include activities to build capacity and relationships between entities required for successful demonstration projects in rural or remote areas, including communities, utilities, private capital, project developers, and DOE; providing seed funding for new investment models or companies; or identifying and developing solutions to help address other challenges.

Question 3.12:

Are there any key considerations OCED should keep in mind while shaping prize competitions?

Response 3.12:

While a prize competition mechanism might be applicable for some projects, this should be designed in such a way that not-for-profit utilities like electric cooperatives and disadvantaged communities do not incur large up-front costs to participate.

Question 3.13:

Are there areas that you believe would be well suited for a prize competition?

Response 3.13:

No response provided.

Grants and Cooperative Agreements: It is envisioned that OCED will fund demonstration projects, and help to facilitate projects through planning, design, construction, and operation. Potential evaluation criteria will include replicability potential; improvements to resilience, safety, reliability, and availability of energy; environmental protections from adverse impacts of energy generation; and other criteria that reflect the BIL priorities.

Question 3.14:

DOE intends to release multiple competitive solicitations over the duration of the ERA Program. Are there specific timing considerations of which DOE should be aware in releasing solicitations? For example, amount of time respondents need, timing within the calendar year, or reoccurrence during FY22-FY26?

Response 3.14:

As noted above, many NRECA members have lean and efficient staffs that wear many different hats. To accommodate, it would be good for DOE to avoid setting time deadlines during traditional holiday seasons. We'd also urge DOE to be cognizant of events like natural disasters that may delay NRECA member ability to meet deadlines that were set prior to the occurrence of a natural disaster.

Question 3.15:

OCED is considering the role of project partners to aggregate projects and work with projects as a cohort or in a region. Are there examples of key organizations that can serve as aggregators for projects? What are their key attributions?

Response 3.15:

As described in Response 1.2, NRECA has established five different member consortiums, each intended to serve an important facilitation and collaboration role in the pursuit of assisting our members to navigate various IIJA opportunities. Each consortium is being developed around a specific vision and goal, often focused on a technology family or purpose, and will be conducting defined activities with project planning and a well-defined set of milestones, with risk management, value management, benefits, measurement and verification, and contingency planning, toward achieving that vision and goal. NRECA will be documenting program implementation and plans, which will help clarify technology goals and provide a basis for tracking progress. NRECA's "consortium approach" will allow members to share progress and discoveries, work through roadblocks and operational challenges, fine-tune R&D&D activities, and evolve the roadmap to address current needs, challenges, and outcomes of a project.

Question 3.16:

What are the key criteria OCED should consider, given the available $200M per year for the next five years for the provision?

Response 3.16:

No response provided.

Other Transaction Agreements (OTA) and Partnership Intermediary Agreements (PIA): In addition to evaluating competitive funding through cooperative agreements or grants, OCED is also evaluating the use of OTAs and/or PIAs. While not frequently used by DOE, these mechanisms are used by other agencies to support workforce development, rapid prototyping, equipment acquisition, and even as another way to manage distributed projects.

Question 3.17:

Are there programs in other federal agencies run through OTAs or PIAs that could serve as models for OCED to consider?

Response 3.17:

No response provided.

Question 3.18:

If you have been a recipient under an OTA or PIA, are there distinct advantages for project management?

Response 3.18:

No response provided.

Question 3.19:

Are there key areas that could be supported through an OTA or PIA that OCED should consider when structuring the program?

Response 3.19:

No response provided.

<u>Technical Assistance</u>

DOE is considering providing technical assistance to awardees, and other potential recipients, including:

- Characterizing the potential for clean energy
- Assessing permitting and siting needs
- Assessing the needed interconnection, transmission, and other grid components
- Assessing system design and operational risk

- Providing measurement, reporting, and validation support to awardees
- Identifying and analyzing financing options for pursuing projects, including partnership opportunities
- Providing capacity-building support to enable effective engagement with private sector entities on environmental and energy justice matters, and
- Assessing existing workforce skills match with clean energy demonstration activities and other project dimensions critical for success.

Question 3.20:

Are there other key areas not listed above that should be considered for technical assistance needs for project and project developers?

