



Inclusive Solar Outreach Awards: Abbreviated Final Technical Report

Emily Evans, Carlie Ortiz, and Jackie Petre

National Renewable Energy Laboratory

**NREL is a national laboratory of the U.S. Department of Energy
Office of Energy Efficiency & Renewable Energy
Operated by the Alliance for Sustainable Energy, LLC**

This report is available at no cost from the National Renewable Energy Laboratory (NREL) at www.nrel.gov/publications.

Contract No. DE-AC36-08GO28308

Technical Report
NREL/TP-6A50-92310
December 2024



Inclusive Solar Outreach Awards: Abbreviated Final Technical Report

Emily Evans, Carlie Ortiz, and Jackie Petre

National Renewable Energy Lab

Suggested Citation

Evans, Emily, Carlie Ortiz, and Jackie Petre. 2024. *Inclusive Solar Outreach Awards: Abbreviated Final Technical Report*. Golden, CO: National Renewable Energy Laboratory. NREL/TP-6A50-92310. <https://www.nrel.gov/docs/fy25osti/92310.pdf>.

**NREL is a national laboratory of the U.S. Department of Energy
Office of Energy Efficiency & Renewable Energy
Operated by the Alliance for Sustainable Energy, LLC**

This report is available at no cost from the National Renewable Energy Laboratory (NREL) at www.nrel.gov/publications.

Contract No. DE-AC36-08GO28308

Technical Report
NREL/TP-6A50-92310
December 2024

National Renewable Energy Laboratory
15013 Denver West Parkway
Golden, CO 80401
303-275-3000 • www.nrel.gov

NOTICE

This work was authored by the National Renewable Energy Laboratory, operated by Alliance for Sustainable Energy, LLC, for the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) under Contract No. DE-AC36-08GO28308. Funding provided by the U.S. Department of Energy Office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy Solar Energy Technologies Office. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the views of the DOE or the U.S. Government.

This report is available at no cost from the National Renewable Energy Laboratory (NREL) at www.nrel.gov/publications.

U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) reports produced after 1991 and a growing number of pre-1991 documents are available free via www.osti.gov.

Cover Photos by Dennis Schroeder: (clockwise, left to right) NREL 51934, NREL 45897, NREL 42160, NREL 45891, NREL 48097, NREL 46526.

NREL prints on paper that contains recycled content.

Final Technical Report (FTR)
Cover Page

a. <i>Federal Agency</i>	Department of Energy	
b. <i>Award Number</i>	39580 (BOS)	
c. <i>Project Title</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inclusive Solar Outreach Awards • Sunny Awards for Equitable Community Solar – Engagement Awards for Community Participation and Inclusive Outreach • Hit Me with Your Sun Shot: Solar Photo Competition 	
d. <i>Recipient Organization</i>	National Renewable Energy Laboratory	
e. <i>Project Period</i>	<i>Start:</i> 3/1/2022	<i>End:</i> 9/30/2024
f. <i>Principal Investigator (PI)</i>	<p>Inclusive Solar Outreach Awards Jackie Petre/Sarah Gomach Prize Section Team Lead Jackie.Petre@nrel.gov</p> <p>2023 Sunny Awards for Equitable Community Solar – Engagement Awards for Community Participation and Inclusive Outreach Lisa Trope Prize Lead (No longer with American-Made; contact American-Made Prize Lead Emily Evans for any questions) Emily.Evans@nrel.gov</p> <p>Hit Me with Your Sun Shot: Solar Photo Competition Jackie Petre/Carlie Ortiz Prize Section Team Lead/Prize Section Communications Coordinator Jackie.Petre@nrel.gov/Carlie.Ortiz@nrel.gov</p>	
g. <i>Business Contact (BC)</i>	Debbie Brodt-Giles Program Manager Debbie.brodt.giles@nrel.gov 303-988-7842	
h. <i>Certifying Official (if different from the PI or BC)</i>	N/A	

Signature of Certifying Official

Date

By signing this report, I certify to the best of my knowledge and belief that the report is true, complete, and accurate. I am aware that any false, fictitious, or fraudulent information, misrepresentations, half-truths, or the omission of any material fact, may subject me to criminal, civil or administrative penalties for fraud, false statements, false claims or otherwise. (U.S. Code Title 18, Section 1001, Section 287 and Title 31, Sections 3729-3730). I further understand and agree that the information contained in this report are material to Federal agency's funding decisions and I have any ongoing responsibility to promptly update the report within the time frames stated in the terms and conditions of the above referenced Award, to ensure that my responses remain accurate and complete.

