Sarah Wright currently serves as the Executive Director of Utah Clean Energy. As founder of Utah Clean Energy, Sarah has a proven record of promoting renewable energy and energy efficiency within Utah. In her current role, she has fostered diverse partnerships with state agencies, municipal governments, industry, agricultural groups, and community groups to advance clean energy solutions. Sarah is an intervener in regulatory proceedings and a witness in legislative hearings, testifying in support of energy efficiency and renewable energy. Previously, Sarah served as an environmental consultant, providing occupational health and ambient air quality permitting services in Utah.

Q & A with Utah Clean Energy’s Sarah Wright

CATALYZING SOLAR IN SALT LAKE CITY

The Institute for Sustainable Communities (ISC), the national coordinator for Solar Market Pathways, conducted this interview with Utah Clean Energy founder Sarah Wright in May 2018.

Sarah Wright: Our Solar Market Pathways project was a partnership with Salt Lake City, who has been our long-time partner on solar dating back to a Department of Energy Million Solar Roofs project. In 2006, we only had 100 kilowatts of solar in 76 installations statewide. Although Utah’s solar market had grown since 2006, we saw the tremendous potential to take it to the next level.

Our Solar Market Pathways work is bundled into four tasks:

1. Revitalizing a state PACE (property assessed clean energy) program
2. Analyzing the costs and benefits of rooftop solar
3. Incorporating solar and storage into emergency preparedness and resilience
4. Pulling it all together with a 10-year solar deployment plan with stakeholders
What are some of the most transformative aspects of Utah's 10-year solar deployment plan?

For SMP, we set a goal of 750 megawatts of utility-scale solar and 325 megawatts of rooftop solar by 2024. Utah achieved the utility-scale solar goal even before the 10-year plan was completed, and is now well over 1 gigawatt. We are about two-thirds of the way to the rooftop goal.

What was transformative about the plan is that the rapid growth of the market is creating new challenges that we didn't think we would need to think about when Utah started on its solar path. The single most transformative strategy is the hardest one: aligning utility incentives with the growth of rooftop solar.

A first critical step is helping utilities, regulators, stakeholders, and city planners understand the wide range of benefits that rooftop solar brings to the state, from economic development and job creation to resiliency and grid benefits. And looking not just at solar in isolation, but solar in combination with storage, demand response, and energy efficiency. All of us need to understand the role solar and distributed energy resources will play in the future, how they can improve affordability and help integrate more renewables, both distributed and utility scale.

An emerging issue is that we want to make sure everyone, including underserved populations, has access to solar. We are just starting a working group to evaluate the options.

How did you engage with the community (or with stakeholders) to develop this solar deployment plan?

There is no one-size-fits-all approach, so we shaped our engagement to different stakeholders. For the solar industry, we did online surveys, group calls, and individual calls to understand barriers they face. With local government, it was easier to meet one-on-one. With utilities, we had small group meetings with just us, SMP-supported experts, and the utility, where we focused on interconnection issues. We used SMP technical assistance support to get help from experts like the Interstate Renewable Energy Council and learn about best practices from other utilities. We now have a memo with Rocky Mountain Power that lays out next steps for updating their interconnection procedures. Once the utility realized we were there to help them, they were open to input.

What have you learned about the interests or values of stakeholders through this engagement process?

They are different for each group. Across the board, with the public and community leaders and local government, they all see rooftop solar as a positive addition to their community and to their own lives. Solar is well accepted. We worked a lot with municipal utilities to do educational events, with help from the Regulatory Assistance Project on solar integration, value, and rate design. What I've found is that respectful collaboration is the best way to move forward on tricky issues. If stakeholders can be heard and understood, they are much more willing to look for beneficial solutions.

What I've found is that respectful collaboration is the best way to move forward on tricky issues. If stakeholders can be heard and understood, they are much more willing to look for beneficial solutions.
Q What are successful ways to connect with the general public and non-technical people to increase engagement on energy issues?

Solar is such a visible [energy] source that it makes it a much easier conversation. They realize that rooftop solar can power their community. When you start community meetings, you need to help the public understand how the power system works, what the sources are, and so on. People are amazed when they learn how much electricity comes from fossil fuels. It’s important to give them time to ask questions, and to help them understand that renewable energy costs have come down, the market has transformed, and that renewables are on par with fossil resources.

Q What’s next for Utah Clean Energy?

Solar Market Pathways launched Salt Lake City into a whole new phase. The city is now looking for broad deployment of utility-scale and distributed solar. They set very ambitious goals—to be 100% renewable by 2032, community-wide—along with Park City, Moab City, and Summit County. Park City and Salt Lake City just put out a request for proposals to get 50% of their municipal load from renewables. It is not just a paper goal; they are really committed.

Utah Clean Energy is working with the communities on how to meet their goals in the most economic way possible. We’re talking about how to ramp up energy efficiency, the role of distributed energy resources, how much distributed versus utility-scale renewables there should be. We’re thrilled to be getting help from the Department of Energy and the national labs through the Solar Energy Innovation Network on the technical challenges around high penetrations of renewable energy. And it’s always important to work with our main utility here, Rocky Mountain Power. They have an agreement with all four of the local governments to help solve challenges. With some hard work and innovative thinking I think we can get there.

Learn More:

Utah Clean Energy
solarmarketpathways.org/project/salt-lake