Response 3.20

- While there is not a one-size fits all solution, there is a lot of interest in increasing the replicability of successful projects.
- Several past and present NRECA projects have utilized the expertise of the National Labs for technical assistance, especially when deploying newer technologies like battery storage and microgrids.
- There is also potential for regional technical assistance centers, leveraging the National Labs, universities, community colleges, and other institutions that can provide expertise to co-ops and communities within a certain area. This could also involve experienced cooperatives willing to advise those interested in replicating an already successful project.
- These, along with NRECA, could provide at least a first-stop for those interested in pursuing potential projects, providing both subject matter experts and resources (e.g., case studies, videos, networking) and hosting workshops.
- Ideally, projects will support local workforce development (e.g., O&M staff, technicians, installers, etc.). OCED can help with this capacity building, for instance by supporting training programs at nearby community colleges, and possibly pursue models to attract and retain this expertise within a community (i.e., avoid brain drain).
- This is not the only program designed to incentivize modern energy technology deployment in these communities, so assistance in connecting to other federal, state, or philanthropic programs to further reduce the cost of projects could be very helpful. Again, this sort of assistance can make these communities very attractive places to develop projects.

Question 3.21:

Are there key organizations that should be considered to provide technical assistance, in addition to the Centers supported through EPA and the national laboratories?

Response 3.21

No response provided.

Question 3.22:

Are there technical assistance programs that should be examined as key models for supporting rural and remote areas in improving energy infrastructure?

Response 3.22:

No response provided.

Evaluation, Analysis and Partnerships to Ensure Enduring Impacts

Measurement and validation during the period of performance of awards will be critical to ensuring that projects have potential for replicability.

Question 3.23:

What are some of the key measures that would need to be validated to demonstrate reliability enhancements?

Response 3.23:

See Response 2.20.

Question 3.24:

How can OCED best release information that would allow for trusted validation of performance of these projects?

Response 3.24:

No response provided.

Category 4: Open

Please provide any additional information or input not specifically requested in the questions above that you believe would be valuable to help DOE develop the ERA Program.

Response to Category 4:

Electric cooperatives lead the nation in smart-meter deployment, with more than three-quarters of co-op meters using advanced metering infrastructure (AMI). This was spurred by the 2013-2014 Smart Grid Demonstration Project, a $68 million DOE-funded project that deployed AMI technology at 23 participating cooperatives, developed tools, and shared experiences and best practices. This has enabled co-ops to innovate using SCADA and other systems across their distribution grids, which has involved building out fiber broadband backbones that are now being leveraged by more than 250 co-ops nationwide to provide broadband services to their members.

Summary

Electric cooperatives look forward to the opportunity to enhance the resilience of their systems with projects funded through DOE's OCED Program for Energy Improvements in Rural or Remote Areas. Electric cooperatives will make excellent partners as they have the knowledge and expertise to support robust

planning and implementation of projects that will ensure federal dollars are expended efficiently, infrastructure is appropriately sized to account for current and planned energy needs, and reliability of the electric grid is maintained. Not-for-profit electric cooperatives are interested in applying for federal funding provided under this program so they can implement projects that might otherwise be cost-prohibitive and ensure that rural communities are not left out of realizing the benefits of these investments.

Thank you for considering our comments.

