

# Solar Industry Policy Principles on Environmental Justice & Equity



## About SEIA

Founded in 1974, SEIA is [the national trade association](#) for the solar and solar + storage industries, building a comprehensive vision for the Solar+ Decade through research, education and advocacy. To support our core values of diversity, equity, inclusion and justice, we have developed a policy platform to advocate for clean energy policies at all levels of government that achieve environmental justice objectives and increase equitable access to solar energy.

## Introduction

Public policy and government action, whether at the local, state, or federal level, will be critical to tackling the climate crisis and building a clean energy future in America. As an industry that deploys clean, reliable, affordable electricity, SEIA recognizes the critical role for environmental justice in these policy discussions, and the need for climate solutions to take into account the disproportionate impacts felt by frontline communities.

The transition to a clean energy economy must be centered around justice and equity for all Americans and support communities that have historically been left behind by environmental policies. But we can only achieve this just and equitable transition through intentional advocacy that prioritizes environmental justice and creates regenerative, sustainable economic wealth in local communities.

To this end, we have developed principles for advocacy and a policy platform that SEIA and our members will follow as we work with elected officials and other stakeholders to create the equitable energy future we so badly need.

**“The transition to a clean energy economy must be centered around justice and equity for all Americans and support communities that have historically been left behind**



## Principles for the Clean Energy Industry's Advocacy

In our community engagement and advocacy, the solar industry will draw on the [Principles of Environmental Justice](#) developed by the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit held on October 24-27, 1991. The core values of mutual respect, informed consent, self-determination, workers' rights, and decision-making equality will be foundational to our work. In addition to these principles, the industry will focus on the following areas:



### Engagement

SEIA and our members will conduct consistent and meaningful engagement with environmental justice advocates and organizations that represent frontline and fence-line communities.



### Communication

SEIA will communicate regularly with our members and other companies in the clean energy industry about environmental justice priorities and opportunities to engage.



### Responsibility

SEIA and the industry will not rely on government intervention or policy mandates to take proactive steps that leverage our resources and power to support communities that have been left behind.



### Measurement

SEIA will analyze the efficacy and reach of the policies that we advocate for, and share results with policymakers to inform future success.

## Policy Platform to Advance Environmental Justice & Equity

### Providing career pathways to underserved communities

- ▶ The solar industry is committed to providing high-quality jobs that support American families. With many tens of thousands of jobs projected to be created by the growth of solar over the next decade, the industry must create opportunities within our workforce for people of diverse backgrounds, those in marginalized communities, workers in the fossil fuel industry, formerly incarcerated individuals, and returning service members. The solar industry supports well-paying jobs across the country, and according to a recent E2 study, solar wages are 28% higher than the national median.
- ▶ Government programs that fund skills training, apprenticeship programs, placement services and other workforce development initiatives in underserved, low-income, frontline and transitioning communities can help facilitate these career pathways. It is critical that these programs are informed by current and projected demand for clean energy trades and job positions to develop talent pipelines that can accelerate the industry's growth and ensure lasting careers.

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- ◉ There are many solutions available to support workforce development and provide career pathways for clean energy, and all of these tools should be considered to expand job opportunities and ensure underserved communities have access to enter the workforce. Unions and organized labor, flexibility in job classification, prevailing wage policy, increased community college training programs, additional public funding for training and workforce development all have a role to play. When designing workforce development programs and initiatives, it's important to avoid creating barriers to entry that are difficult for those looking for careers to overcome.
- ◉ Workforce development is a local process that requires localized solutions, and active participation by employers and industry stakeholders. Federal and state funding for workforce development should seek to provide resources and flexibility to local institutions and be targeted towards clean energy careers.
- ◉ The government can also play a role in supporting entrepreneurs and fledgling businesses through incubators and other efforts designed to help small businesses enter and grow in the clean energy industry. These incubators should prioritize diversity and ensure that entrepreneurs of all backgrounds have access to startup capital and mentorship for establishing their business in the marketplace.

