D04. Tips to Build Trust and Work with Conservative Audiences around Climate

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Room 304

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HOW TO REACH CONSERVATIVES ON CLIMATE

People tend to seek out information that confirms what they already believe. That’s why Democrats and Republicans respond differently to new information about climate change.

- If a Democrat reads a story about someone hurt by climate change, he will likely identify with the victim in that story, and he will be more likely to support government action to stop climate change.
- If a Republican reads the same story, he will likely not identify with the victim. In fact, he will be less likely to support government action than he would have if he had never read the story (Hart & Nisbet, 2012).

People think about their political identity when evaluating new information about climate change. Climate change is highly polarized (Pew Research, 2018) and has become more polarized over time (Dunlap, McCright, & Yarosh, 2016), as Democrats have grown more worried about the problem, while Republicans have largely remained unconcerned.

When conservatives learn about melting glaciers and rising sea levels, they often become more dismissive of climate change. Why? Because popular solutions to climate change conflict with their values (Kahan, 2010). How can you deal with this?

Focus on the local impact of climate change. Show how climate change is hurting people in the communities where they live. Do your best to show how climate change poses a threat to them and their families. Conservatives are more likely to have a change of heart when they can see how climate change affects them personally (Hart & Nisbet, 2012).

“Texas has been hit especially hard this year by a continuing drought, threatening high winds and increasingly destructive range fires. Simply, these conditions have lead to extremely adverse conditions in the agriculture industry.

— Rep. Michael McCaul (R-TX 10)

Appeal to conservative values.
Conservatives dismiss evidence of climate change because the solutions don’t comport with their values. They fear that addressing carbon pollution would mean more regulation on businesses, and they see this as a threat to free enterprise. Reframe arguments to appeal to conservative values (Feinberg & Willer, 2015).

For example, conservatives might accept evidence of climate change if they knew the possible responses included nuclear power and carbon sequestration, symbols of American ingenuity and resourcefulness (Kahan, 2010).
Point out that dealing with climate change is necessary to preserve our *American way of life* and that it is *patriotic to conserve* our natural resources ([Feygina, Jost, & Goldsmith, 2010](#)) and that acting on climate will benefit everyone ([Jylhä & Akrami, 2015](#)).

“When you run a company, you want to hand it off in better shape than you found it. In the same way, just as we shouldn’t leave our children or grandchildren with mountains of national debt and unsustainable entitlement programs, we shouldn’t leave them with the economic and environmental costs of climate change... Risk management is a conservative principle, as is preserving our natural environment for future generations.”

— Henry Paulson, Former Secretary of the Treasury

**Emphasize sanctity.** When speaking to progressives, explain how we have *harmed* the environment. Emphasize the need to *care* for our home. When speaking to conservatives, explain how we have *contaminated* our surroundings. Emphasize the need to *purify* our air and water. Conservatives care about purity and sanctity ([Feinberg & Willer, 2012](#)).

![Smog contaminates the air over Los Angeles.](image)

**Talk about efficiency.** A conservative may purchase a high-efficiency lightbulb if the package says it will save him *money*, but he will be less likely to purchase that same light bulb if the package says it will save the *climate*. Listing the environmental benefits of a product can backfire with conservatives because they tend to see climate change as a liberal cause ([Gromet, Kunreuther, & Larrick, 2013](#)).

**Talk about the past.** Conservatives respond to messages focused on the past—messages that show how environmental action would return nature to its previously unblemished state ([Baldwin & Lammers, 2016](#)).
Forget national security. Focus on public health. Climate change threatens national security, but reminding conservatives of this fact can backfire. If the messenger lacks the credibility to speak to this issue, conservatives may respond with anger rather than concern. When it comes to national security, enlist a member of the military to do the talking for you. Otherwise, focus on public health (Myers, Nisbet, Maibach, & Leiserowitz, 2012).

“Today, the whole world is confronted with the need to put future generations first, but this time, no sacrifice is necessary. In fact, the most effective methods of fighting climate change are also the best means of improving public health and raising standards of living.

— Michael Bloomberg, Former Mayor of New York

Never condescend to your audience. We are more likely to acknowledge facts that conflict with our views when we feel good about ourselves. We cling to falsehoods because it hurts to admit we are wrong (Cohen, Aronson, & Steele, 2000). We will modify our views in the face of overwhelming conflicting evidence, but doing so may stir feelings of anxiety (Redlawsk, Civettini, & Emmerson, 2010).