Appendix 1 to NRECA RFI Response

Behind the Scenes: S.C. Co-op Opens Channels to Its Growing Hispanic Community

Published
March 22, 2022

Author
Derrill Holly

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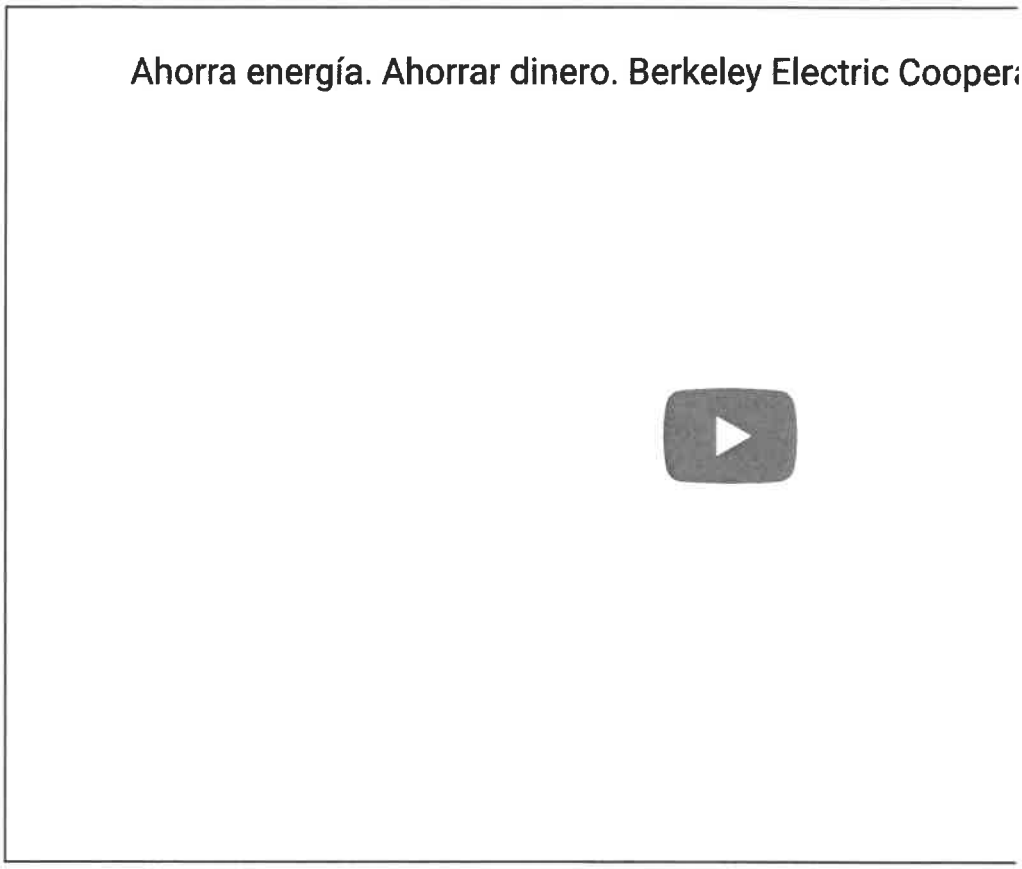
Berkeley EC distribution designer Cristian Gonzalez helps with Spanish commentary for Charleston RiverDogs games when they play as Los Perros Santos to celebrate the Hispanic population. (Photo courtesy Berkeley EC)

Yajaira Bess remembers when she joined the staff of Berkeley Electric Cooperative (https://www.berkeleyelectric.coop/) in 2005, members who preferred to communicate in Spanish would often bring their young, English-speaking children to the co-op to translate.

"[They] would come into our lobbies with 10- and 12-year-old kids," she says. "It was obvious they'd been pulled out of school to help address family needs and what really amounted to adult business."

Bess, a Puerto Rican born and raised in New York state, started as a member services rep and was one of two bilingual employees at the Moncks Corner, South Carolina-based co-op. Now a public relations and grassroots specialist, she says Berkeley EC has become a leader in addressing the needs of the Charleston area's growing Hispanic population, now around 7%.



Initial steps taken with the support of the co-op's board included recruitment and training of more bilingual member services representatives for lobbies and the call center. As the co-op's website and social media presence evolved, Spanish preference options were included.

"We started translating our bylaws, brochures, applications, some of the programs and services, and our annual meeting letter in Spanish," Bess says. "Our website and Facebook page were adapted so our LEP [limited English proficiency] members could translate the information and post in their language. And beginning in 2016, we began promoting prepaid metering to our members, and translating the messaging into Spanish generated a great response."

The co-op even launched a weekly radio program, hosted by Bess, called "Conversaciones Electricantes"—or Electrifying Conversations. The half-hour show not only covers co-op issues but also community services and events of interest to the local Hispanic community.

"We're all about concern for community, and if there are members in need of clothing, food or help paying their bills, we use the radio program to try and connect them with organizations that can help," Bess says.

Berkeley EC's Yajaira Bess hosting the co-op's monthly "Conversaciones Electrificantes" radio show. (Photo courtesy Berkeley EC)

Dr. Lorna Manglona-Alexander, a high school career specialist with the Berkeley County School District, says efforts like Berkeley EC's to remove language barriers in the community can have a broader impact.