## Utilizing solar to expand access to low-cost clean energy

- ◉ Community solar is a powerful tool to provide solar benefits to those without easy access to the property or upfront capital needed to install a solar system. Many states have implemented community solar programs, but getting beyond the pilot stage and ensuring that these programs are designed to reach underserved communities is critical.
- ◉ In addition, onsite solar creates a pathway for historically disadvantaged communities to reduce monthly energy costs and maintain homeownership, which is critical to building generational wealth. Programs that target these communities to provide incentives for installing rooftop solar systems can provide long-term financial stability and community wealth. Furthermore, increased rooftop solar adoption can reduce overall electricity costs for all ratepayers, and help accelerate the retirement of fossil fuel generation facilities, providing environmental and economic benefits to underserved communities.
- ◉ Net metering (NEM), virtual net metering (VNEM) and other electricity rate design measures that compensate residential solar customers for the energy and other benefits they provide to the grid are essential for expanding access to low-income communities.
- ◉ The Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) and Weatherization Assistance Program (WAP) have historically been useful policy vehicles for supporting underserved communities, but they are a missed opportunity when it comes to creating lasting generational wealth and advancing environmental justice priorities. These programs should be reformed to allow funds to be used to install distributed energy resources such as rooftop solar and energy storage, which can lower utility bills while enhancing property value and reducing overall electricity demand.
- ◉ Governance of these programs must involve community experts to ensure that equitable distribution of benefits is achieved. Installers and industry players who help implement these programs must be screened and vetted to ensure clarity of intent. Where possible, programs should include local hiring provisions for installers to create positive workforce outcomes in addition to energy access benefits.
- ◉ SEIA and the solar industry are committed to increased consumer protection. For solar to realize its full potential as an American economic engine, and provide Americans with competitive power choices, customers must fully understand solar transactions. SEIA has developed model contracts and other standardized information for solar customers to ensure transparency and education for potential customers.

## Leveraging government procurement and infrastructure to create economic opportunity for low-income communities

- ▶ Federal, state and local governments have significant purchasing power when it comes to energy, and should use this tool to invest in renewable energy projects that benefit local communities, passing savings on to the communities they serve.
- ▶ In addition, public buildings and other infrastructure can provide low-cost opportunities to install community solar projects or other clean energy investments that directly support frontline communities. Public multi-family housing developments, libraries and other municipal buildings, and public schools should all leverage their rooftops, land and other resources to provide affordable, clean solar energy to be used either onsite or offsite.
- ▶ Clean energy goals should be aligned with energy security and energy burden challenges, and public initiatives to address the affordable housing crisis must contemplate the energy aspects of these goals.

## Tax policies and programs that remove barriers to access financing for rooftop solar

- ▶ The federal solar investment tax credit and other state-level tax incentives often require the customer to have significant tax liability to take full advantage of the incentive. Creating refundable options for residential solar tax credits would help increase their effectiveness with lower-income communities and increase solar deployment in these underserved areas. Providing a refundable option for clean energy tax credits should go hand in hand with community engagement and funding for outreach campaigns to ensure that these financing mechanisms are adopted by their target audience - those in lower income brackets without the tax appetite to monetize a tax credit for installing solar.
- ▶ Targeted credit enhancement and access expansion programs can help to provide communities that have been left behind with financial tools to install solar energy and make efficiency upgrades. Financing programs should directly target non-profits, governments, tribal lands and other entities without a tax base to take advantage of the ITC.
- ▶ In addition to tax incentives, third-party ownership models can help expand access to lower-income families and small businesses. Leases and third-party ownership should be available nationwide to allow customers to take advantage of the benefits of rooftop solar without being required to take on new financial liability. As these financing models are developed and promoted, they must be presented with full transparency and clarity to ensure that customers in all communities are able to make informed decisions.

## Climate resilience and disaster preparedness programs that include onsite solar, storage, and other electricity resilience measures

- ▶ As climate-related weather events increase in scale and frequency, energy resilience and reliability becomes even more critical. After the devastation caused by Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico, many solar companies reacted quickly to deploy onsite solar and solar + storage systems, enhancing energy autonomy and resilience for residents on the island that were impacted by the storm. As governments develop climate resilience plans, solar and energy storage should be a key component of creating energy security in the wake of natural disasters. Deploying onsite solar and energy storage capacity for critical infrastructure, including hospitals, is a key contributor to building local climate resilience in underserved communities and can raise awareness about the benefits of clean energy more broadly.

