



The Iowa Policy Project

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Climate Change and the COVID-19 response

Productive strategy would target low- and moderate-income families

IOWA CITY, Iowa (May 13, 2020) — While federal and state responses to climate change have been slow, there are ways national leaders now dealing with the spread of COVID-19 could address both threats and help low- and moderate-income families at the same time.

“The problem can seem too big or abstract, but we have resources readily available in Iowa that point the way to immediate and ongoing strategies to reduce greenhouse gases,” said Joseph Wilensky, lead author of a new report for the nonpartisan Iowa Policy Project.

The key, Wilensky and co-author David Osterberg found, is by focusing on help to low- and moderate-income consumers who bear a high cost of energy as a share of their income. That could both reduce energy use and help families facing economic challenges from the pandemic.

“That should be part of the next stimulus package,” Osterberg said. “We can reduce greenhouse gas emissions and provide relief for low-income consumers who bear high energy costs that are especially burdensome when the economy and jobs are declining.”

The authors noted that an annual Iowa Department of Natural Resources report identified, for 2018, the top four categories for emissions: agriculture, 31 percent; power plants, 23 percent; residential, commercial and industrial fossil fuel use, 22 percent; and transportation, 15 percent.

As research from IPP and others have shown through the years, energy efficiency is part of the low-hanging fruit of climate responses.

By expanding efficiency, fossil fuel consumption can be reduced both to produce power, in power plants, and in direct consumption by the residential-commercial-industrial sector.

The authors recommend:

- Boosting state and federal weatherization program now in place — the Weatherization Assistance Program (WAP) in Iowa, and the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP).
- Allowing for more community solar projects that assures low-income families can participate.

“These kinds of steps can boost the economy — in good or bad times — by employing local contractors to perform weatherization,” Wilensky said. “Once it is safe to resume the type of in-person work that residential weatherization entails, this is one area where federal COVID-19 relief funds could help in Iowa, to enhance WAP implementation across the state with a focus on those most in need of assistance, the poor.”

On the energy production side, the authors pointed to great opportunities to expand solar energy production, as wind power already has a significant share of Iowa's energy production.

"While there is always room to improve wind generation, growth in solar power presents a much larger opportunity," the report said. "Iowa only generates 0.17 percent of its total power mix from solar resources and ranks 39th of 50 states in solar power production. There is obviously room to grow, and community solar projects may be the best way to do so."

For those facing housing insecurity or those who move frequently, community solar could become a COVID-19 stimulus investment, and implemented as an expansion in existing federal support.

The authors also noted policy in neighboring Minnesota and Illinois to show how to expand solar power access to underserved communities.

"Minnesota's community solar programs are considered the best in the country, with 10 times the number of projects either online or in the process of coming online as anywhere else in the history of United States energy production," the report stated.

"Iowa can learn from examples in other states to encourage larger-scale solar developments," the authors concluded. "This along with added weatherization program funds provide an opportunity to fund vitally needed energy improvements in the state while also reducing greenhouse gas emission sources and assisting those most in need.

"With record unemployment filings across the country, Iowa should work proactively to keep solar installers and weatherization technicians on the job and reduce the energy burden of those who can least afford to withstand a lost paycheck."

The Iowa Policy Project is a nonpartisan public policy research and analysis organization in Iowa City. Reports are available at www.iowapolicyproject.org.

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