

## MULTIYEAR PLANNING RURAL STAKEHOLDERS WORKSHOP SUMMARY

Energy Trust held a virtual workshop March 17, 2025, for stakeholders interested in learning about and providing input on Energy Trust's energy efficiency and renewable energy generation programs and services for rural customers for the next five years. Staff presented information on the organization's background and services, 2025-2030 Strategic Plan and the transition to multiyear planning, replacing its current annual budgeting process. The workshop content also included draft energy savings and generation targets. Staff that manage customer programs and services then presented information on program structure and offers and key strategies planned for 2026-2030 that will serve or otherwise impact rural customers, including:

- For industry and agricultural customers: new business lighting offers and instant discounts, new small business offers, increased incentives, account management to priority customers.
- For commercial customers: special offers for small businesses, collaboration with professional organizations on new building design, working with environmental justice communities and contracting with community partners to serve multifamily customers.
- For residential customers: more regionally specific incentives, growing Community Partner Funding and In-Home Energy Services, layering complementary funding.
- For renewable energy customers: targeted campaigns and higher incentives including for hydropower and bio power, solar financing, community planning and feasibility studies, funding for energy resilience projects.
- For all customers: rural capacity building through small grants, regionally based outreach staff, incentives for community and municipal projects, energy planning and resilience planning, support for utility initiatives in rural areas.

Participants could ask questions and respond to information presented during full group question and answer breaks, in the Zoom chat, in a short poll, in small group discussions and in a follow-up survey after the workshop. Energy Trust and other attendees answered questions throughout the presentation and those responses are not included here. The following are themes that emerged from participants, including specific comments and questions:

### **Participants identified resiliency as critical, including back-up power sources during outages, cooling systems for places that do not have them, and the need for multiple technical options.**

Participants noted their communities experience power outages and are hearing lots of demand for back-up systems (and specifically for generators), as well as the need for cooling systems for housing without air conditioning in increasingly hot weather, particularly for older populations. They expressed the need for multiple types of solutions in addition to solar + battery storage, such as heat pumps, microgrids for critical infrastructure, and dual fuel source solutions and virtual power plants, with associated incentive programs. Related to this is to prioritize resiliency planning and preparedness, for example, education around air purifiers in preparation for fire season.

- *Resilience is really important to rural communities. Resilience and independence feel very similar to me in rural communities. The history of energy in rural areas is less than 80 years old in terms of people being connected to the grid. The same people that were left behind are the same ones that are on the frontlines of climate change.*

**Messaging around energy efficiency, renewables, and resiliency is important.**

People in rural communities can be suspicious of government programs, resistant to change, and are put off by terminology such as “renewables” and “climate change.” Messaging is needed to help overcome this resistance. People do want to reduce their utility costs. Messaging (digital and print) should provide concrete examples and customer stories that focus on saving money, helping vulnerable populations, and should be very clear that no extra fees will appear on energy bills as a result of participation. It would be most effective to have no-cost offers without match requirements. Also, there could be creative solutions such as do-it-yourself workshops at hardware stores where people can learn about opportunities and access discounts right then and there.

- *Climate resilience is political. Saving people money is not.*

**Community-based organizations (CBOs) need more support to complete administrative tasks, find contractors, and strategically navigate the programs and resources available to them and their rural clients.**

People in rural communities trust community-based organizations, which gives CBOs an important role in disseminating information to rural customers and ultimately helping customers make the decision to participate in Energy Trust programs. CBOs want to better understand Energy Trust’s offers, how they can leverage these programs to support their communities, and how it will impact individual community members. Educating CBOs is a key step in reaching more rural customers and expanding services. While enabling CBOs to administer Energy Trust programs is an effective strategy, it is common for rural CBOs to have limited capacity. Therefore, any support to lessen the administrative burden of programs is highly desirable. Specifically, CBOs are looking for Energy Trust to help them find contractors who can do estimates and install products. CBOs are also looking for help with paperwork and accounting, including grant writing, post- award reporting, and auditing. Lastly, CBOs appreciate any technical expertise and strategic guidance that Energy Trust staff can provide.

- *What would serve us best on the coast is helping to put together contractors and customers. Our lack of getting resources to the community is getting more administrative lift. Finding the contractors to do the work is always a problem out on the coast.*

**Affordability is a major consideration for rural people, and financing larger projects and programs is a challenge for most rural CBOs.**

Affordability is top of mind for rural residents. Many rural customers, especially individuals and small businesses, are sensitive to the upfront costs when deciding whether to participate in a program. While some CBOs have found success in layering programs and funding sources to offer no cost or very low-cost options, more work needs to be done in this area. Several participants advocated for loan programs that are tiered with interest rates based on income, including a zero-interest rate loan for homeowners in poverty and other vulnerable populations, such as the elderly. For larger projects, typically undertaken by CBOs, financing becomes challenging. Front end costs, as well as cash on hand requirements are difficult for CBOs to meet. It is also difficult for CBOs to find accountants to meet the attestation requirement. Lastly, CBOs are looking for support to cover post-award costs that are not included in grant or program funding. Participants thought that collective efforts to get funding for energy projects might be a viable solution (e.g., Main Street or downtown associations applying for funding vs. small businesses applying individually).

- *It depends on your economic level... Financial security, making enough money to survive, is a priority. If we can find a way to save money on energy costs and provide relief, that is helpful. If the programs require any type of matching, it is hard to get folks to join. More no-cost offers would be helpful. It would be helpful for folks to have reassurance that the programs aren't part of a government takeover, that they won't get extra burden on their energy bills because of partaking in a program.*

**Housing is a major challenge in rural, and energy programs should prioritize supporting both new housing construction and efficiency retrofits of aging housing.**

Rural areas need more housing, and they need to be efficient. Rural developers and contractors do not always prioritize efficiency when they are building and renovating housing. Information needs to be in more digestible chunks and tailored for a rural perspective. Organizations can provide resources and coaching to help them take advantage of Energy Trust programs.

- *Aligning with rural priorities on housing and home efficiency and existing buildings efficiency is important. It costs a lot more to do things in rural Oregon, so adjusting for that is also important.*

**Workforce issues related to accessing contractors, building capacity of contractors, building a pipeline of energy consultants, and streamlining communication and payment to contractors, need to be addressed.**

It is difficult in many rural areas to access enough contractors, and the contractors who work there often do not know how to access information on Energy Trust programs. One participant noted that uncertainty around timing to process payments to their organization made it difficult to communicate payment timelines to contractors. Participants recommended some solutions: One easy access place for information about programs, since contractors cannot afford to spend lots of time tracking down information; incentives to get contractors to rural places; stipends to attend trade ally events; and training pathways for high school students in energy efficiency and renewable energy careers to create a pipeline of technical experts.

- *We talk a lot about workforce development, but there aren't a lot of pathways for high school students. Creating training options and getting them excited would be great.*

**POLL RESULTS**

**What are the most critical issues related to energy savings and renewable energy facing your community? Select all that apply. (Respondents = 23)**

- Incentives to lower the cost of projects: 70%
- Access to education resources for customers to understand options related to energy savings and renewable energy: 70%
- Access to qualified local contractors to install energy related projects: 43%
- Access to back-up power/battery storages in case of an outage: 22%
- Access to training programs for qualified local contractors: 22%

**What other energy issues did we not list that are also important?**

- Critical home infrastructure repair
- Filling out paperwork (support needed)
- Assistance on braiding programs and funding
- Resilience and recovery