"When we can expose them to a few of the opportunities available, it opens the door for them to learn more," she says.

Berkeley EC recently expanded its outreach to include more cultural, entertainment and educational projects. The co-op sponsors Charleston's Latin American Festival as well as minor league baseball's "COPA de Diversion"—or Fun Cup—campaign. Bess and co-worker Cristian Gonzalez have even helped with Spanish commentary for Charleston RiverDogs games when they play as Los Perros Santos to celebrate the Hispanic population.

Berkeley EC's outreach efforts include sponsoring Charleston's Latin American Festival. (Photo courtesy Berkeley EC)

"It was the best experience ever," Bess says. "We'll be partnering with several more community organizations that work with the Latinx community, and we are sponsoring a Junior Achievement program in Spanish for multiple language high school students. We're also launching a Spanish-language video podcast that we'll produce in the co-op's new recording studio."

President and CEO Mike Fuller says the outreach is all part of a continual effort to ensure all members have equal access to the co-op's wealth of services.

"We strive to meet each member where they are, no matter their circumstances," he says. "Because we're in a high-growth area, we regularly encounter members who are new to the area and don't know how co-ops are different from other utilities. For our Spanish-speaking members, we want to remove any obstacles to them seeing us as a trusted resource—and that we're here to serve them."

← Back to Articles (/remagazine/articles)

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Co-op Forum: Community Revitalization

Published
June 13, 2022

Author
NRECA

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This month's question: What is your best advice for how co-ops can help improve or revitalize their communities?

Hoover

Lea Hoover

Director of Member and Strategic Services

Oregon Trail Electric Cooperative

(https://otec.coop/)

Baker City, Oregon

Size: 31,418 meters

Answer: The opportunities are endless for cooperatives to play a role in the health and vitality of their communities. My best advice is to stay engaged and at the table. Once you're positioned as a key community partner, the alignment of strategic goals will become clear. Here at OTEC, we've found many unique partnership opportunities that have resulted in some of our most meaningful programs. For example, during a strategy session with our regional university, they expressed difficulty with getting their students to complete all four years and graduate here in eastern Oregon. We partnered with the school to create a four-year, full-ride scholarship that incentivizes four students per year to stay in school and graduate. They also complete three summer internships at OTEC, delivering value back to the cooperative and the membership.

Another example is our growing partnership with rural fire departments. As part of our wildfire mitigation

efforts, we have aided local RFDs with volunteer recruitment drives and leveraged funding streams and OTEC's resources to underwrite new equipment and infrastructure improvements. We see the university and the RFDs as extensions of OTEC resources since we are all serving the same communities. We have a unique opportunity to leverage the cooperative network for the greater good. And as we all know, what's best for our communities is what's best for our cooperatives.

Lambert

David Lambert

Manager of Member Relations

Withlacoochee River Electric Cooperative (https://wrec.net/)

Dade City, Florida

Size: 225,000 meters

Answer: At Withlacoochee Electric, and as a member of the cooperative family, we take pride in and adhere to all of our cooperative principles. But we take particular care to ensure that the seventh principle, "Concern for the communities we serve," is imbedded into the core of our mission to provide affordable, safe and efficient electricity to all our members. Just as our electrons run through our five-county service territory, a current of concern for community is woven into the fabric of every decision we make as a co-op. The best advice I can offer for how to help improve or revitalize your communities is to meet your members where they are. That's how you learn about their true needs and wants. We have a Combined Core Team to help us with our strategic planning. This includes co-op members, cooperative staff, government officials and nonprofit and business partners. Our outreach engagement plan includes things like community town halls,

presentations at civic groups and regular communication with our government officials so when we start a project, we know we have community-wide support. My other piece of advice: Stay for the long haul! Ensure that your presence in any project is prevalent, consistent and direct to reinforce your co-op's genuine intent to invest in its members. Through these small but mighty steps, you'll see better member engagement, a safer community and a positive cooperative workplace.

