U.S. DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY | Office of ENERGY EFFICIENCY & RENEWABLE ENERGY
SOLAR ENERGY TECHNOLOGIES OFFICE

SETO Communications Quick Start Guide

Being thoughtful about how you plan to communicate your research from the beginning of your award can help you have maximum impact with your initial announcement and as you have news to share along the way.

Creating a communications plan sets you up for success because it enables you to think proactively about how and to whom you want to communicate about your work and to develop concrete activities and goals to accomplish this.

In this quick start guide, we've included the materials you'll need to create a communications plan and execute it effectively, including real examples of results from a successful communications plan.

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Questions? Concerns? Ideas? Feel free to contact us:

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Worksheet: Develop Your Communications Plan

Answer the questions on this worksheet to gather the information you will need to put together a communications plan, then use it fill in the outline provided next.

1. Choose your target audience

What audience do you want to reach? Who will be most interested or benefit most by hearing about your work?

2. What are your communications goals?

What do you hope to accomplish in communicating about your work?

3. Who are your stakeholders?

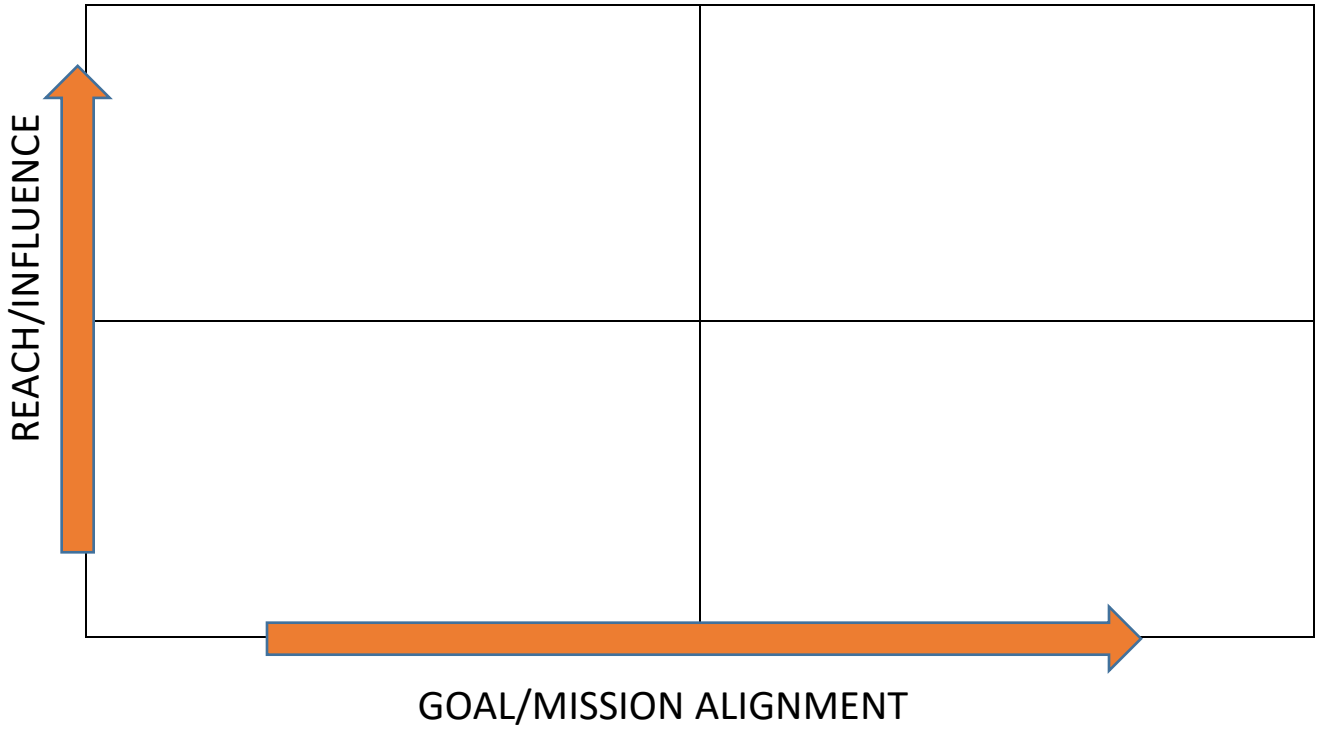
Brainstorm 8-10 groups or organizations that would be interested in news about your work.

4. Map your stakeholders

Which stakeholders are most important? Stakeholders have varying levels of influence, and some are a better fit for your goals. Use the map on the next page to help you figure out the most promising stakeholders to target.

Stakeholder Map

The best stakeholders to target will be in the top right hand corner – they will be both high influence AND high on goal alignment. List your top targets.



5. Key Messages

Develop 1-3 key messages that you want to have your stakeholders and media repeat. It should be factual, concise, and essential to your program.

For example: Solar creates local jobs and boosts the economy.

6. Anecdotes

Think of 1-2 anecdotes that help illustrate your messages.

