SITING + PERMITTING

MARCH 11 – 13, 2024 | COLORADO SPRINGS, CO

olsson®

C. BURCH[1,2], R. LORAAMM[2]

1. Olsson, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

2. Department of Geography and Environmental Sustainability, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma

Why Can't We Be Friends: Key Considerations for Collaboration in Environmental Planning of Utility-Scale Renewables

BACKGROUND

This research focuses on the experiences of renewable energy developers, state and federal regulators, and non-profit organizations in the environmental planning and permitting of utility-scale renewable energy. These three groups are the most actively engaged in the process and represent an important avenue for collaboration in planning and permitting *(Loveless et al. 2021)*.

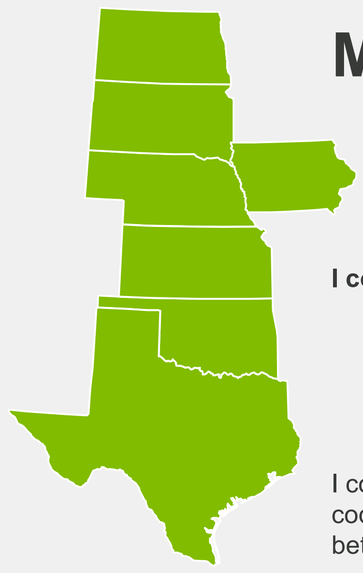
Environmental concerns are one of the most prevalent reason for delayed or canceled projects. *(Susskind et al. 2022).*

While policy is often a key factor considered in the energy transition literature, an understanding of the policy realm is often underrepresented or oversimplified *(Cherp et al. 2018).*

OBJECTIVE

The goals of this research are to:

- Understand the experience of renewable energy developers, state and federal regulators, and environmental nonprofits (ENPO) in navigating environmental considerations for utility-scale development
- Provide insight into how these three stakeholder groups currently approach consultation and siting resources as well as similarities and differences between wind and solar
- Provide a perspective on the challenges and opportunities within siting of renewable energy projects to spark conversations about how we can be more collaborative in this process.



METHODS

My research focused on North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Iowa, Kansas, Oklahoma and Texas, which are states with a similar regulatory framework.

I completed 56 interviews via Zoom with:

- 19 developers representing 15 development firms
- 18 state and federal regulators
- 19 ENPO staff members representing 13 organizations

I completed a qualitative analysis using the coding software NVivo, analyzing themes present between and within the stakeholder groups.

RESULTS

Developers and regulators: perspectives on their relationship

An overall emphasis on collaboration or the importance of building and maintaining relationships in the consultation process

Most developers overall shared very positive perceptions of the consultation process and their relationship with regulators

Regulators shared uncertainty about whether or not developers actually implemented the recommendations they provided or felt like recommendations were not being implemented at all. Communication often stops after initial consultation.

Regulators were divided on if earlier consultation would be beneficial.

Consulting firms were often noted as key bridges in the consultation process.

"Our philosophy in our office is to be as collaborative as possible, so that's one of our kind of our core values for our particular office. So, I do my best to approach our coordination and even regulation of renewable energy projects from a collaborative space." (Regulator)

"Because you know, they are the experts in their field and they know what potential issues there may be in an area where, say, we've never built a project in this state or this area. The resource agencies know what the issues are, and they can tell us right up front. So we have a good idea of what we really need to focus on, so they're very valuable." (Developer)

"I guess you know the feeling that sometimes we are just a check box that, you know, there can be little… little faith that they're going to implement what we're asking them to do." (Regulator)

The climate change versus biodiversity dichotomy: finding common ground

I had a lot of conversations about the challenge of balancing the impacts of climate change and renewable energy's role as a climate mitigating technology and also continuing to give attention to the current biodiversity crisis and renewable energy's impacts on local environments.

