

Iowa Environmental Council 2021-2022 Policy Priorities

The Iowa Environmental Council closely monitors state and federal environmental policies and programs that could affect Iowa's land, water, climate, and transition to clean energy.

Each program sets overarching priorities that we believe represent significant opportunities for progress, or address the greatest threats to Iowa's natural resources. We also have shared priorities, which are listed below. Each year, we set specific legislative priorities that outline our focus for that year's session.

Environmental Justice

Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and their communities are disproportionately and unjustly impacted by pollution, public health disparities, and economic injustices. Additionally, implicit bias and systemic inequality are inherent in many environmental laws and regulations. We also acknowledge that our work takes place on the ancestral and traditional territories of numerous Indigenous peoples. We will look for opportunities to fight systemic racism and inequality where we find it in energy and water regulations, laws, and policies, including examining the disproportionate negative impacts of poor water and air quality, flooding, lack of access to public lands and outdoor recreation opportunities, and high energy bills on BIPOC and marginalized communities.

Focus areas for the organization include:

- Engaging more diverse voices on energy, climate, water, and land policies to center justice and equity in our work, ensure BIPOC individuals and groups are not only part of our movement but lead in their areas of expertise, and increase IEC's impact on environmental policy for the benefit of *all* Iowans.
- Working to expand our coalition to not only invite more diverse voices into our coalition, but also listen, learn, and support BIPOC in related movements.
- Ensuring that environmental justice considerations are meaningfully included in all IEC policy proposals.

Climate Change

Climate change is a crosscutting issue that both programs will work to engage on and address in different but complementary ways. We will use a common framework based on the understanding that Iowa can be a leader in mitigating the effects of climate change and becoming a carbon neutral state. From renewable energy production to conservation practices that sequester carbon, Iowans are well-positioned to be at the forefront on climate. Measures to mitigate and adapt to climate change will also create new economic markets, increase community resiliency, reduce pollution, protect public health, and improve habitat. We will advocate for a just transition that allows people to realize the full value of Iowa land, water, and ecosystem services while securing a more resilient future for Iowa.

Energy and Climate Program

The Energy and Climate Program's long-term goal is to transition Iowa from fossil fuels to 100% clean energy, including wind, solar and energy efficiency, and to support the region and the nation's transition to clean energy. The Energy Program will work to ensure that this transition happens quickly and that all Iowans benefit from the transition. We focus on energy because burning fossil fuels for energy is responsible for over 90% of greenhouse gas emissions globally and this transition is fundamental to avoiding the worst impacts of climate change. In the Energy Program we may not always talk about climate change, opting instead for economic arguments or discussing air and water quality. That approach is informed by public opinion research and we are always looking to adopt the best messaging to continue moving policy forward. Many signs are pointing to an increased ability to appeal to Iowans based on climate. However, it is critical to remember our underlying goal is not renewable energy simply for renewable energy's sake, but as a solution to our climate crisis.

Fortunately, the transition to clean energy is well underway in Iowa, supported by policies the Council has helped enact or implement in recent years. Iowa has become a national leader on clean energy in the past decade, a status that we will seek to maintain and expand in the years to come. At the same time, there are real obstacles to continued progress as our utilities continue to rely heavily on coal and we have experienced setbacks in the deployment of energy efficiency in recent years. We also know that the progress we have made so far is just a small fraction of what will be necessary to move Iowa and the U.S. as a whole away from fossil fuels to a 100% clean energy economy.

Our policy goals in 2021-2022 will involve protection and implementation of existing policies, but will also be focused on moving Iowa forward in this pivotal moment for clean energy and expanding our reach to ensure greater equity in access to clean energy.

Renewable energy

The Council will advocate for policies and practices at the local, state, and federal level that encourage development of distributed renewable energy generation and large-scale renewable energy projects with the long-term goal of reaching 100% renewable electricity. We anticipate focusing on the following:

- Improve access to renewables by expanding and improving clean energy tax incentives and innovative financing for farmers, businesses, residents, utilities, and communities to own or invest in wind, solar, and other renewable energy technologies. This includes extensions of federal tax incentives for wind and solar, increasing funds available for the Iowa upfront solar tax credit, and working with the utilities and through the Iowa Utilities Board (IUB) and legislature to advance community solar and other renewable energy policies that will benefit Iowans with a low income.
- Protect and expand policies that support distributed renewables, including net metering, interconnection rules, rate design, and local policies. Advocate for utility rate design that is fair to customers with a low income and encourages investment in renewable energy and energy efficiency.
- Intervene in county and state approval processes to support utility-scale wind and solar projects.
- Ensure sufficient high-voltage transmission lines exist to allow for significant additions of wind power, such as reaching 25,000 megawatt (MW) milestones of wind capacity and 4,000 MW of solar capacity in Iowa.

Energy Efficiency and Electrification

Senate File 2311 in 2018 dealt a major blow to Iowa's energy efficiency programs. The Council has since been working to educate policymakers early on the benefits of energy efficiency, to grow an efficiency coalition and to focus in particular on impacts to low-income customers of more efficient housing. We will continue this rebuilding while working to protect important codes and standards and push for more aggressive local policies where possible such as the Des Moines building benchmarking ordinance. We will also expand to opportunities more appealing to utilities where we might be able to work together such as vehicle (EV), building, and industrial process electrification. Our action in this area will:

- Work with allies to develop policy and strategy to restructure and rebuild energy efficiency programs in a way that benefits all customers.
- Focus on educating policymakers and the public about energy efficiency – what it is for, what it achieves, and who benefits.
- Coordinate and assist with local efforts to move forward on energy efficiency.
- Use research and advocacy with allies to create opportunities at the regulatory, state, and a local level to advance electrification of vehicles, buildings, and industrial processes.

