



Catalyst Grant Final Project Report **February 2019**

Project title: *Expanding the Renewable Energy Policy Initiative*

Project team

Barry Rabe, University of Michigan Ford School of Public Policy
Tony Reames, University of Michigan School for Environment and Sustainability (SEAS)
Sarah Mills, Ford School
Kristy Hartman, National Conference of State Legislatures
Stephanie Leiser, Ford School
Michael Lerner, University of Michigan LSA/Ford School

Summary

A recent gift to the Ford School established the Ford School Renewable Energy Support Fund, which provides seed funding for Ford School applied academic research on state and local policies impacting the deployment of renewable energy in the U.S. As part of this, the Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy (CLOSUP), in collaboration with the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), was able to host a workshop in May 2019 bringing state legislators from across the country to the Ford School to interact with CLOSUP researchers. The workshop was intended to provide feedback on existing and in-progress research, suggest areas for new research, identify appropriate fora for sharing research findings with policymakers, and develop a proposal for securing external funding for sustaining these research activities.

The Catalyst Grant enabled us to expand the effort to UM faculty beyond the Ford School and to enhance policymaker involvement in the planned workshop. The Catalyst grant allowed SEAS faculty member Tony Reames to research how states across the country are incorporating diversity efforts across race, class and place in state-level solar energy policies. He presented this research at the workshop, as well as participated in workshop networking and brainstorming sessions to understand policymaker needs and priorities for future research. Further, it allowed for external partner NCSL to bring five additional state legislators to the workshop (matched by five supported by the Ford School Renewable Energy Support Fund).

The primary outputs from this activity are the powerpoint slides from the workshop and policy briefs, available online at <http://closup.umich.edu/renewable-energy-policy-initiative/>. The formal evaluation conducted of workshop attendees—both policymakers and researchers alike—was extremely positive, with both groups noting that they appreciated the uncommon opportunity to network and share their expertise in a small-group setting. As a result, CLOSUP and NCSL are planning to hold a follow-up workshop in the Summer of 2020.

Project background and approach

As national concern for addressing global warming grows, more and more Americans are looking for governmental action to speed a transition to low-carbon energy sources. Most of the focus has been on federal action or—in the Trump era—reversal of prior federal action. Furthermore, the lion's share of attention has been paid to a handful of policies that either put a price on carbon (e.g., carbon tax or cap-and-trade) or require utilities to meet renewable energy or improved energy efficiency targets. Below the radar, though, are state and local government level policy choices—on tax policy, land use regulation, infrastructure investment, and use of public land—that can serve to facilitate or hinder an energy transition. Taken individually, these policies may seem innocuous, but collectively they can serve to provide preferred status to some energy sources and impact the performance of other policies. As a

result, some states have opted to use these lower-profile policies to facilitate an energy transition even in states where talking about climate change is politically untenable. Meanwhile in other states, these lower-profile policies may—knowingly or unknowingly—undermine achievement of even more explicit state climate policies including renewable portfolio standards and carbon pricing. To date, however, there has been very little research—at the University of Michigan or elsewhere—on this web of policies effecting the energy transition.

A recent gift to the Ford School allows the School to expand our research in renewable energy policy and fill this void. In keeping with the mission of the Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy (CLOSUP) through which this research is being coordinated, our approach is to engage policymakers throughout the research process: inviting them to help set the research agenda by identifying the policy areas of interest, communicating with researchers throughout the research process to continually ensure that we are asking the right questions, and then communicating the research results in language and venues accessible to these policymakers to ensure that the research can inform policy.

To accomplish this, we held a workshop in May 2019 to bring together a small group of Ford School-affiliated researchers and state legislators. For the workshop, we are partnering with the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), a national bipartisan organization working to improve the quality and effectiveness of state legislatures. NCSL's Energy Program regularly convenes state legislators with energy interests to facilitate policy innovation and information among legislators across states. Through this partnership, we were able to strengthen ties between NCSL and UM researchers to be able to provide more rigorous analysis on the extent to which state policies are impacting the deployment of renewable energy.