For example: Solar Ready Vets graduate, Jane Smith, now works for Solar Company X and has moved quickly up the ranks. Her supervisor says she is a top performer and will now be hiring more veterans as a result of her success.

7. Tactics

Brainstorm some creative ways to get your message out. These should be relevant to your audience, realistic for you to produce, and replicable. The best content can be used in multiple ways, for example: a blog post can be repurposed as an authored article on another website, then turned into an email to stakeholders or even a Linked In post.

8. Measurement

Measuring and documenting the results of your work as you go along will be key to communicating them. Brainstorm some resources you can use to help measure your success.

Communications Plan Outline

Overview

Provide a high-level description of the potential outcomes of the communications plan, for example:

- How does the work being announced advance the goals of the organization?
- What broader messaging goals can be achieved by this announcement?
- What key assets will be updated or added to the organization's communications arsenal?

Internal Communications

Describe how your will engage your colleagues in the announcement process. Who needs to know what, when? What approvals are necessary before you proceed to the next stage? How will your internal audience be able to share the news once it is released?

Stakeholder Engagement

Describe how you will engage your key stakeholders in the news and when. Prioritize your stakeholders based on their influence and potential impact to help maximize your reach. Ensure that you make it as easy as possible for these stakeholders to share your message. For example, give your stakeholders a heads up on your big news, prepare a communications package with prepared social media posts, newsletter blurbs, and website information.

Media Relations

Develop Talking Points

Describe the topline messages that you want to see in media coverage. In five bullets, it should cover what you do and what this project means for your future. In addition, develop 3-5 examples or anecdotes that speak to the topline messages.

Media Outreach

Develop a list of reporters that you want to pitch and what your story ideas are. You should shoot for a few "reach" publications that would cover your story in depth. Describe when you will send your press release and who, if any, will get an embargoed copy of your release. See next section for further detail about media relations.

Op-Ed

If you have found high-level stakeholders through your stakeholder engagement, it is often a good idea to get a third-party stakeholder to write a guest op-ed in support of your achievements. Brainstorm a few "reach" stakeholders who might be interested in publishing an op-ed about your news and what publications you would like it to get placed in.

Visual Assets

Graphic design is increasingly important to communicating your messages. Potential graphics include:

- Maps
- Photos with text overlay
- Social media-sized images
- Charts and graphs
- Video

Web

The primary channel through which your audience will access your news is your website or your organization's website. This provides an opportunity to communicate the purpose and scope of your news in a concise and impactful way. Ensure that your website has links to a summary, key findings, graphics and any additional assets like blog posts, video, and news stories.

Social Media

Describe how you will engage social media on your news, including what platforms will be used. You should also plan to share your social media posts with key stakeholders (including SETO) so that they can amplify your news on the day it is released. Be sure to identify the hashtags you will use.

Materials

List all of the materials you will develop for the announcement with deadlines and owners. Many of these benefit from being gathered on an ongoing basis as you are conducting your work. This could include taking photos to share later or collecting data for graphics you plan to create.

Measuring Success

Describe what metrics you will use to determine whether or not you have achieved your communications goals. Examples include: social media impressions, traffic to your website, media hits, email list subscriptions, etc.

Media Engagement Tips and Tricks

How to develop a media list

The first step is to take a look at stories in the media about solar and who's writing about your specific field or area of study. Awardees usually target the journalists that they regularly read or where they want to be featured.

One helpful tool is Google News. Try searching for companies similar to you, other researchers, or your topic area to see what media coverage they're getting as well as the key words that you feel are relevant. Also, Twitter is a great resource for learning about different solar research communities. Even if you don't feel like tweeting or want to make a private account, you can at least follow the journalists you like or want to get to know better.

SETO can't give out specific journalist names because of privacy laws, but we can help guide you towards outlets that might be relevant. First, we recommend reaching out to local media to discuss the value of your work and the local impact. In addition, there are several outlets that regularly write about solar.

Solar trade publications

- Solar Industry Magazine
- PV Magazine
- Solar Power World
- PV-Tech
- Clean tech
- CleanTechnica

General Renewable Energy

- E&E News
- Renewable Energy World
- Business
- Bloomberg
- Bloomberg New Energy Finance
- SNL Energy

Tips for Writing a Press Release

There's no one way to write a release, but generally press releases are succinct and offer only the most important information. Think of it like the highlight reel. Journalists don't have a lot of time to review each release in-depth, so it's important to put the most important information at the top and then move into explaining your achievement and why it's important. Writing a good press release takes some practice, but once you get the hang of it, it's a skill you can use over and over again.

How to Find Contact Information

Once you find articles that cover similar stories or journalists that you like, you will need to find their contact information and add them to your list.

If you can't find a journalist's contact information from their bio page or underneath an article they've written, my favorite trick is playing with Google search terms and using the domain name (i.e. @greentechmedia.com) to find email addresses. Once you figure out the domain name for all email addresses used at an outlet, type in quotes the domain name, plus sign, and then that person's name in quotes. This will pull up all mentions including both the domain name and that person's name – often times giving you an email address.