1. **Acknowledgement:** "This material is based upon work supported by the U.S. Department of Energy's Office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy (EERE) Solar Energy Technologies Office (SETO) under the **Inclusive Solar Outreach Awards** and the **Hit Me with Your Sun Shot: Solar Photo Competition**.
2. **Disclaimer:** This report was prepared as an account of work sponsored by an agency of the United States Government. Neither the United States Government nor any agency thereof, nor any of their employees, makes any warranty, express or implied, or assumes any legal liability or responsibility for the accuracy, completeness, or usefulness of any information, apparatus, product, or process disclosed, or represents that its use would not infringe privately owned rights. Reference herein to any specific commercial product, process, or service by trade name, trademark, manufacturer, or otherwise does not necessarily constitute or imply its endorsement, recommendation, or favoring by the United States Government or any agency thereof. The views and opinions of authors expressed herein do not necessarily state or reflect those of the United States Government or any agency thereof.
3. **Project Objectives:**
Millions of Americans have experienced the benefits of transitioning to solar, such as money saved on electricity bills and reduced environmental impact. However, many households have been overlooked and left out of this energy transition due to limited funds, low credit scores, language barriers, or lack of solar adoption from neighbors and other community members. Leading organizations have recognized this gap in communications and have started to target more diverse audiences in their solar marketing campaigns.

This project outlines three years of prize funding, recognizing solar industry communications campaigns that demonstrate excellence in strategic, effective, and meaningful communication to diverse audiences across digital, video, marketing, mobile, print, social media, and more.

Year 1: Inclusive Solar Outreach Awards

The first year of project funding in 2022 covered the creation and implementation of the Inclusive Solar Outreach Awards. This prize recognized communications campaigns that were successful in increasing solar energy adoption and/or solar workforce recruitment and retention among a diverse target audience and that crossed a variety of mediums. Participants submitted a description of a communications campaign and its results, along with campaign materials to illustrate the tactics used. The U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) selected five winners to be featured in the first iteration of the [Best Practices Guide for Inclusive Solar Outreach](#). There was no monetary prize for these awards.

Year 2: 2023 Sunny Awards for Equitable Community Solar – Engagement Awards for Community Participation and Inclusive Outreach

The second year of project funding supported the creation and implementation of two \$5,000 Engagement Awards, which were added as a bonus prize to the 2023 Sunny Awards for

Equitable Community Solar program. While the main Sunny Awards were funded and implemented under separate agreement #39849, this report focuses solely on these supplemental awards:

1. Community Participation Award: Recognizes programs that incorporate community-driven design and ensure benefits directly address local needs.
2. Inclusive Outreach Award: Honors programs that demonstrate effective communications strategies for increasing solar adoption and workforce development.

Year 3: Hit Me with Your Sun Shot: Solar Photo Competition

The third year of funding covered the creation and implementation of the Hit Me with Your Sun Shot: Solar Photo Competition in 2024. This prize called for applicants to submit photos that highlighted and brought attention to solar energy's importance in the clean energy transition. Photo categories ranged from solar workforce and solar in nature to grid integration and research processes. The winning submissions will be used by DOE to highlight the highly diverse and growing solar workforce, as well as the integration of solar in a variety of ways across the United States. DOE selected two \$2,500 grand prize winners, eight \$1,000 category winners, and eight \$500 category runners-up.

4. Project Results and Discussion:

Year 1: Inclusive Solar Outreach Awards

The [Inclusive Solar Outreach Awards](#) received 13 applications over the course of three months. DOE selected five winners from these submissions and featured each team in the first iteration of the [Best Practices Guide for Inclusive Solar Outreach](#), a digital guide that lives on energy.gov. Winning submissions were also highlighted in a webinar presented by the SETO Comms team in September 2024. There was no monetary prize for these awards.

The submissions obtained through these awards shine a light on the diverse efforts of solar communications at varying levels of time, investment, and creativity. Highlighting these initiatives in a public format creates accessible learning opportunities for anyone in solar communications to obtain and spark conversation around meaningful outreach, especially to those in underserved communities.

