

Equitable Access to Community-based Solar

DATE: May 2021
SUBJECT: Request for Information (RFI)

Description

This request for information is intended to inform the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) Solar Energy Technologies Office (SETO) on the current barriers to rapid community solar deployment, and other community-serving models to increase solar access, that include meaningful benefits such as bill reductions, workforce development, local resiliency, and community wealth building. SETO is interested in responses from all stakeholders, including community-based organizations, local businesses, governments, etc. serving environmental justice communities, fossil fuel transitioning communities, and other groups that work with individuals and organizations with high energy burdens.

Background

The [National Community Solar Partnership \(NCSP\)](#) is run by SETO and focuses on network engagement, peer learning, and direct technical assistance with a goal to make community solar affordable and accessible to all Americans by 2025. Community solar represents approximately 4% percent of the overall solar market and is available in 39 states and Washington, DC. Only 1% of the community solar market serves low- to moderate-income communities. To accelerate the equitable deployment of solar energy, we must thoughtfully remove barriers and support deployment to ensure that all households and businesses can benefit from community solar .

Purpose

The purpose of this RFI is to solicit feedback from environmental justice organizations, community-based organizations, solar developers, investors and funders, state and local governments, researchers and other stakeholders to better understand how SETO can support increased deployment of community solar to reduce energy poverty through community wealth building. SETO is particularly interested in equitable deployment models like those that enable communities to own solar systems, which provide greater access and benefits to customers and owners.

For the purposes of this RFI, SETO is using the definitions below:

This is a Request for Information (RFI) only. EERE will not pay for information provided under this RFI and no project will be supported as a result of this RFI. This RFI is not accepting applications for financial assistance or financial incentives. EERE may or may not issue a Funding Opportunity Announcement (FOA) based on consideration of the input received from this RFI.

- Community ownership/community-owned facilities: Subscribers own the community solar assets and are in the service territory. Further, these facilities provide the greatest economic benefit derived from deployment directly to the subscribers.
- Equitable deployment: The full range of benefits provided by community solar are successfully realized by communities with higher energy burdens and those disproportionately impacted by legacy fuel systems and climate change.
- Meaningful benefits: Both subscriber and community benefits are maximized, these benefits can include, but are not limited to, bill reduction, price certainty, economic development, grid and environmental resiliency, and avoided emissions.
- Community wealth building: A model of local economic development such as cooperatives, employee-owned companies, social enterprise, land trusts, family businesses, community development financial institutions and banks, and more. Economic benefits realized from the development of community solar are realized locally.

Disclaimer and Important Notes

This RFI is not a FOA; therefore, EERE is not accepting applications at this time. EERE may issue a FOA in the future based on or related to the content and responses to this RFI; however, EERE may also elect not to issue a FOA. There is no guarantee that a FOA will be issued as a result of this RFI. Responding to this RFI does not provide any advantage or disadvantage to potential applicants if EERE chooses to issue a FOA regarding the subject matter. Final details, including the anticipated award size, quantity, and timing of EERE funded awards, will be subject to Congressional appropriations and direction.

Any information obtained as a result of this RFI is intended to be used by the Government on a non-attribution basis for planning and strategy development; this RFI does not constitute a formal solicitation for proposals or abstracts. Your response to this notice will be treated as information only. EERE will review and consider all responses in its formulation of program strategies for the identified materials of interest that are the subject of this request. EERE will not provide reimbursement for costs incurred in responding to this RFI. Respondents are advised that EERE is under no obligation to acknowledge receipt of the information received or provide feedback to respondents with respect to any information submitted under this RFI. Responses to this RFI do not bind EERE to any further actions related to this topic.

Confidential Business Information

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Pursuant to 10 CFR 1004.11, any person submitting information that he or she believes to be confidential and exempt by law from public disclosure should submit via email well-marked copies: one copy of the document marked “confidential” including all the information believed to be confidential, and one copy of the document marked “non-confidential” with the information believed to be confidential deleted. DOE will make its own determination about the confidential status of the information and treat it according to its determination.