Pitching Your News

Once you have your media list prepared and your press release written, it's time to send out your press release.

In the body of your email you'll write a personal email that's succinct and briefly explains the news. It's important that this pitch it brief, personable, and sells the overall importance or significance of your work. Then beneath the pitch, you'll include the copy of your press release. Do not attach the press release – the chances of someone clicking on the attachment are much lower.

Successful Example of Communicating Results

By creating and executing a communications plan, you can maximize the impact of your work. Below is an example of successful communication of results from a project conducted by the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA).

You can read their press release as well as two blog posts written about their work. These include statistics, photos, and graphics that they collected and created over the course of their project.

Press Release: New Research Shows a Solar Revolution in Rural America

ARLINGTON, VA, July 18, 2018 –The rapid acceleration of solar development by America's electric cooperatives is transforming the energy landscape in rural America. According to a new report, electric co-ops today own or purchase more than nine times as much solar energy as they did in 2013.

In 2013, the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA) received a grant from the Department of Energy (DOE) to help electric cooperatives remove barriers to solar development. Through the ensuing Solar Utility Network Deployment Acceleration (SUNDA) project, NRECA worked with 17 electric cooperatives to develop models and resources for co-ops interested in developing solar energy.

"Electric cooperatives are led by and belong to the communities that they serve. This heightened community focus allows co-ops to quickly adapt to evolving consumer expectations," said NRECA CEO Jim Matheson. "As solar costs come down, co-ops are bringing the benefits of this renewable resource to local communities and consumer-members across the country, often in places once written off as unsuitable for solar."

According to the newly released NRECA report:

- Today, the average co-op solar project is larger than 1 megawatt, up from 25 kW in 2013.
- Half of the nation's nearly 900 not-for-profit, member-owned electric co-ops have solar offerings for their consumer-members through projects they own, electricity they purchase or joint projects with other co-ops.
- Generation and transmission cooperatives (G&Ts) are increasingly leading on solar development.
- Electric cooperatives lead the electric utility sector in the development of utility-sponsored community solar programs. As of July 2018, nearly a quarter of all co-ops offer a total of 196 existing community solar programs.
- Increased consumer interest in solar combined with a decline in the cost of installed solar were key factors in the accelerated adoption of solar among electric cooperatives.

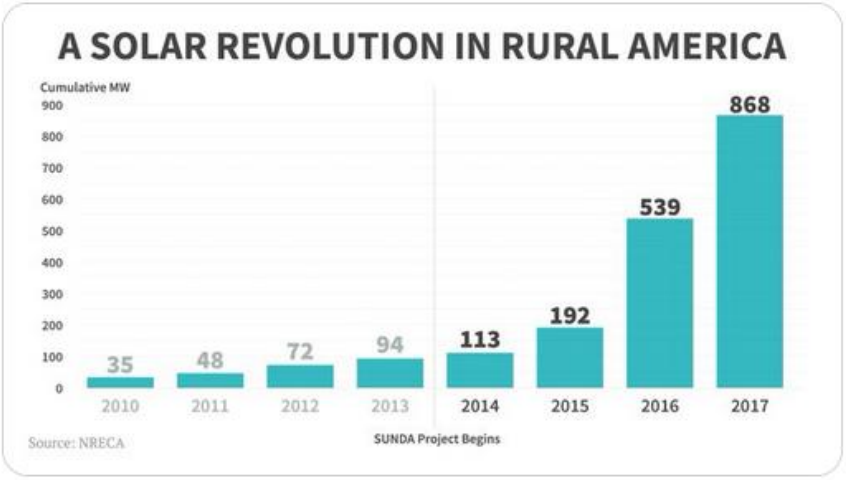
The National Rural Electric Cooperative Association is the national trade association representing more than 900 local electric cooperatives. From growing suburbs to remote farming communities, electric co-ops serve as engines of economic development for 42 million Americans across 56 percent of the nation's landscape. As local businesses built by the consumers they serve, electric cooperatives have meaningful ties to rural America and invest $12 billion annually in their communities.

Social Media Posts

NRECA @NRECANews · Jul 18, 2018

NEWS: The energy landscape in rural America is transforming thanks to the SUNDA project, a collaboration between NRECA and @ENERGY.

