



# EEG Communications Workshop Synopsis

## NRECA Lincoln

### January 22, 2015

#### **Overview**

Cooperatives are facing potentially disruptive market dynamics, but have an opportunity to demonstrate relevance, purpose, innovation, member empowerment, and leadership in a way that inspires member loyalty. The EEG group is a horizontal, collaborative network that can serve as a laboratory for new ideas in this period of transition and can help cooperatives “shape their own destiny.” In advance of the meeting in Lincoln, interviews were conducted with members of the EEG steering committee and other partners. The interviews revealed that there was significant interest in discussing communication strategies related to renewable energy. Different types of communication were emphasized by different stakeholders, and so the Lincoln discussion was structured to be broad. The first half of the discussion in Lincoln focused on communications with cooperative Boards, staff, and members, as well as with other cooperatives. The second half of the discussion focused more specifically on communication with cooperative member-owners and with external organizations. A key conclusion is that one-way communication is ineffective and that what is necessary is two-way (or multi-way) dialogue. The workshop concluded with a discussion of how EEG could specifically support communication. A near-term opportunity is for EEG to support cooperative engagement with organized interest groups.

#### **Board**

- Cooperative boards are challenged as they try to balance the goals of stewardship and innovation, and attempt to navigate commitments to supply low cost energy to their members while at the same time “wearing the white hat” on energy.
- Some Boards are pushing hard for renewable energy, some are exploring renewable energy but emphasizing the need to remain cost neutral, and some remain relatively under-informed (even in the face of high interest from members).
- In all cases, there are opportunities to develop materials for Board members about the basics (and complexities) of renewable energy. These basics can include not only the technology and economics, but also where renewable energy can fit within traditional planning. This education effort needs to be coupled with appropriate expectation setting, and framing about the realistic need for new business models. Should the cooperative be a more hands-on energy, trusted advisor? DG system owner? Financier?
- A key question for staff is the level of granularity that is useful for Board communication
- Another key question is how to frame and approaches challenges to the “centralized mindset” with regard to both generation and also communication.
- It would be useful to have a benchmarking tool to determine if cooperative renewable energy policies and procedures are up to date and fair (e.g. does the interconnection policy and process reflect current practice? Is the cooperative well positioned to navigate ongoing energy transitions?)

#### **Staff**

- Efforts to move forward with renewable energy can be bogged down if staff do not have the bandwidth, technical expertise, or desire to support new programs. The pace of renewable energy

development can be faster than expected. For example, staff in Kauai'i were surprised by the volume of interconnection requests received

- A barrier is that distribution cooperative staff are often fully booked up with operations work and don't have bandwidth for additional responsibilities
- Staff can benefit from renewable energy 101 trainings and the implications that RE can have for the business (e.g. how to interpret and deal with new technology); there is currently no standard staff training template and cooperatives are "creating their own wheels." Standard training templates would be useful.
- An important early goal is to train a broader range of staff for basic Q+A and customer service; this can also help build confidence for staff that don't want to talk about renewables during standard district meetings since they "don't have the answers"; in parallel with training for member services agents, tailored trainings should also be developed for engineering, linemen, energy auditing staff, etc.
- Who interacts with members on renewable energy? In some cases, most interaction and communication is between members and engineering, rather than with communications staff (which may not exist depending on cooperative size and resources).