Retire existing coal plants

Iowa still relies on many aging and highly polluting coal plants that were built in the 1950s through the 1980s. The Council will support efforts to retire these coal plants. This will include pursuit of creative regulatory structures and consideration of a just transition for communities impacted by coal plant closures that includes support for loss of tax base in those communities as well as job re-training for displaced employees.

Emerging technology and complementary clean energy policies

We recognize that there are dynamic and fast-changing energy technologies, markets and strategies at play and want to be flexible in specific areas. Depending on the pace of change and available opportunities, we may spend more or less time in the following areas.

- As Iowa's transition to clean energy continues, new technologies and strategies may be needed or be useful in integrating higher levels of wind and solar. The Council will further investigate and support these technologies and strategies where appropriate. We anticipate an expanded role for energy storage technologies and grid modernization.
- The Council will support the work of our partners on a range of complementary policies and practices that are both environmentally and economically sustainable. For example, the Council will support policies to expand passenger transit choices such as bus and rail and reduce vehicle miles traveled and will further explore policies that offer a soil carbon sequestration, soil conservation, and clean water benefit.

Water and Land Stewardship Program

The long-term goal of the Water and Land Stewardship Program is to improve and protect Iowa's water and land to strengthen Iowa's resiliency, economy, public health, and quality of life. This requires widespread land-use change across Iowa. We will focus on increasing conservation and land stewardship practices that achieve any of the following: improve water quality, mitigate flooding, increase wildlife habitat, enhance outdoor recreation opportunities, protect soil health, and sequester carbon. Many practices provide several of these co-benefits. Widespread behavior change is necessary to achieve the goal of transformative land-use

change across Iowa. Our policy priorities reflect a mix of incentives and requirements (carrots and sticks) to drive behavior change.

Agricultural Pollution

Runoff and leaching of sediment, fertilizer, and manure from agricultural land is the largest source of water pollution in Iowa and is largely unregulated. Surface runoff and tile drainage convey pollutants into Iowa's waterways, resulting in nitrate and bacteria contamination, harmful algae blooms, degraded water quality for recreation, expensive drinking water treatment, and continuous contributions to the Gulf of Mexico dead zone. While point sources (water utilities, industrial facilities) are subject to regulation, non-point sources (primarily agricultural land) are largely unregulated. Because non-point sources contribute the vast majority of pollutants to Iowa waterways, the strictly voluntary approach to non-point source pollution is inequitable and ineffective.

IEC supports:

- Mandatory best practices as part of a basic standard of care on agricultural lands. Such a framework includes flexibility to tailor to individual operations and financial assistance to install conservation practices.
- Implementing statewide water quality standards to address contamination from agricultural production and operations, including but not limited to nutrients and bacteria.
- Holding regulatory agencies accountable for enforcing water quality laws, such as the Clean Water Act and Safe Drinking Water Act, and corresponding administrative rules.
- Adequate funding to plan, implement, and monitor water quality improvement at the watershed level across the state, including benchmarks and targets for water quality goals and accountability measures to ensure goals are met.

Flood Mitigation and Climate Resiliency

Flooding continues to be an issue across the state, and the threats are increasing due to climate change. Flooding increases water pollution, harms communities, damages habitat and outdoor spaces, and disrupts economies. Natural infrastructure solutions such as floodplain restoration, wetlands and oxbows, and perennial vegetation help to hold water on the landscape and mitigate floodwater downstream. Agricultural production contributes the largest percentage of greenhouse gas emissions from the state, but agriculture also has significant opportunity to lead on climate change by implementing practices that reduce carbon emissions, sequester carbon, and increase climate resiliency across the state. Land-use change is essential to Iowa's ability to mitigate and adapt to climate change.

IEC supports:

- Flood mitigation plans that include natural infrastructure solutions, and implementing natural infrastructure in flood-prone areas to reduce flood impacts and protect communities.
- Increased funding and support for communities and watersheds to develop and implement climate and flood mitigation plans that incorporate natural infrastructure and climate resiliency principles.

- Change in land-use practices to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, sequester carbon, and increase climate resiliency.

Investing in a diverse, inclusive, and multi-functional Iowa landscape

Iowa is a state that is rich in natural beauty and outdoor opportunities, but the state has not historically invested in its natural resources. Iowa's water quality, in particular, has been treated as an externality of agricultural production rather than a resource that, if invested in, can provide a solid economic return. Public lands and investment in conservation have numerous benefits, including improved air, water, and land quality, physical and mental public health benefits, economic development opportunities for local businesses, increased workforce recruitment and retention, improved quality of life, increased resiliency to natural disasters, and critical habitat for native plants and animals.

IEC supports:

- Policies that maintain, improve, and expand public parks, recreation opportunities, and public access to Iowa's land and water resources.
- Funding for protection and restoration of Iowa's natural landscapes, such as wetlands and prairies, that contribute to cleaner water and increase wildlife habitat.
- Long-term funding for state and local staff necessary to effectively implement conservation, water quality, and land stewardship efforts.