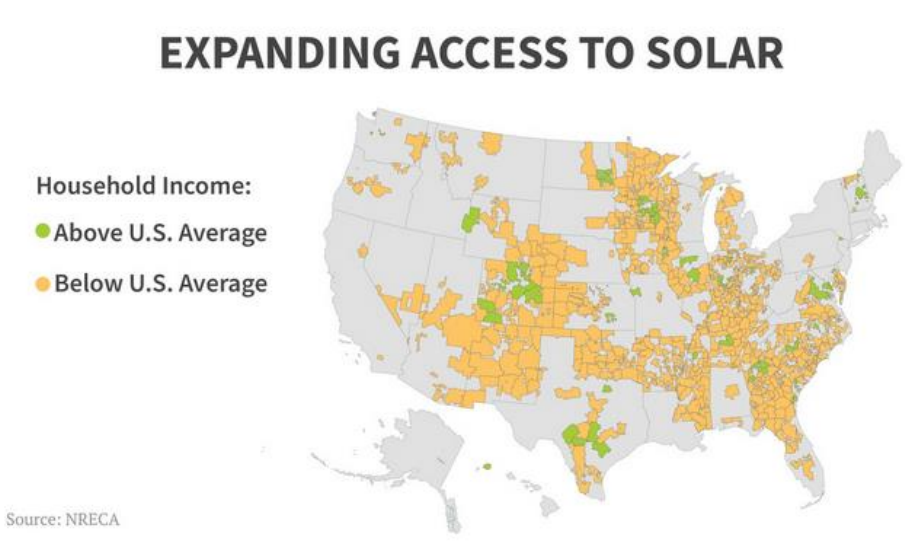
Electric co-ops now own or purchase more than nine times as much #solar energy as they did before SUNDA. Learn why: ow.ly/HuUM30kZTHR



NRECA

July 23, 2018 ·

As our SUNDA solar research project concludes this month, more than 400 electric co-ops now offer solar energy to their members.That's meant a transformation in rural America, as co-ops are delivering solar to communities where household income is below the national average. Read one Colorado co-op's success story: http://ow.ly/T5Ay30I51CO



Blog Post 1: Bringing the Power of Community Solar to the Entire Community

NRECA's SUNDA project helps a Colorado co-op remove barriers to participation

NRECA's SUNDA project helped Poudre Valley REA make the Coyote Ridge Community Solar Farm accessible to all co-op members. (Photo By: Poudre Valley REA)

Editor's Note: One of the innovations from NRECA's Solar Utility Network Deployment Acceleration (SUNDA) project is community solar programs benefiting low- and moderate-income consumers. Colorado's Poudre Valley REA is one such success story.

Its first two community solar projects were very successful, but when it came time for a third, Poudre Valley REA knew something had to change.

"The access to community solar was kind of limited for those that are under-resourced within our membership," said David White, vice president, member relations, at the Fort Collins, Colorado-based co-op. "Our board wanted us to try to figure out a way to remove the barriers."

Enter GRID Alternatives, a nonprofit that partners with utilities, government agencies and other entities to bring solar to low-income households and communities. Added bonus: GRID Alternatives was already working with the Colorado Energy Office.

"Their model is very much like a Habitat for Humanity model, where they bring in engineering resources and construction resources through volunteers. They're able to really drive down the cost of the project, which allows us then to pass on those savings to the under-resourced," said White. GRID Alternatives also handles the sign-up process.

"It was a really good fit for what we were envisioning for our project, and for their mission."

Coyote Ridge Community Solar Farm opened in September 2017. Eligibility is determined by income guidelines, which vary based on family size and county of residence. The range goes from an annual gross income of $41,000 for a single person in Weld County to $89,800 for a family of eight in Boulder County.

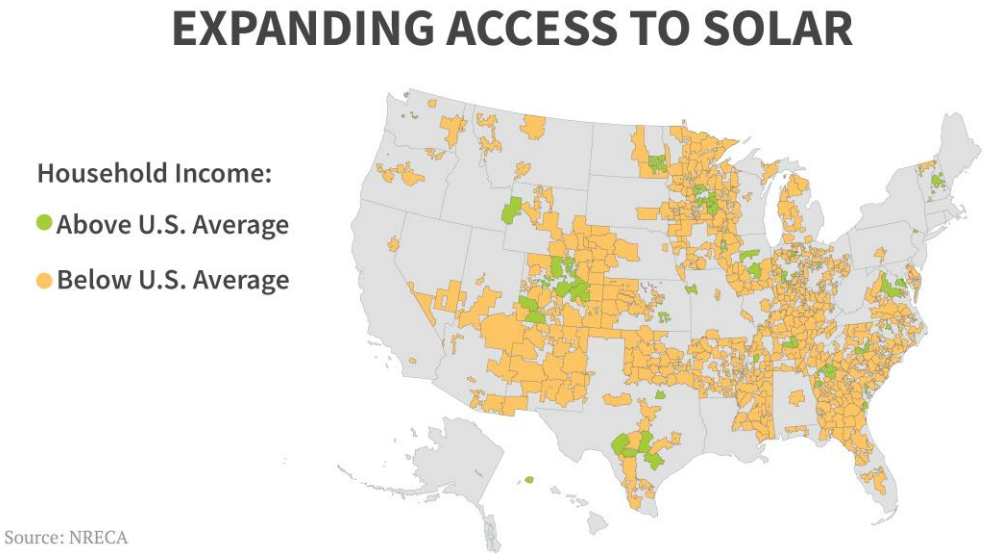
White said the co-op's northern Colorado service territory has a good economy, but "the cost of living, particularly housing, is fairly high," which really hits a number of people.

The traditional subscriber to Poudre Valley community solar makes a one-time upfront investment and then pays a monthly subscription charge. In exchange, the member gets a 100 percent offset on their bill for all energy generated by the panel(s) they subscribe to.

