

GETTING IT RIGHT:

Community Benefit Plans for the New ERA Program

The Empowering Rural America (New ERA) program helps rural Americans transition to clean, affordable, and reliable energy. A completed Community Benefits Plan (CBP) is required for any New ERA award allocation. Required CBPs allow applicants to plan for and address the needs of workers and communities to ensure electric cooperative plans are in step with local priorities.

The BlueGreen Alliance believes New ERA CBPs should include or ensure:

INCLUSIVE CBP DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

- **Honest, accessible, and two-way engagement strategy** that seeks input from labor unions, Tribes, environmental justice organizations, local environmental organizations, and groups and institutions serving primarily disadvantaged community (DAC) members;
- **Ensure all aspects of CBPs are publicly available;**
- **Include mechanisms for identifying, assessing, and mitigating project benefits and burdens for workers and communities**—with the flexibility to include broader consideration of local priorities;
- **Outline detailed steps for how co-op CBP goals will be fully aligned with community and worker goals**, including full details of a stakeholder engagement plan;
- **Outline the specific measures and accountability mechanisms** that rural electric cooperatives and CBP parties will take to ensure the planned benefits outlined in CBPs are realized. Specific project data should be shared directly with stakeholders and made publicly available;
- **Include robust implementation plans that include strategies to measure, track, and report project impacts** including any community monitoring data;
- **Timelines for CBP development, project(s) development, decommissioning, and/or remediation should be shared** with regional host communities, state agencies, residents and engaged stakeholders, and other interested parties; and
- **Ensure the negotiated CBP becomes fully executed as a legally binding Community Benefit Agreement (CBA)** between the applicant, regional host communities, and CBP parties.

HIGH-ROAD NEW GENERATION, STORAGE, TRANSMISSION AND ENABLING PROJECTS

- **All project construction should be covered by a legally binding agreement with labor**, such as a Project Labor Agreement, Community Workforce Agreement, or a standing Collective Bargaining Agreement with a local utility union.
- **Ongoing operations and maintenance (O&M) should also be covered by an agreement with labor**, or a Labor Neutrality agreement and there should be robust O&M plans and adequate staffing for enabling grid infrastructure;
- **Include Local Hire benchmarks** to prioritize and support the hiring of workers from within the state or local community;
- **Include Targeted Hire benchmarks** to prioritize and support employing workers from certain communities, which may include women; people of color; veterans; the formerly incarcerated; Indigenous people; economically DACs; communities heavily impacted by climate change, pollution, energy transition, or deindustrialization; and many others;
- **Recognize that siting consultations should include all impacted stakeholders**, including farm or grazing lessees and neighboring landowners/lessees; and
- **Ensure that CBP terms apply to all projects funded fully or partially by the New ERA program**, including projects added to a co-op's generation portfolio through a Power Purchase Agreement (PPA) and enabling project elements.

ENSURE EQUITABLE OUTCOMES

- **Plan and facilitate honest, accessible, and two-way engagement with Justice40 and other disadvantaged communities (DACs)** that will either be impacted or potentially benefit from this program;
- **Prioritize community benefits that reduce home energy burdens and increase resilience**, especially for DACs;
- **Formal and informal Tribal consultation**—from early awareness to detailed sharing of plans as they develop and become actionable;
- **Regular review and updating of equity and Justice 40 goals and initiatives** to ensure plans and actions are in step with community needs as they evolve;
- **Ensuring that each project works to develop its own binding Community Benefits Agreement** through robust local and regional stakeholder engagement and does not require stakeholders to sign non-disclosure agreements (NDA);
- **Invest in workforce programs and institutions that recruit and train workers** for a high-quality career, such as registered apprenticeship programs; and
- **Include letters of support from environmental justice and other community-based organizations** to demonstrate the applicant's commitment to the implementation strategy.

MONITORING AND ENFORCEMENT

- **Establish a plan for ongoing monitoring of all commitments and benefits agreed to with** at least yearly reporting that is made publicly accessible for the community; and
- **Ensure communities and stakeholders have the ability and resources to provide third-party monitoring and enforcement.**

HIGH-ROAD COAL COMMUNITY TRANSITIONS

- **All facility closure and decommissioning details**, including a precise schedule with a comprehensive list of milestones for closure and impacted worker details; supports provided for workers in between decommissioning and new projects coming online (worker gap support); cleanup and remediation plans; and workforce requirements and local hiring provisions for decommissioning, remediation, and (if applicable) site reutilization;
- **Provisions to maximize worker retention and minimize job losses.** Outcomes will be best if these provisions ensure:
- **Job quality for new work is the same or higher for retained or rehired workers**, ideally by keeping workers within their union bargaining unit and remaining fully neutral in potential worker organizing;
- **The existing workforce is offered training so they may shift to closely aligned new work within the company** located in the immediate region where they currently live and/or work; and
- **First-in-line hiring preference is established for impacted energy workers and their families** to allow seamless transition to new high-road jobs, minimize workforce relocation, and ensure workers benefit from the transition to cleaner, cheaper energy;
- **Full disclosure of how rural electric cooperatives consider local revenue impacts and plans to remediate losses** and provide tax benefits for communities and local taxing; and
- **Including terms in Project Labor Agreements that allow workers impacted by closures to participate in new investment/facility construction and be guaranteed ongoing O&M placement** in equivalent or better-quality jobs.

CONTACT

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