Talk about clean energy. Even if conservatives don't believe that climate change is happening, many are still concerned with air pollution and support investment in clean energy research. Conservatives especially like solar panels, because solar panels allow homeowners to disconnect from a central power grid (Echelon Insights, 2015). Conservatives are less likely to trust scientists who study the environmental impacts of industry, but they are more likely to trust innovators (McCright, Charters, Dentzman, and Dietz, 2015).

Messengers matter. Conservatives are skeptical of climate scientists (Vraga, Myers, Kotcher, Beall, & Maibach, 2018), Democratic politicians (Johnson & Schwadel, 2018) and others associated with the environmental left (Druckman & McGrath, 2019). People take cues from members of their own group on how to feel about climate change (Markowitz & Shariff, 2012). Deploy messengers that conservatives will trust. Here are a few examples:
• **Military Brass:** [General Anthony Zinni](#), former Commander-in-Chief of U.S. Central Command under George W. Bush says, "It's not hard to make the connection between climate change and instability or climate change and terrorism."

• **Business Leaders:** [Greg Page](#), executive chair of agricultural giant Cargill, recently wrote that farmers should "participate in the ongoing conversation about climate change, politically fraught as it may be."

• **Conservative Christians:** [Katherine Hayoe](#) is a Texas climate scientist and a conservative christian. She asks, "What's more conservative than conserving our natural resources, making sure we have enough for the future, and not wasting them like we are today?"

• **Republican Politicians:** Former South Carolina Congressman [Bob Ingliss](#) has been a stalwart champion for action on climate change. Like Katherine Hayoe, he believes "it's conservative to conserve."

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[http://www.theclimatechat.org/persuading-conservatives](http://www.theclimatechat.org/persuading-conservatives)

Climate Chat is a guide to the science of climate change communication. Drawing on the latest peer-reviewed research, Climate Chat offers lessons on how to speak more clearly and persuasively about all matters climate, whether you are a scientist, journalist, advocate, or just a concerned citizen.
HARNESSING THE POWER OF THE SUN

Finding Common Ground
Working with Corporations
Siting Solar Projects: The Right Power in the Right Place

By Marina Schauffler

Land trusts are stepping forward to help guide the design and siting of new solar facilities, always keeping top-of-mind the preservation of agricultural, ecological and other conservation resources.

ON THE COVER:
Sunset over the Roan Highlands, parts of which the accredited Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy has protected. SAHC Roan Seasonal Ecologist Travis Bordley is an accomplished photographer.

TRAVIS BORDLEY
Siting Solar Projects: THE RIGHT POWER IN THE RIGHT PLACE

By Marina Schaufler

Right plant, right place. That favored principle of gardeners, which guides landscape design, applies to siting renewable energy installations like solar farms: Even “right power” needs to go in the “right place.”

Land trusts are stepping forward to help guide the design and siting of new solar facilities, recognizing that a rapid transition to renewable energy is vital to sustaining natural ecosystems and human communities. Drawing on their ecological expertise and negotiation skills, they are working to ensure that solar installations minimize disturbances to wildlife habitat, wetlands and productive agricultural areas.

Engagement with energy projects can be a natural step for organizations already committed to advocacy and policy work, but for some land trusts it represents a new—and not always comfortable—challenge. “To help them become a voice for conservation in renewable power development, we created a guide, Reshaping the Energy Future, and a set of practical pointers for siting renewable power projects on conservation easement lands,” says Kelly Watkinson, manager of the Land Trust Alliance’s Land and Climate Program, which was funded by a generous $1 million catalyst grant from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation in 2017.

Drawing on land trust experiences in New York, the guide holds lessons for land trusts nationwide. “In New York it’s no longer a question of if my land trust will be impacted by energy siting, but when,” says Meme Hanley, Alliance New York Program manager. “Reshaping the Energy Future offers land trusts of every size practical ways they can influence siting decisions.” (See Resources & Tools on page 34 for links to resources mentioned in this article.)

Complementing these resources are stories from the field, gathered here from land trusts working to accelerate renewable power adoption without compromising the integrity of place.