Those who qualify to subscribe through GRID Alternatives get a 30 percent offset but have no upfront or monthly costs.

The numbers are impressive. Eighty-five percent of the panels for income-qualified members are subscribed. That compares to 49 percent of panels for traditional subscribers and 38 percent of panels for nonprofits including schools and firehouses.

"What's interesting is we haven't really done a big, paid marketing push on the community solar farm and the subscription rate has been really successful considering," said Amy Blunck, Poudre Valley's communications director. "We did a few articles in our magazine last year, a bill insert, and a few paid social media posts, but that's about it. The earned media on this project has been substantial."



NRECA's SUNDA project helped bring solar to communities where the household income is below the national average.

White credits NRECA's SUNDA project with providing invaluable help for the project. He said Poudre Valley's first two solar farms were purchase power agreements. They wanted the third to be co-op-owned and operated.

"But we didn't have much expertise in that. So SUNDA brought us a lot of resources in terms of how to do a community solar project where you're going to be the owner-operator," he said. "They had fantastic financial models that we utilized to determine the economics of the project. They also brought technical expertise in terms of engineering and procurement."

And Blunck said the SUNDA materials "will be great for other cooperatives that don't have the resources" to undertake a community solar project.

Poudre Valley's efforts to bring community solar to all recently earned it a couple of honors. It was named 2018 Electric Cooperative Utility of the Year by the Smart Power Electric Association and won a Silver Award for Best Total Communication Program in the 2018 NRECA Spotlight on Excellence Awards.

Blog Post 2: The Story of Co-op Solar in Nine Graphics

The rural American energy landscape is in the midst of a dramatic transformation thanks in part to a four-year research project spearheaded by NRECA and the Department of Energy's Solar Energy Technologies Office. Electric cooperatives are on track to own or purchase more than 1 gigawatt of solar power by 2019, more than a tenfold increase from what it was in 2013, before the project began.

The initiative, known as SUNDA (Solar Utility Network Deployment Acceleration), officially closes this month. As part of the project, NRECA partnered with 17 co-ops in 10 states to develop 22 solar installations totaling more than 30 megawatts. But the impact of that work went far beyond the footprint of those original arrays.

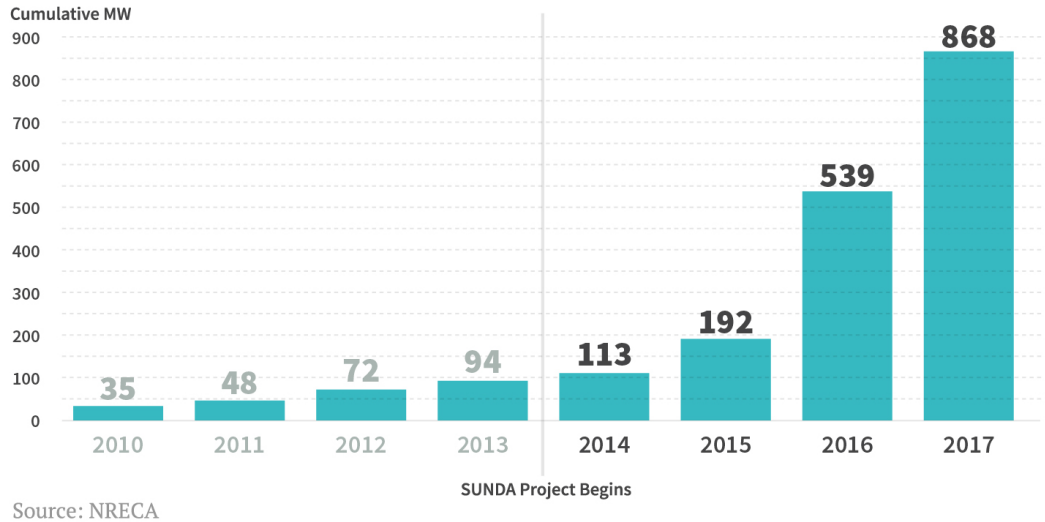
Lessons learned by the SUNDA partners led to a library of guides and tools designed to help other co-ops evaluate whether solar was right for them. These timely, comprehensive resources helped reduce risks, remove hurdles and lower costs, and now, more than 400 co-ops offer solar to their members. Cooperatives even pioneered the community solar model and now lead the industry with 198 programs across the country.

In addition, large solar deployments by power generation cooperatives on behalf of their distribution co-op members helped demonstrate that increasing the size of a system and involving multiple players can further reduce construction costs and risks.