## **Members**

- Demographic data is a gap for cooperatives; cooperatives do not have granular data about their members and their interests. Some recent surveys have demonstrated support for renewable energy (e.g. High West survey found 80% interest in solar), but there is often a gap in understanding why cooperative members want renewables (e.g. energy security vs. low costs vs. carbon reductions). Demographic baselines / focus groups / needs assessments of the members would be useful. Ma
- Messaging depends on member type and there are many different types of members. Some members will support renewables but take no action, whereas early adopters will push to become residential "prosumers." Some members are unengaged and will be difficult to reach / don't want to be bothered. Communication strategies for these groups will necessarily be different from outreach to and engagement with big commercial users / "anchor tenants." There is an opportunity for cooperatives to develop "key accounts" strategies to understand the green power interests of their largest customers, especially given the increasing demand by some national businesses for onsite and/or offsite solutions.
- What do we want to communicate to our members? In some cases, there is a need to manage demand for renewables. In some cases, there is a need to create demand for renewables (e.g. encourage signups for a new community solar program). Beyond renewable energy, it is clear that some members simply don't understand the opportunities and limitations inherent in the cooperative model.
- Different tools work for different cooperatives. Some cooperatives are small enough that direct contact works, whereas larger cooperatives need focused outreach strategies. Given aggressive from renewable energy companies, there is a need for both proactive messaging and message simplicity.
- Who is the trusted source for renewable energy information? Member to member tours of solar sites can be an effective engagement tool. There is an opportunity for cooperatives to be the trusted source on new technology. A useful tool has been to create opportunities for members to interact directly with industry (e.g. cooperative-sponsored trade shows) and then to have cooperative staff to provide feedback and commentary as well.
- Self-serve online and tele-town halls tools may also be helpful strategies

- How to move beyond the “usual suspects” to communicate more broadly? One option is to train/equip interested and motivated members to become “ambassadors” within the community
- Different cooperatives take different approaches to social media. Some do not use it because their members are not active. Some do not use it but would like to. Given staff bandwidth, how large is the potential return from social media? Few cooperatives have focused social media efforts related to renewable energy specifically.
- Touchstone could play a role to help cooperatives with re-positioning.

### **Cooperatives**

- There is strong interest in having ongoing dialogue and peer-to-peer exchange among distribution cooperatives about topics such as community solar, rate structures, outreach materials, community resilience issues, etc.
- Some distribution cooperatives have difficulty communicating with their members about renewable energy challenges and pass off such discussion to the G&T cooperative staff.

### **Partners**

- Partner organizations include stakeholders outside of the cooperatives and can include, for example, associations that cooperative members belong to (e.g. dairy associations and farm bureaus), environmental advocates, etc.
- It is important to move beyond the “us vs. them” posture, particularly since cooperative members may in many cases be both “us” and “them.” In other words, advocates and activists may often be cooperative members.
- There is a need to communicate “energy economics 101” and how it specifically relates to the cooperative business model; at the same time, there is also a need to articulate (and internalize) the cooperative mission to empower members and embody “community economics 101.” What is the full cost and how does that relate to fair price for both retail electricity price (to member-owners) and for purchased electricity (from member-owners)?
- Which partners can serve as marketing channel partners in innovative ways for new cooperative products or initiatives?
- Regulators and policy makers are also an important constituency – regulatory and policy makers tours can be a useful tool for engagement

### **Industry**

- Renewable energy companies have focused marketing and sales efforts focused; cooperatives have difficulty competing with renewable energy marketing and messaging; cooperatives do have a comparative advantage in that they have established community relationships – but there remains a growing risk of disintermediation.
- There is a need to evaluate and explain the “real” technologies for member-owners. This is particularly true for biogas and biomass technologies.

### **Potential EEG activity:**

- EEG pilots need to define their focus, structure, funding, and cooperative volunteers
- Issues related to Board, staff, and inter-cooperative communications are likely to be addressed through ongoing NRECA efforts.
- There is a clear need nationally for distribution cooperatives to better understand and engage their members. However, there was no immediate interest from participating cooperatives in EEG supporting their member dialogue. This will continue to be explored by EEG and NRECA.



- There was direct and immediate interest from cooperatives in support for dialogue with partners and other civil society organizations. For example, there was an interest in dialogue between a G&T cooperative (i.e. Wabash) and the dairy associations, between distribution cooperatives and industry associations (i.e. Pedernales), and multi-stakeholder dialogue between industry, farm bureaus, and cooperatives. The goals of such dialogue could include, for example, explaining the cooperative model, seeking ways to align interests, and joint fact finding regarding technologies. EEG could provide direct support to these types of convening.
- There is an opportunity to collect and share best practices around both business models and outreach materials.