Thomas

Brad Thomas

Manager of Economic

Development

East Kentucky Power

Cooperative (https://ekpc.coop/)

Winchester, Kentucky

Size: G&T

Answer: The most important action electric cooperatives can take to improve their local community is taking a role in all facets of economic development. Economic development is crucial to the current and future well-being of our members and served communities. We must use our cooperative voices to promote communities and tell our members' stories, showing why our rural communities are the places to invest and build a life. We need our cooperatives developing relationships and making connections for our members to build a brighter future across our rural landscapes. We should be actively engaged in the discussions of local government bodies, civic organizations and others confronting the challenges of building and maintaining vital rural communities. We need to use our community-building skillsets to help educators create career pathways in schools, linking industry and students

from kindergarten to skill certificate or degree programs and using these initiatives to develop a skilled workforce pipeline that is vital to recruiting new employment opportunities. We need to be involved in Main Street revitalization efforts to protect the heart of the community and to build a space that unleashes an entrepreneurial spirit and life in rural downtowns. Our cooperatives must champion the development of new industrial parks that bring opportunities for growth and investment, paving the way for our children to develop careers within our communities.

Adams

Jana Adams

Executive Director

Touchstone Energy®

Cooperatives

(https://www.touchstoneenergy.com/

)

Arlington, Virginia

Size: N.A.

Answer: Electric cooperatives are in a unique position to positively impact the communities you serve. The most important first step you must take is to engage. Engage with your consumer-members; engage with the business community. Engagement only happens when what you are a talking about overlaps with what your members care about. That means you must start by listening and learning to understand the issues each are facing. True engagement is a cultural value. It requires a commitment to service excellence and a staff trained to deliver excellence. Every member of the co-op team is an ambassador within your community. Your staff are your eyes and ears to help understand community needs to advance engagement. Your team must be prepared to represent your co-op values within the community. And they must be empowered to act when it is needed. Touchstone Energy cooperatives have access to a variety of tools to support

engagement. Whether it is supporting local businesses by spotlighting them on Co-op Connections, helping understand the needs of a prospective C&I customer through our relationships with national energy managers, or putting a book in the hands of your youngest members through our affiliation with Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, Touchstone Energy is fully focused on helping you engage in your community. We can also help you create that team of community ambassadors through our Service Excellence program. We know engagement leads to stronger relationships. Once you develop that engagement, the next steps will come naturally.

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(https://hub.dragos.com/guide/5-critical-controls-for-ot-cyb
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'What Their Town Can Be'

Northwestern REC's Rural Rocks initiative is helping reimagine its local communities

Published
May 29, 2022

Author
Victoria A. Rocha

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Children enjoy tubing down the slopes of Mount Pleasant ski resort in Edinboro, Pennsylvania, during Presidents Day weekend. (Photo by Denny Gainer)

It's the last day of Presidents Day weekend, but it feels more like early spring at the Mount Pleasant of Edinboro ski resort in Cambridge Springs, Pennsylvania. It's too warm to make snow, but at 45 degrees with sunny skies, it's just right for kids to spend the holiday's waning hours in T-shirts and hoodies flying down the slopes on inner tubes, snowboards and skis.

Andrew Halmi, the ski resort's general manager, nods in approval as a few adults march past with snowboards tucked under their arms.

"It was even busier over the weekend. We've been packed all winter."

The bustling facility is more than just a successful business. Its popularity and history have made it an anchor attraction in a broad initiative, led by the local electric cooperative, to revitalize the

northwestern Pennsylvania region.

Rural Rocks campaign leaders Linda King, Willliam Buchanan, Brenda Cannell, Patrick Hargest and Steven Lombard on Erie Street in downtown Edinboro, Pennsylvania. (Photo by Denny Gainer)

"The owners have taken it from a small learn-to-ski operation with T-bars for chair lifts to a year-round attraction," says Linda King, a community development consultant for Northwestern Rural Electric Cooperative (https://northwesternrec.com/). "I think the initiative raised owners' awareness of how important their community asset is to the area and the impact that can be made when we all work together."

Electric co-ops have long been catalysts for improving communities in small-town America. But that job has been harder in recent years as rural towns have struggled with shrinking populations and demographic shifts.