Here's a look, in charts and graphics, at the surge in co-op solar the SUNDA project helped spur in rural America:

A Solar Revolution in Rural America

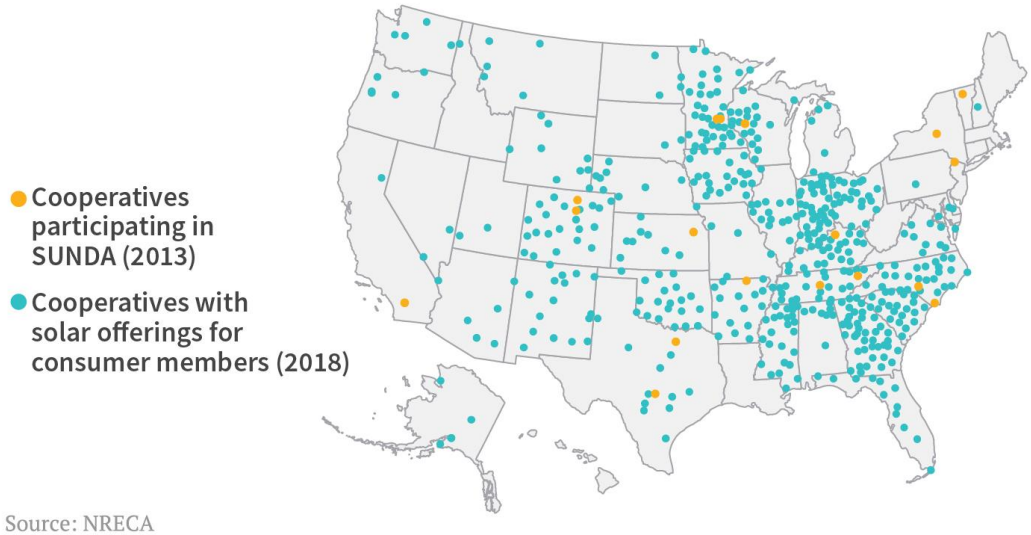
Cooperatives own or purchase more than nine times as much solar energy as they did in 2013 prior to the SUNDA project.



Source: NRECA

Early Solar Adopters Pave the Way

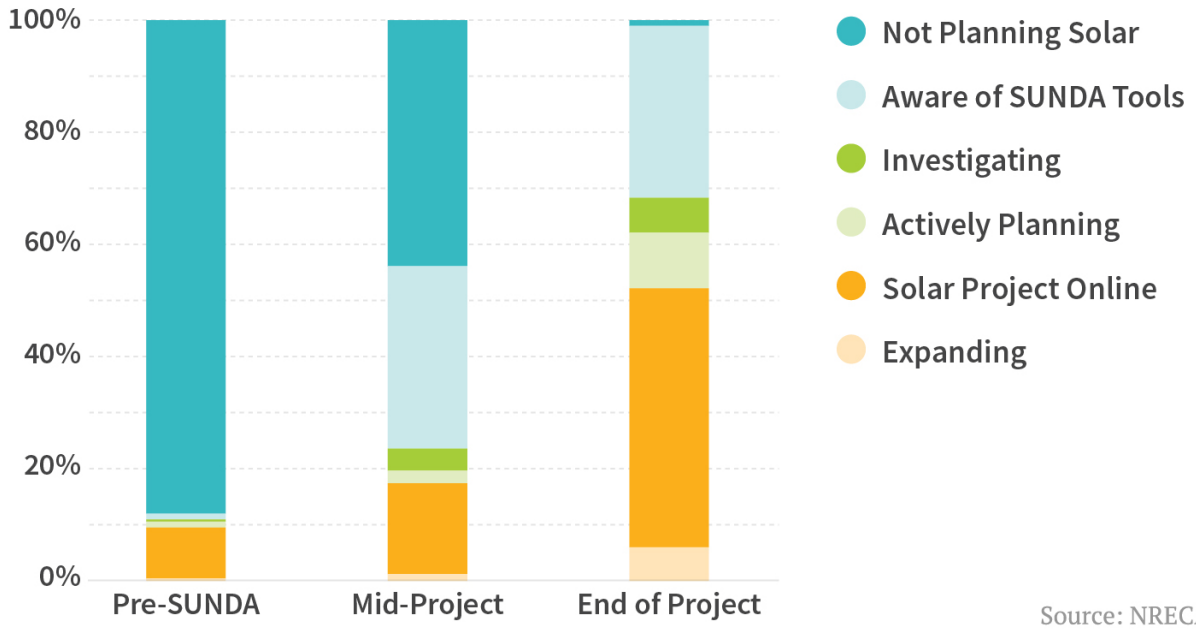
The experiences of 17 electric cooperatives provide guidance for the co-op network; more than 400 co-ops now have a solar energy option.