Evaluation and Administration by Federal and Non-Federal Personnel

Federal employees are subject to the non-disclosure requirements of a criminal statute, the Trade Secrets Act, 18 USC 1905. The Government may seek the advice of qualified non-Federal personnel. The Government may also use non-Federal personnel to conduct routine, nondiscretionary administrative activities. The respondents, by submitting their response, consent to EERE providing their response to non-Federal parties. Non-Federal parties given access to responses must be subject to an appropriate obligation of confidentiality prior to being given the access. Submissions may be reviewed by support contractors and private consultants.

Request for Information Categories and Questions

The [National Community Solar Partnership \(NCSP\)](#) is run by the [Solar Energy Technologies Office \(SETO\)](#) and focuses on network engagement, peer learning, and direct technical assistance with a goal to make community solar affordable and accessible to all Americans by 2025.

Category 1: Equitable deployment and greater access

1. How, and please be as specific as possible, can SETO address the needs for greater community solar deployment and benefits to all customers? Tools and activities that can be leveraged include, but are not limited to:
 - Data aggregation
 - Analysis
 - Decision tool development
 - Convening
 - Training
 - Peer exchange
 - Identifying best practices
 - Increasing market transparency
 - Consumer protection efforts
 - Innovative pilot programs
 - Prize and challenge programs
 - Providing financial assistance
 - Evaluation, measurement and verification

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2. What are specific needs, beyond financial support, for increased and more equitable community solar adoption and customer acquisition/management?
3. What are the specific barriers, if any, to provide greater access to capital and/or affordable tax equity for community solar deployment for all markets? Please describe in detail where access to capital or tax equity stopped a project from moving forward and possible SETO-focused tools and activities, as referenced above, that could have facilitated a solution.

Category 2: Strategies for meaningful bill savings and other benefits of community solar

1. What strategies could be supported to provide substantial bill savings for low to moderate income customers of community solar?
 - a. What minimum bill savings are needed to attract low to moderate income customers?
 - b. Please define what substantial bill savings means to you and why.
 - c. What are costs to subscribe low to moderate income community solar subscribers today? How could those costs be decreased? *(or what could SETO do to support cost declines?)*
2. What is needed to promote and deploy additional community-owned solar facilities for the purposes of local wealth building?
 - a. How can additional energy technologies be integrated with community-owned solar for greater wealth building?
 - b. What elements should be considered in program or business model designs to ensure a community-owned? facility provides resiliency benefits? What specific assets should be included?
3. How could DOE programming or funding ensure community solar facilities provide economic and environmental resiliency to the communities they are located in?

Category 3: Innovative Business Models

1. What types of business models exist that support community ownership of solar? What barriers exist to making community ownership of solar accessible, affordable, and scalable? How could DOE address specific barriers, if possible?

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2. How can community solar facilities better leverage micro-grids, storage and other technologies to provide greater value and meaningful benefits to customers and communities?
3. How could the [FERC Order 2222](#) allow for new programs or business models to deploy community solar using the virtual power plant structure?
 - a. How could this structure potentially support greater access to community solar? How could this structure support additional community wealth building by incorporating community solar and solar plus storage?
4. How can SETO support scalable business models and programs that target greater numbers of low to moderate income customers that include meaningful bill reduction or other benefits?

Request for Information Response Guidelines

Responses to this RFI must be submitted electronically to equitablesolar@ee.doe.gov no later than 5:00pm (ET) on June 1, 2021. Responses must be provided as attachments to an email. It is recommended that attachments with file sizes exceeding 25MB be compressed (i.e., zipped) to ensure message delivery. Responses must be provided as a Microsoft Word (.docx) attachment to the email, and no more than 5 pages in length, 12 point font, 1 inch margins. Only electronic responses will be accepted.

Please identify your answers by responding to a specific question or topic if applicable. Respondents may answer as many or as few questions as they wish.

EERE will not respond to individual submissions or publish publicly a compendium of responses. A response to this RFI will not be viewed as a binding commitment to develop or pursue the project or ideas discussed.

Respondents are requested to provide the following information at the start of their response to this RFI:

- Company / institution name;
- Company / institution contact;
- Contact's address, phone number, and e-mail address.

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