Project goals

The aim of this project was to allow for both internal and external partnership development, with the goal of identifying areas of mutual interest for future collaboration—Objective 1 of the Graham Catalyst Grant Objectives. The Catalyst grant allowed us to expand the effort to UM faculty beyond the Ford School and to enhance policymaker involvement in the planned workshop. Our hope was that this project would allow us to identify additional opportunities to jointly work together, as well as increase collaboration between energy researchers in SEAS and the Ford School. Indeed, Tony Reames (SEAS) and Sarah Mills (Ford School) have subsequently met on a number of occasions to discuss overlapping research interests and opportunities to collaborate in the future. The Catalyst grant also allowed us to double the number of NCSL policymaker participants from five to 10 to allow for a more geographically and politically diverse set of stakeholders to participate, and create a more meaningful collaboration between UM and NCSL. On this measure, too, we have succeeded, as the positive feedback—gathered largely to satisfy the Catalyst grant requirements—has helped us better document what a valuable experience this was to both policymakers and researchers.

Findings

The key findings from this work take two separate forms: the results of the original research conducted by Tony Reames and the feedback from policy-maker and researcher participants in the workshop.

Reames' research finds that there are four primary approaches that states have taken to include equity considerations within their solar energy policies: 1) targeting low and moderate income (LMI) households; 2) targeting environmental justice communities; 3) targeting LMI-serving nonprofit and public facilities; and 4) setting and tracking solar equity goals. More details on which states utilize these policies and how other states might consider implementing them is on [policy brief](#) he developed.

The feedback from workshop participants highlighted how valuable it is to bring together policymakers and researchers. All participants agreed (strongly or somewhat) that “the workshop inspired new ideas that they plan to apply to their work/research” and that they “would be eager to participate in a similar workshop in the future.” In open-ended comments, participants noted that they appreciated “the mix between policymakers and researchers is unique”, and “it gave me much needed insight between the different worlds of researchers and policymakers.”

Outputs

- **Workshop with state legislators from across the country**

We held the one-day workshop held at the Ford School on May 23, 2019, bringing legislators from across the country to the Ford School to interact with CLOSUP researchers and faculty affiliates. The agenda (available online [here](#)) included six research presentations, including the presentation by Tony Reames, and time for discussion. The workshop slides are also available [online](#).

- **Summary of research findings**

Each of the researchers presenting at the workshop was asked to provide a short summary of their research findings, focusing in particular on what the research means for policymakers. A draft was shared with all workshop attendees prior to the workshop. Revised versions, which included graphic design, are posted on the CLOSUP [website](#). Catalyst grant funding allowed for findings from Dr. Reames' research to be included; the direct link to that policy brief is [here](#).

Outcomes

- **Increased engagement between SEAS and Ford School researchers, leading to more interdisciplinary solutions to real-world problems**

Catalyst grant funding was primarily being sought to allow us to expand the Renewable Energy Policy Initiative (REPI) to researchers outside the Ford School, thereby increasing engagement between researchers interested in energy policy across campus. Four of the workshop attendees were from UM units outside of the Ford School (and more were invited but unable to attend). As noted previously, Tony Reames and Sarah Mills have identified areas where our work overlaps for on-going collaboration (i.e., regional planning for renewable energy), but have not yet identified a suitable funding body.

- **Increased engagement between UM and external partner NCSL, leading to research that is more closely aligned with policymaker priorities**

This is, we believe, where the Catalyst grant made the most impact. While we had already planned to partner with NCSL, the Catalyst grant funding allowed us to deepen that participation and bring more policymakers to the workshop. Also, the evaluation component required as part of the Catalyst grant helped us demonstrate the impact, and set priorities for future collaboration. The extremely positive feedback from attendees enabled us to secure additional funding and helped solidify the relationship with NCSL. While we are still identifying a date and venue, both CLOSUP and NCSL are interested in taking what we learned from the workshop and making the next even more impactful.

Evaluation

Workshop participants completed an evaluation form immediately following the workshop. They are extremely positive, noting how there are few opportunities for policymakers and researchers to meet and interact at such a level. There was also some constructive critical feedback (e.g., that we need to be sure research is at a farther stage; need a longer event, etc) that are really shaping the next workshop.