Source: NRECA

Co-op Solar Heats Up

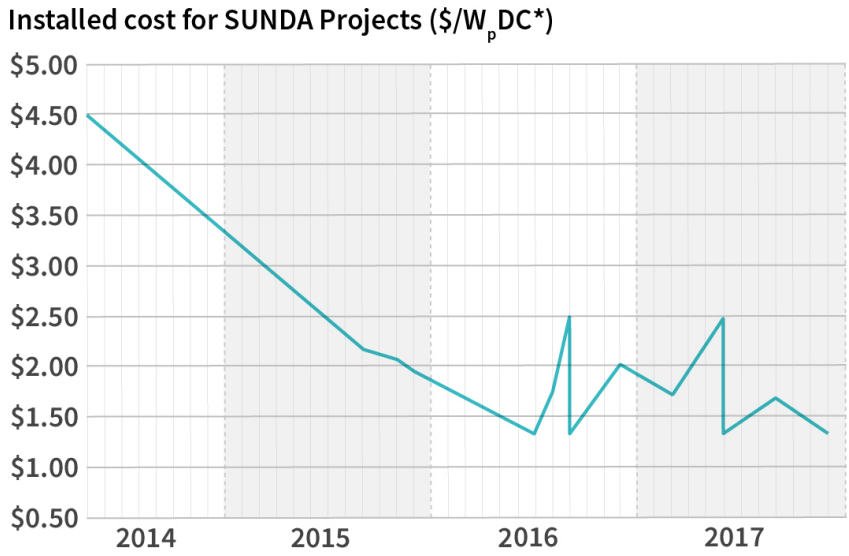
NRECA's SUNDA project catalyzed cooperative solar development by providing tools for every step in the process.



Source: NRECA

Co-ops' Solar Costs Plummet

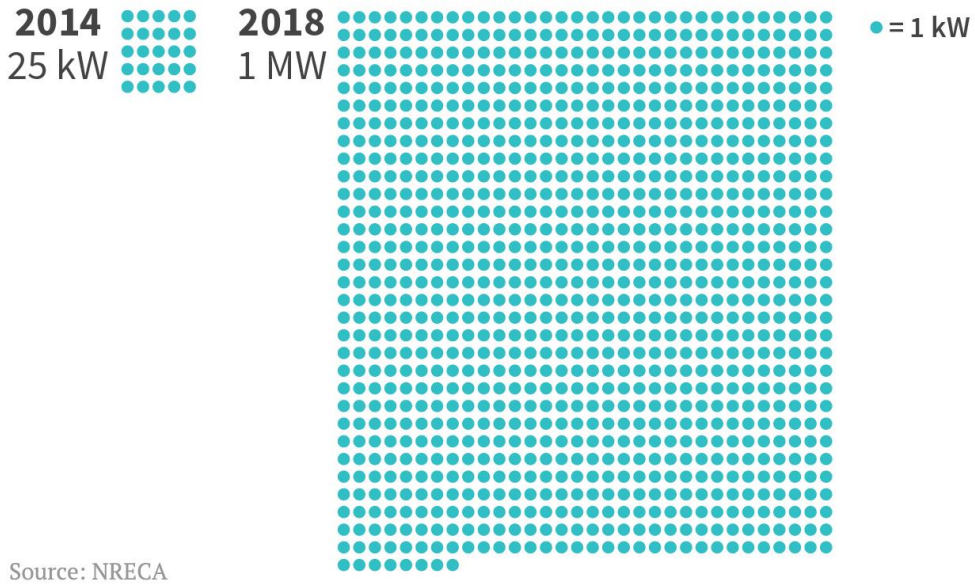
Economies of scale, falling panel prices and new business models dramatically reduced the cost of installed solar for co-ops.



* Cost per Watts peak DC
Source: NRECA

Co-op Solar: From Trial-Size to Super-Size

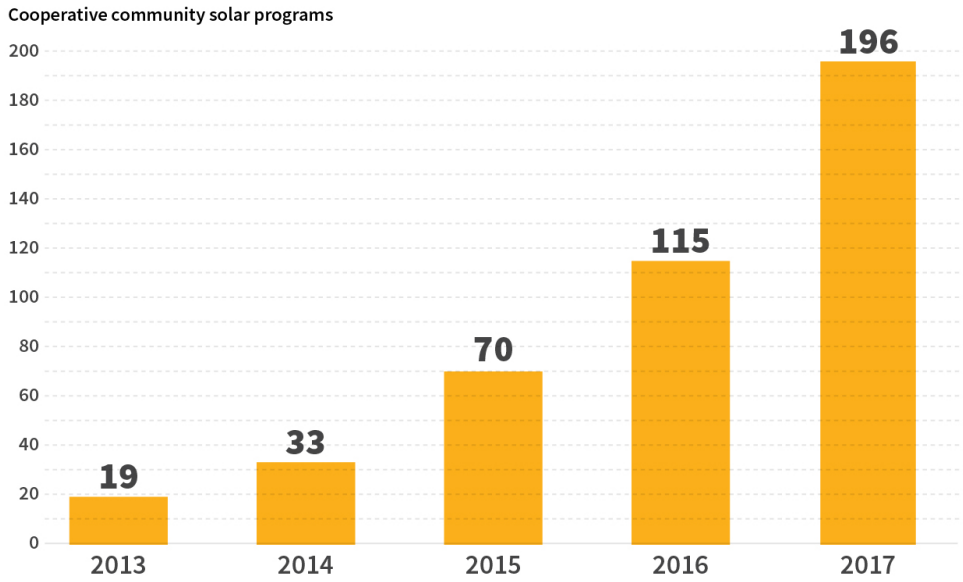
Over the course of the SUNDA project, the average size of a co-op solar installation grew from experimental-level to utility-scale.