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- ▶ Climate-related events are already having severe and often devastating effects on low-income and underserved communities. Evacuations, property damage and other impacts from natural disasters are disproportionately harmful for these communities. Increased solar deployment can help mitigate future climate events by lowering carbon emissions, and locally-sited energy generation increases resilience and reliability for local populations. In responding to natural disasters, governments should prioritize lower-income and frontline communities for resilience centers and increase funding for repairs, restoration and relocation for these communities.
- ▶ Due to restrictions within the Stafford Act, federal funding to rebuild communities after natural disasters is currently underutilized when it comes to installing next generation technologies that increase community resilience to weather events and mitigate climate change. Rebuilding infrastructure in the wake of harmful weather events should be done using technology solutions like solar and energy storage that help prevent and adapt to future climate-related disasters.

## **Siting and permitting processes for large-scale renewable energy projects that are conducted in consultation with impacted communities**

- ▶ Project siting must involve consultation from fenceline communities and relevant tribal governments, and permitting must balance responsible community engagement with the need to rapidly increase renewable energy deployment.
- ▶ While large solar projects and other renewable energy development do not have the same harmful pollution or environmental impacts on local communities as traditional energy generation, the construction and maintenance of these projects still impact local populations and landowners.
- ▶ Solar projects also provide significant economic benefits for the fenceline communities in which they are sited, including generating tax revenue for local governments, creating direct and indirect jobs, and increasing local property values. State and local governments should fund research that demonstrates the positive local impacts of renewable energy development to ensure communities have access to information about available benefits. Publicly funded studies will help to ensure that climate mitigation strategies can successfully address historic inequities
- ▶ Where possible, clean energy growth should take advantage of aging fossil fuel infrastructure by replacing or reclaiming decommissioned facilities with clean energy projects. It's critical that financial support for remediation is made available before the project development phase for reclaiming brownfields or other decommissioned sites begins. To effectively incentivize solar deployment on brownfields and reclaimed land, clear and transparent liability measures must be in place that do not place undue burdens on solar developers.
- ▶ The U.S. Department of Interior and Bureau of Land Management should play a more active role in facilitating consultation with tribes and indigenous populations. Under-resourced and understaffed tribes need support from government entities to ensure they have an opportunity to weigh in meaningfully on siting decisions.

## Clean energy curricula for K-12, vocational schools, community colleges, and higher education, with an emphasis on HBCUs, tribal colleges and other minority-serving institutions

- ▶ Enhancing public education around solar and clean energy, and the technologies, markets, and policies that drive these industries, can help build a strong career pipeline, as well as a wider customer base of informed energy citizens. Focusing this education on historically-black colleges and universities, tribal colleges and other minority institutions will ensure that the next generation of solar workers and customers represents the diversity of the nation. State and federal curriculum development that includes dedicated courses on energy systems, as well as incorporating more specific energy content into STEM learning, will help build a foundation for this important growth.
- ▶ Additionally, because many good-paying solar jobs with opportunities for advancement do not require a 4-year degree, solar is uniquely positioned to work with technical and trade schools to develop a pipeline of qualified graduates.
- ▶ The solar industry is not often seen as a traditional career trajectory for those students studying fields such as finance and investment, which is a key component of the solar supply chain. Conveying to institutions and students that they can take a non-traditional, high potential role in a growing sector should be a key effort looking beyond installation/construction roles.

## Fostering environmental justice expertise in agencies with jurisdiction over energy, climate, and environmental policy

- ▶ Federal agencies such as EPA, the Departments of Energy and Interior, and similar state agencies, should employ experts in environmental justice in positions of leadership to ensure these considerations are built into decision making.
- ▶ At the state and local level, energy offices and other responsible entities should be reformed to ensure that funding for increased clean energy deployment in low-income communities is implemented in a collaborative manner with communities and that the programs achieve their desired outcome. Regulatory bodies that oversee electric utilities and customer ratemaking should strive for maximum transparency and allow for local grassroots participation.
- ▶ The solar industry supports equitable and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations and policies.

