

Rural Climate Partnership: Qualitative Research on Renewable Energy Siting



**RURAL CLIMATE
PARTNERSHIP**

Background

- Landscape analysis of existing polling , review of key messaging strategies (both pro and against clean energy)
- Five focus groups- Nov 2023
 - Center right and center left in MI
 - Swing voters in WI and IN
 - Center right in IA
- Online discussion board with swing voters from each state- Dec 2023

Key Takeaways

- Wind and solar, generally, are broadly appealing – driven largely by environmental and economic benefits. Many also feel it is an inevitable, and needed, future
- Skepticism increased when projects in participants' community came up, driven by fears around wildlife impacts, costs, viability, and land use
- People don't know a lot about wind and solar, and some basic information surprised them
- Participants were persuadable and open to messaging in support of and opposed to clean energy projects
- Matching the messenger with the message is critical

What's appealing about clean energy?

Environmental & Public Health Benefits



"It is a **clean and renewable** form of energy. It **cuts down on the pollution levels** going into the air." – Woman, Michigan

"It would mean that there are **less pollutants in our environment**. ... There is only one earth and we need to protect it while we still can." – Woman, Indiana

"We're just destroying this planet. ... and **we just need more alternatives**." – Woman, Michigan

Economic Benefits



"**Lower prices for everybody**."
– Woman, Michigan

"The benefits would be **a few new jobs and local access to a power supply**."
– Man, Iowa

"Maybe **it would create some sort of jobs**, like maintaining either the turbines or the solar panels. And hopefully it would **bring in some income to offset some local taxes**." – Woman, Indiana

Future



"No one seems to know exactly when **certain resources will run out, but it is an inevitability, so we've got to start preparing sooner than later**."
– Man, Indiana

"**Our other forms of energy are finite** and will not last forever. I think it would be **important to invest in the more infinite clean energy**. It will **be better for the future generations** to have a more sustainable Earth to live on." – Woman, Michigan



EVs and rooftop solar panels tend to often be associated with "clean energy":
"I think of **electric vehicles, windmills, and solar panels**." – Woman, Michigan

What's not?

Returns on Investment

There is real skepticism about whether these projects are economically viable.



"I need to see more facts and figures. **How much energy are we producing? How much does it cost to set up these clean energy projects?**" – Woman, Michigan

"How much of the grid would it take up or produce for? Is it half the grid? Is it going to help out with all of the grid?" – Man, Wisconsin

Ecological Impact

Many parrot industry talking points around bird deaths, impacts on local wildlife, and hazardous chemicals seeping into the ground.



"I've seen studies where [wind turbines] can **impact migration patterns or even kill migratory birds.**" – Woman, Indiana

"The solar, they're not telling you about the dust suppressants and everything that they use that affect the water supplies." – Man, Michigan

Land Use

Once voters see the scale of these projects, they worry about the amount of farmland needed for these projects.



"From my perspective, fields of solar panels would be horrible. Where would the animals go? It just seems like a waste of land." – Woman, Iowa

"It is hard to image large-scale production of solar power... The amount of farmland taken out of production could be considerable." – Man, Iowa

Messengers matter a lot! So does messenger/message pairing

- Variety of messengers and messages tested
 - Farmers, local elected officials, utility lineman, nurse, mom, school superintendent, veteran
 - Cost, energy independence, community benefits, farmer benefits, public health
- Participants wanted to hear from other people in communities with projects
- Darren stole the show in one focus group



Most Trusted Messenger Tallies

Farmers and ranchers	16
Your local agriculture extension professionals	11
Local conversation groups like Ducks Unlimited or The Nature Conservancy	8
The state or national farm bureau	7

People like the idea of energy diversification and improving reliability, are keen to support farmers

- *“A single acre of solar can power 80 American homes and a single turn of a wind turbine can power a home for two days.”*



- Despite farmers’ economic interest in projects, people trusted them
 - **“I’ve never met a dishonest farmer in my life.”** – Man, Michigan
 - **“He’s actually still harvesting from his land and has the energy as well. So it seems like a benefit for everybody if the farmer can still farm and he’s also making money...”** – Woman, Indiana
- Pointing out farmers’ right to do what they want with their land resonated with many participants, too

Community benefit messaging can work, but it must be done right

Superintendent Chilman, Opinion: *Wind Energy is Generating New Opportunities at Beal City Schools*



"As a former Earth Science teacher, I have long supported harnessing our planet's natural resources — the wind and the sun — to generate electricity. Today, as a school superintendent, I have seen that wind and solar energy can power far more than only our homes and businesses. They can power new opportunities for students, teachers and entire school districts through the benefits they bring to communities that host them.

In early 2021, the Isabella Wind project was completed and began operations in our community. The new 383-megawatt, 136-turbine project was the largest wind project constructed in Michigan. In total, 83 of those wind turbines are located in the Beal City School District and our school building sits in the heart of the wind project.

Prior to the project's approval, our school district passed a supportive resolution because we could see the huge benefits the project would bring to our community, not only through hundreds of construction jobs and new long-term careers for future graduates, but also the millions of dollars in new tax revenue it would bring to local school districts like ours and other local governmental agencies.

In the project's first two years of operation, it has already generated more than \$10 million in new tax revenue for Isabella County, local townships, and local school districts, including more than \$1.5 million to Beal City Schools alone.

Thanks to the wind farm, we are going to be able to modernize our school district and have the kinds of resources and amenities a small rural school district like ours typically would not be able to afford — and we are far from the only district seeing these kinds of benefits from wind energy. School districts in Gratiot County have received more than \$40 million in new tax revenue from wind farms since 2012."

Voters appreciate seeing hard numbers, and Chilman is seen as credible because of his executive position in his district

"I have an overall positive reaction... **It is an experienced professional who sees the benefit of using alternative clean energy who sees how it positively impacts his rural community.**" – Woman, Michigan

Nearly everyone picked this line as the MOST convincing part of Chilman's op-ed

"It did change how I feel a little bit because it can have a positive impact on my community. I'm in a rural area so there is little funding circulating and if we could get revenue from this it would be good." – Woman, Wisconsin

"With the school getting that much more revenue just because of renewable energy seems like a slam dunk easy decision for me to support it." – Man, Michigan

Key Conclusions

- Basic clean energy education valuable
- Farmers are valuable messengers and messages from/about them resonate
- People are initially skeptical of economic/community benefits but persuadable
- Earnest, truthful messaging from trusted sources can break through
 - But people are on high alert for messages or messengers that are tainted or off the mark
- Misinformation is not exceptionally potent but can be effective when injected into the right environment
 - It also can rationalize deeper concerns about impacts to community character

What's Next

- Phase two already started
 - Polling in four states in late March/April to quantify focus group insights
 - Creative message development (video and digital static ads) and testing
 - Real world campaign testing
- Questions, details about focus groups, phase two research
 - Scott@ruralclimate.org