Alarmed by stagnant growth on their system, Northwestern REC's board several years ago began working to identify causes and potential solutions.

"It all comes back to our rural communities," says King, who retired in late 2021 as Northwestern REC's vice president of communications and energy solutions. "If they aren't healthy and growing, we probably aren't either. We might not be serving them, but our members frequent them or have businesses there."

1 of 7

IN

OWN

Hear from community members (clockwise, from to
Howles and Steven Lombard, whose lives have bee

King says she had an epiphany at a Touchstone Energy® Cooperative conference in 2019, where she heard community placemaking expert Zachary Mannheimer describe local successes using a people-based approach to turn their communities around. Placemaking involves bringing partners together to identify and restore key facets of a community, like Main Street businesses and recreational areas, to help attract new residents and businesses.

Thinking it would be a good fit in Northwestern REC's territory, King proposed the idea of a contest and called it Rural Rocks. It would offer technical assistance from Mannheimer's planning group, Atlas, as the main prizes.

- Related Content: Boone Electric commits to business district with major HQ renovation (/remagazine/articles/Pages/Staying-In-the-Loop.aspx)

"A lot of times in small communities, people say, 'Well, we tried that before, and it didn't work,'" King says. "It's good to get a reality check from someone outside of the community."

1 of 7

RE

From giving a destroyed inn a new life as a brewery how the Rural Rocks team helped the towns of Edin

Six groups applied, and three were selected to each receive $45,000 grants. The three Rural Rocks towns—Cambridge Springs, Edinboro and Titusville—had lost some of their luster in recent decades due to business shutdowns and population loss, but their charming attributes remained. Those include abundant community spirit; natural features like French Creek, voted 2022 River of the Year by an environmental group; Edinboro Lake's "beachfront"; outdoor music and art festivals; a craft brewery with a farm-to-table menu; and, of course, the ski resort.

The first challenge was getting their heads around the unfamiliar concept of placemaking, says Gina Mussett, an Edinboro team member.

"It was very exciting to us, because that's where every small town struggles —the vision of what their town can be and then creating a plan on how to get there," she says.

Each of the Rural Rocks towns formed steering committees and working groups with a broad cross-section of residents.

"From the onset we felt that whatever community we selected, the work groups had to have a mix of people to handle different viewpoints," King says. "What's the impact on the community if we do A?"

Hard work

Because it was begun just as the COVID-19 pandemic was spreading, most of the planning and "visioning" work for Rural Rocks was done virtually, using focus groups and surveys. Atlas staff helped members organize around four central themes: public art, downtown revitalization, housing and branding/marketing.

"It speaks volumes to these communities on their dedication," says Atlas's Libby Crimmings. "Community development work is hard enough when you're in person, but having to shift very rapidly and do everything on Zoom forced all of us to get a lot more creative in how we reach people and have meaningful conversations."

Participants agreed that progress on large-scale revitalization projects comes in increments.

REC

With kayaking and other water sports in the summe have options for outdoor activities year-round. Nort array of activities it offers.

"We try to find projects where we can make small victories," says Brenda Cannell, president of the Edinboro Community and Economic Development Organization, which recently sponsored the installation of seasonal lamppost banners, a redo of the town's major Edinboro marker and distribution of tourist maps.

Another big obstacle, they say, is finding additional grant opportunities and partners to fund big-ticket projects. In Cambridge Springs, Deputy Mayor Delores Hale is looking for money to build a new playground and other amenities in a park bordering French Creek.

Still, the towns' successes, however small, are bringing an "infectious" enthusiasm, says King. A mall in downtown Edinboro is filling up with merchants, shop owners are replacing facades, and in Cambridge Springs, homeowners are taking more pride in their curbside appearance.

"It makes my heart swell that we are coming together," she says. "Maybe we didn't have the same ideas in the beginning, but now we are moving forward together and making true changes as a community."

Related videos

Linda King, a community development consultant for Northwestern REC, talks about how the Concern for Community principle sparked the co-op's involvement in the Rural Rocks campaign.

Brenda Cannell, chair of Edinboro Community and Economic Development, discusses how Rural Rocks was a catalyst for the group to focus on Edinboro's priorities and start implementing improvements.