"And I would say like most, if not all the biologists I work with in this realm, we all understand the need for renewables and the impacts climate change is having on all of these species. So we get that we need renewables, it's just we want them to be sited in a way that respects the natural resources." (Regulator, emphasis added)

"But in the end, renewable energy is just full of people like me who – we think climate change is essentially the number one factor to impact you know wildlife and habitat globally. And so we want to figure out a way that, you know, not only are we helping to curb climate change, but also help support from a regional perspective, the species that interact with our projects." (Developer)

"Sometimes it feels very gaslighty when you come in and say no, we know these projects are having impacts and they say well, no, they're not. And guess what? If you complain, you are stopping the world from solving climate and it's like, OK, let's not… if that's the conversation we're going to have, let's just not have a conversation." (ENPO)

ENPOs in development: the role they could play

ENPOs as an avenue for mitigation, voluntary compensation, or overall contribution of funds to conservation projects by developers.

Some developers recognized the potential for ENPOs to serve as bridges in communities, to help bring together diverse stakeholders in conversations related to development.

While ENPOs offer a wide range of modeling tools and research for renewable energy development, acknowledged and often recommended by regulators, this was not a role in renewable energy that developers discussed.

"I think we as an industry need to take a more proactive approach and just agree to do more of this because again we need to advance the science on technologies, on other aspects, we need to understand more. So I think we as an industry need to do a better job of being more proactive in these types of collaborations just so we can advance the science of you know renewable energy and wildlife impacts." (Developer)

Challenges and opportunities for the industry and their relation to environmental planning

Challenges mentioned most frequently:

- New species listing
- The availability of space for development
- The buildout of transmission

Opportunities mentioned most frequently:

- The opportunity for dual land use approaches
- The potential for collaboration and partnerships
- Opportunities for responsible siting approaches

CONCLUSIONS

- Developers overall feel really good about the consultation process and respect regulators and their knowledge – this doesn't translate to how regulators feel how the consultation goes on their end.
  - ***How can we better communicate to emphasize the value of these positive relationships?***
- The consultation process feels abrupt and while the value of relationships is emphasized, the communication level does not reflect that. "Early and often" consultation doesn't make regulators any more confident that their recommendations are being taken seriously.
  - ***Can we find communication frameworks – like the one created by the AFWA working group – to encourage ongoing conversation in environmental planning of projects?***
- The climate change versus biodiversity narrative does not create a collaborative environment.
  - ***How can we create a new narrative that views these two as complimentary goals versus conflicts of interest?***
- ENPOs have valuable resources to share, but their efforts are often disjointed and in conflict with other ENPOs; their contribution is, therefore, diluted.
  - ***How can we create collaborative relationships with ENPOs, using their broad knowledge base and their often-strong relationships with local communities and community leaders?***

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Rebecca Loraamm, as well as my doctoral committee members for their support on this project as well as their feedback along the way. I'd also like to thank Morgan Starr, Buck Ray, and Amanda Miller for sitting down with me when I first started down this research pathway, for making sure my research was grounded in practice and could be applied to the industry! Lastly, I'd like to thank my supervisors Susan Freund Opperman and Amy Cherko for giving me the opportunity to attend this conference and present on this research.

REFERENCES

Cherp, A., Vinichenko, V., Jewell, J., Brutschin, E., & Sovacool, B. (2018). Integrating techno-economic, socio-technical and political perspectives on national energy transitions: A meta-theoretical framework. *Energy Research & Social Science*, *37*, 175–190. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2017.09.015

Susskind, L., Chun, J., Gant, A., Hodgkins, C., Cohen, J., & Lohmar, S. (2022). Sources of opposition to renewable energy projects in the United States. *Energy Policy*, *165*, 112922. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.enpol.2022.112922

Loveless, B., Humpert, M., Reif, S., Voltura, K., Wilkinson, J., & Zebehazy, L. (2021). Is the Answer Blowing in the Wind? *The Wildlife Professional*, *15*(4).

CONTACT INFORMATION

Claire Burch, M.S.

Olsson | Utility Environmental

E-mail: cburch@olsson.com

Cell: 618-541-6168

www.linkedin.com/in/claire-burch95