## Acknowledgments

This platform benefitted from the input and engagement of numerous key stakeholders, including:

- » 100% Network
- » Clean Energy States Alliance
- » Data For Progress
- » Greenpeace
- » GRID Alternatives
- » Interstate Renewable Energy Council
- » National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
- » National Renewable Energy Laboratory
- » Vote Solar

## Glossary of Terms

### **Diversity**

Diversity is the range of human differences, including but not limited to race, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, social class, physical ability or attributes, religious or ethical values system, national origin, and political beliefs.

### **Equality**

Equality means each individual or group of people is given the same resources or opportunities.

### **Equity**

Equity recognizes that each person has different circumstances and allocates the exact resources and opportunities needed to reach an equal outcome.

### **Inclusion**

Inclusion refers to the behaviors and social norms that ensure people feel welcome.

### **Environmental Justice**

Environmental justice (EJ) is the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations and policies.

### **Frontline Communities**

Frontline communities are those that experience “first and worst” the consequences of climate change. These are communities of color and low-income, whose neighborhoods often lack basic infrastructure to support them and who will be increasingly vulnerable as our climate deteriorates. These are Native communities, whose resources have been exploited, and laborers whose daily work or living environments are polluted or toxic.

### **Fenceline Communities**

A fenceline community is a neighborhood that is immediately adjacent to a company and is directly affected by the noise, odors, chemical emissions, traffic, parking, and operations of the company.

### **Transitioning Communities**

Local communities proactively preparing for an oil-scarce future in a warming world by reducing their dependence on fossil fuels and helping mitigate climate change by re-localizing, shifting production closer to home and creating functioning communities with the idea that strong neighborhood networks will help towns to weather future energy shocks. Transition towns address the issues of peak oil, climate change and economic instability by creating a strong, connected, self-sufficient community.

### **Informed Consent**

Informed consent is a process for getting permission before conducting an activity that directly impacts that person.

### **Self-Determination**

This term refers to each person’s ability to make choices and manage their own life. This ability plays an important role in psychological health and well-being. Self-determination allows people to feel that they have control over their choices and lives.

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## **Generational Wealth**

Generational wealth refers to any kind of asset that families pass down to their children or grandchildren, whether in the form of cash, investment funds, stocks and bonds, properties or even entire companies.

## **Underserved Communities**

Refers to populations which are disadvantaged because of ability to pay, ability to access services, or other disparities for reasons of race, religion, language group or social status.

## **Low-Income Communities**

A Low-Income Community (LIC) is defined by the U.S. Department of the Treasury as a census tract with a poverty rate of at least 20 percent or a median family income 80 percent or less than the area it is benchmarked against (metropolitan area for metropolitan tracts, state for rural tracts).

## **HBCUs**

HBCU stands for Historically Black Colleges and Universities. This is a college or university that was originally founded to educate students of African American descent.

## **Minority-serving institutions**

MSIs are institutions of higher education that serve minority populations. They are unique both in their missions and in their day-to-day operations. MSI's include Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), and Asian American and Pacific Islander Serving Institutions (AAPISIs).

## **Regenerative Wealth or Regenerative Capital**

These terms encompass eight elements:

1. *Right Relationship*: It holds the continuation of life sacred and recognizes that the economy is embedded in human culture and the ecosphere.
2. *Entrepreneurialism*: A Regenerative Economy draws on the innate ability of human beings to innovate and “create anew” across all sectors of society.
3. *Wealth Viewed Holistically*: True wealth is defined in terms of the well-being of the “whole,” achieved through the enhancement and harmonization of the multiple forms of capital—social, ecological, manufactured, and financial.
4. *Shared Prosperity*: Wealth is equitably (although not necessarily equally) distributed in the context of an expanded view of true wealth.
5. *Real Economy Circularity*: Ultimately solar powered, the economy strives continually to minimize energy, material, and resource throughput radically at all phases of the production cycle. Products are remanufactured, recycled and composted, with natural outputs safely composted to the biological world, while minerals and human made substances return to the industrial cycle.
6. *“Edge Effect” Abundance*: Creative, diverse collaborations increase the possibility of value-adding wealth creation through relationship, exchanges, and resiliency.
7. *Resiliency*: The whole system develops the long run ability to adapt and learn from shocks; adaptability to change is valued over current brittle concentrations of power and hyper-efficiency.
8. *Honors Place*: A Regenerative Economy operates to nurture healthy, stable communities and bioregions, both real and virtual, in a connected mosaic of place-centered economies.