Gina Mussett, a member of the Rural Rocks team and vice chair of Edinboro Community and Economic Development, talks about Northwestern REC's contributions and what Edinboro might look like in five years.

Doug and Laura Sinsabaugh, owners of ski resort Mount Pleasant of Edinboro, discuss the vital link Northwestern REC has played in developing Mount Pleasant into a top tourist attraction.

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Thinking Big: 'We're All There to Help Our Town'

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Author
Erin Kelly

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As demand for child care grows in their rural communities, three small electric cooperatives in Iowa have stepped up to help fund new day care centers and preschools to meet the need.

Leaders at 2,700-meter Raccoon Valley Electric Cooperative (https://www.rvec.coop/), 4,700-meter Guthrie County Rural Electric Cooperative (https://www.guthrie-rec.coop/) and 6,000-meter Southwest Iowa Rural Electric Cooperative (https://www.swiarec.coop/) say helping provide quality child care is not only a way to support local families but a key to economic development as their communities compete with towns in other states to bring in new jobs.

"If we're going to attract new industry, this is just one of the essential resources you have to provide," says Phil Kinser, CEO of Southwest Iowa REC in Corning. "It's critical infrastructure for attracting and retaining business."

The co-op, along with its generation and transmission co-op, Central Iowa Power Cooperative (https://www.cipco.net/), and CoBank, provided a $10,000 grant and designated another $4,000 from its Operation Round Up funds to help build the new Stanton Child Resource Center. The center can accommodate up to 130 children—50 more than the facility it will replace—and is expected to open by next summer.

"It's going in across the street at a new business/technology park," says Kinser, whose co-op has also offered the center the possibility of a zero-interest loan. "It will be the first business to locate there. It should be a huge attraction to bring in more businesses."

In Panora, Guthrie County REC loaned $150,000 at zero interest to the Little Panther Daycare and Preschool to finance a 1,400-square-foot expansion slated to open in spring. The center currently has a three-year wait for spots in its classrooms.

The co-op provided the funds through the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Economic Development Loan & Grant Program. REDLG offers zero-interest loans to utilities, which pass that money on to local businesses through a revolving loan fund for projects that help create jobs.

"Little Panther has been in business over 20 years; it can carry its own weight," says Cozy Nelsen, CEO of Guthrie County REC, explaining why the co-op was willing to provide the large loan.

The children of young co-op workers could be among those who benefit from the expansion, she says.

"They're not thinking about that initially when they start, but soon after they get married, it becomes a huge issue," Nelsen says. "More than 70% of young children in this area have parents who both work. If we can help provide more child care, it's one less thing for parents to worry about when they're at work."

Raccoon Valley EC provided a $360,000, zero-interest loan to the Lil Wildcat Education Center to help build a $1.4 million child care facility in Glidden for infants and children up to 5 years old. Construction is slated to begin this fall.

"Raccoon Valley has a long history of helping communities with these kinds of projects," says CEO Jim Gossett. "In rural areas, day care and housing are the big issues when it comes to economic development. The issue has become so acute in rural areas, and particularly in Iowa, that we really believe that investing in child care can spur growth for our areas."

Co-ops that might want to emulate what's happening in Iowa should make sure they know who they're working with, Gossett says.

"You need to know your partners are sophisticated enough to not only build the day care but to run it afterward," he says. "You want to be part of something that succeeds. And we have every confidence that this is going to be a successful project. But my advice would be, 'You can't just slap it together.'"

Nelsen adds that it's crucial to know who is going to run the child care center.

"Who have they hired as employees and as the director of their day care?" she says. "Make sure they're reputable. And make sure there hasn't been a lot of job turnover. That's important to parents."

It's also essential for a co-op to know what the unmet need is for child care in their territory, Kinser says. He says it's wise to survey the community to gauge interest.

"You've got to do some analysis," Kinser says. "Have some community meetings. There's no sense in having a project that's overbuilt."

Co-ops also have to be willing to "really dig in and ask hard questions about cash flow," Gossett says.

"We're on the hook because of the loan," he says. "It's difficult to run a day care center and to stay afloat. You've got to be able to analyze the financial situation. At the end of the day, we're all there to help our town."

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