Source: NRECA

Community Solar Goes Viral

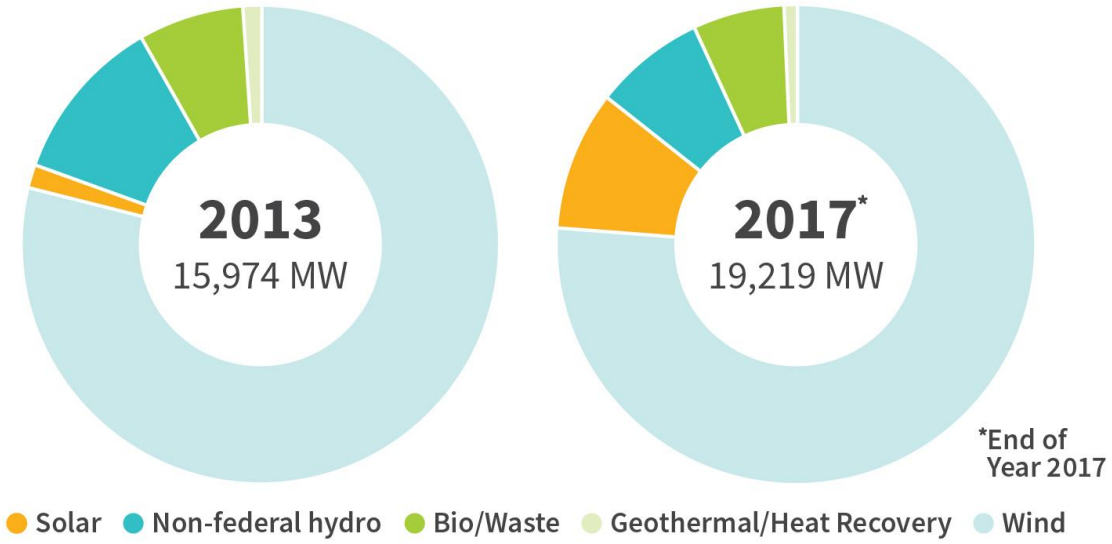
The community solar business model, which offers greater access to solar with lesser risks, is a hit with co-ops and their consumer-members.



Source: NRECA

A More Diverse Mix of Renewable Resources

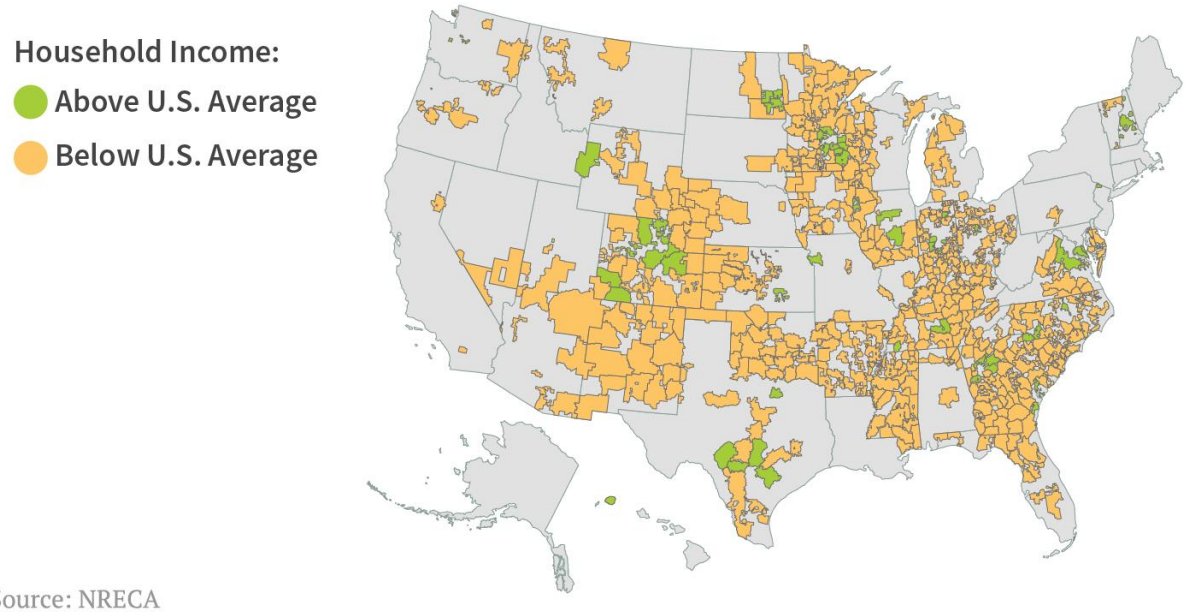
During the SUNDA project, solar's share of the co-op non-hydro renewable energy mix went from nearly nonexistent to 5 percent.



Source: NRECA

Expanding Access to Solar

Co-ops are bringing solar to communities where the household income is below the national average.



Source: NRECA

Road to Solar Success

From field manuals to business plans, SUNDA resources paved the way for a surge in co-op solar.