From Theory to Practice
Terri Lane, executive director at the accredited Northwest Arkansas Land Trust (NWALT), was aware of the important role land trusts can play in clean energy siting from Rally sessions and land trust discussions, but until recently this was not an immediate concern in her area. Then
one day a local preservation advocacy group told her that the City of Fayetteville—where the land trust is located—was planning a large solar installation on what Lane calls “one of the last pockets of unplowed virgin prairie left in the area.”

Teaming up with the advocacy group, NWALT met with the city’s mayor. Fayetteville was the first city in Arkansas to commit to 100% renewable energy by 2030, and the proposed solar construction on city-owned land would offset electricity use at wastewater facilities that represent two-thirds of municipal consumption.

The meeting went very well, she says, in part because the land trust already had a constructive working relationship with city administrators. “It’s definitely important to establish those relationships in advance,” Lane says.

“We applauded their intent,” Lane recalls, “and came prepared with an alternative site”—an adjacent city-owned parcel with no significant agricultural or ecological value. Although construction at that site would cost more, the city agreed to relocate its planned solar installation.

NWALT encouraged the city to go a step further, permanently protecting the original prairie parcel as another means to sequester carbon. City officials agreed, and the land trust is now completing a conservation easement and land management agreement and planning a small walking trail on the land where area residents can enjoy birding and rare plants (over 200 plant species were identified in a recent “botany blitz”).

It was affirming, Lane says, to have such a clear “win-win” resolution. Not all land trusts, though, get to work on solar projects with willing partners.

Not Backing Down

The accredited New Jersey Conservation Foundation first learned through a news story of a plan to clearcut 92 acres of pine barrens for a theme park’s solar installation.

Michele Byers, NJ Conservation’s executive director, acknowledges that it’s “uncomfortable opposing a solar project,” but five years earlier, NJ Conservation had persuaded the state’s Board of Public Utilities to provide incentives for solar development on rooftops, parking lots and brownfields, guiding new installations away from productive farmland and sensitive ecosystems.

So upon news of the theme park plans, NJ Conservation joined forces with other groups and requested that the developer relocate the proposed panels to a carpert over its expansive parking lots. “We got nowhere in negotiations,” Byers recalls, “and the organization shifted to litigation, a process that dragged out over several years. Finally, the prospect of expiring federal solar tax incentives helped push the company toward a settlement. That agreement, now in effect, Byers characterizes as “a compromise, a much better outcome than it would have been otherwise” but not a conservation victory. The park will clearcut 40 acres, rather than 92, and the company has committed to donate a conservation easement on 150 acres of forested wetland. Solar panels will span three vast parking lots and additional acreage in what is to become the state’s largest net-metered solar project—supplying 98% of the theme park’s power.

Since the settlement, NJ Conservation has been working to support advancement of solar and other clean, renewable sources of energy and to strengthen state solar siting guidelines. It worked as part of a coalition to secure passage of landmark clean energy legislation last year that will bring offshore wind to New Jersey and expand solar energy, and then secured strong siting guidelines as part of the new Community Solar Pilot Program.

Byers sees value in resources like the Alliance’s new renewable energy guide. It makes no sense, she says, for “groups to be going it on their own, one at a time.”

Local Enhancement

Dave Clutter, executive director of the accredited Driftless Area Land Conservancy in Wisconsin, recalls vividly the day that his conservation director, Amy Alstad, came into his office with a strikingly simple question. Following months of work
against a high-transmission energy corridor that would cross conserved lands, she asked, “What are we for?”

That question prompted the land trust to consider how it might “work proactively with solar installers,” Clutter says, and help easement holders develop larger solar systems—provided those installations were sited carefully and inter-planted with pollinator habitat.

Alstad is now at work on guidelines for solar developers, and is undertaking topographic analyses of the land trust’s service region to find the marginal croplands best suited for renewable energy sites.

Driftless is also exploring the possibility of creating an “energy district”—modeled after one in Iowa’s Winneshiek County—that could help build local momentum for an energy transition by offering energy audits, weatherization assistance and planning for small-scale renewable projects. “What’s very appealing to us as a land conservancy is the local ownership and local economic enhancement opportunities, given that it’s difficult for folks to make a living in southwest Wisconsin,” notes Chuck Tennessen, Driftless’s community organizer. “It might be just the right kind of fit for us.”

While Driftless is actively promoting these initiatives, it has chosen not to take a public stand on a newly approved solar project in its service region, a large installation that is the biggest project yet east of the Mississippi River. It would have no direct bearing on any conserved land, Clutter says, and “the board shied away from a formal endorsement so as not to complicate the power line issue.”

Scaling Up
Questions of scale are taking on added significance in New York, which recently committed to get 70% of its electricity from carbon-free sources by 2030 (known as 70 by ’30), the highest target for that date of any state. That ambitious goal will mean “building bigger megawatts,” both to accommodate increased energy use and replace electric generation now reliant on fossil fuels, says Audrey Friedrichsen, land use and environmental advocacy attorney with the accredited Scenic Hudson.

Land trusts, she adds, are caught in an “interesting position” simultaneously advocating for greater climate resilience while seeking to limit the impact that new facilities have on existing preserves, historic viewsheds and sensitive ecosystems. The driving question becomes, “How can we meet those two goals here?”

In March 2018, Scenic Hudson released a renewable energy siting guide at a “Solar-smart Hudson Valley” symposium with land trusts and solar developers. “Everyone agrees with the siting principles in concept,” Friedrichsen says, “but the devil is always in the details.” (Scenic Hudson’s guide inspired the Alliance to create its own.)

“Zoning for these projects is extremely difficult,” she notes, “so a second guide to help with that is due out this fall. Scenic Hudson is also advocating for a broader land-use planning effort to happen in conjunction with the 70 by ’30 buildout.”

Promoting Smartly
For the accredited Nature Conservancy’s North Carolina Chapter, best practices for siting solar are not fixed but evolving.
Liz Kalies, director of science, says Conservancy staff knew early on that they wanted to “promote solar—but smartly” and they found many other agencies and groups in the state “coming to the same level of awareness.” Collectively, they organized the North Carolina Pollinator Conservation Alliance so they could take a coordinated approach to determining best practices and sharing those findings with solar developers.

Kalies gives solar developers great credit for collaborating in the process, consistently being “receptive, interested and generous with their time.” Many projects are located on former agricultural land, and the Conservancy is working to restore some conservation value to those sites by fostering wildlife and pollinator habitat.

To help solar developers create pollinator-rich sites, the pollinator alliance has produced technical guidance on appropriate native plantings. Several renewable energy trade associations in the state have helped share that guidance with members, says Tiffany Hartung, the chapter’s climate and energy policy manager.

The Conservancy is now undertaking research at several solar sites to test how different fencing options might minimize wildlife impact by allowing for animal movement through facilities. The industry is still figuring out this challenge, Kalies says, whereas the support for pollinators is “a little more established.”

**Getting to Yes**
The steady succession of floods, droughts, wildfires and invasive species symptomatic of climate disruption serve to reinforce a growing sense of urgency many people feel to facilitate a rapid and responsible energy transformation.

Stakeholders, including local and state governments and clean energy advocacy groups are exploring how to build a clean energy system, how to accelerate large-scale solar and wind development while also preserving agricultural, ecological and other conservation resources. Land trusts are an increasingly important contributor to these efforts, helping to ensure that land conservation considerations are embedded into decision-making processes, that important natural areas are not developed and that environmental impacts are minimized. In addition, land trusts can work with stakeholders to identify places where siting is appropriate, including where conservation and renewable energy development can coexist.

When it comes to advancing solar power generation, Watkinson says, “Land trusts are looking for ways to say yes while keeping conservation top of mind.”

**Elevated Solar: Making Panels More Compatible with Farming**

Solar installations can help farmers—already struggling with erratic weather—by providing back-up power and added income. Research is under way in Germany and Massachusetts on methods that would allow solar panels to coexist on productive agricultural land without diminishing much productivity. Dual use of productive lands could reduce competition for land, provide needed income and increase the site’s overall efficiency (up to 60% in a 2017 pilot done by the Fraunhofer Institute for Solar Energy Systems ISE). In the German study, panels were situated high enough over winter wheat and potatoes (7 to 16 feet) that farm machinery could pass underneath.

Under a new state incentive, Massachusetts farms have begun adopting “dual-use arrays,” so more data will become available on how elevated panels affect vegetable growing, cattle grazing and hay production. The dual-use panels are “being met with a combination of enthusiasm and skepticism” by the farming community, notes Zara Dowling, a research fellow with UMass Clean Energy Extension. Some farmers welcome the prospect of additional income, she says, while others want to see more research results before they’re convinced.