Year 2: 2023 Sunny Awards for Equitable Community Solar - Engagement Awards for Community Participation and Inclusive Outreach

The [2023 Sunny Awards for Equitable Community Solar](#) received 16 submission, 7 of which were deemed eligible for the prize. Per the official rules, eligible competitors could win either an engagement award or a grand prize award, but not both. Due to this eligibility requirement, the teams who were most meritorious for an engagement award were selected for a grand prize, and therefore could not be formally recognized for an engagement award.

Two award winners were featured in the second iteration of the [Best Practices Guide for Inclusive Solar Outreach](#) and featured in a webinar presented by the SETO Comms team in September 2024.

The applications received through this prize paint a unique, telling picture of the efforts of growing solar startups and organizations in the U.S. Submissions conveyed success in specific areas of outreach and initiatives, such as community engagement and state-funded programs, and areas of need, such as increased funding and adequate staffing to fuel these efforts. Prizes like the Sunny Awards provide competitors with a direct opportunity to receive government funding, educational resources, and industry networking, all foundational building blocks to long-term success in this industry.

Year 3: Hit Me with Your Sun Shot: Solar Photo Competition

The [Hit Me with Your Sun Shot: Solar Photo Competition](#) received more than 110 applications, resulting in over 450 photo entries across eight categories ranging from solar and weather to solar workforce and installation, within just two months. DOE awarded two \$2,500 Grand Prizes, eight \$1,000 Category Winner Prizes, eight \$500 Category Runner-Up Prizes, and 28 Honorable Mentions with no monetary value. All eligible photo submissions are available to the public for use through a [Flickr account](#) created and managed by the SETO Communications team.

The photos obtained through this contest were submitted from a diverse array of applicants, varying in geographic location and occupation, showcasing the growth and impact of solar across the United States. Submissions to categories such as Workforce Development and Manufacturing helped expand the assets available for solar storytelling through SETO communication efforts.

5. Significant Accomplishments and Conclusions:

Year 1: Inclusive Solar Outreach Awards

The Inclusive Solar Outreach Awards allowed SETO Comms to see how other industry communicators were approaching outreach and project amplification. Instead of asking applicants to develop new materials for a submission, this award called for entries highlighting work that had already been complete and the outcomes of those communications efforts. The applicants showed a diverse array of outreach strategies that helped inform the [Best Practices Guide for Inclusive Solar Outreach](#).

Although there were valuable insights gained from the competition that were shared in a public way for others to access, there were very few entries to use as examples of success. The competition asked applicants to submit projects that were already complete, but this still required time to pull adequate examples and impacts together, which applicants knew wouldn't earn them any funding for their time. It is difficult to determine whether the smaller number of entries was due to the niche audience of solar communicators or the lack of prize funding for this competition.

Year 2: 2023 Sunny Awards for Equitable Community Solar – Engagement Awards for Community Participation and Inclusive Outreach

This pilot program aimed to explore how DOE could use existing prize competitions to recognize and encourage innovative community engagement and inclusive outreach strategies.

The Sunny Awards provided the communications team with valuable insights throughout the competition process, from developing award criteria to evaluating final submissions. The team gained deeper understanding of both successes and challenges faced by various community solar organizations, exemplified by creative problem solving but often stunted by lack of funding or employee bandwidth. Although eligibility rules prevented us from awarding the 2023 Engagement Award as planned, the materials submitted and feedback shared from applicants provided crucial learnings for future programing.

Year 3: Hit Me with Your Sun Shot: Solar Photo Competition

This Solar Photo Competition was a unique opportunity for SETO to connect with potential prize applicants in a new and engaging way. Unlike other prizes that require a more time intensive application, this competition challenged competitors to showcase the world around them, whether they were photographers with a passion for solar or professionals in the industry. The photos obtained from the prize exceeded team expectations and showcased solar in a variety of ways that may have gone unnoticed before—in nature, weather, and even behind the scenes. Though photo contests are uncommon among government funding opportunities, SETO seized an opportunity to grow their own library of photos and create a more inclusive narrative across website and outreach messaging.

Although this competition received more than 450 photo entries and selected a total of 18 winners, it must be noted that not all prize funding was awarded to the selected winners. Two of the category-winning photos and one category-runner-up photo were submitted by a U.S. government federal contractor, who was ineligible to accept a prize payment. Additionally, one category runner up did not respond to communication about accepting their prize payment, even after numerous follow-up messages. In total, \$3,000 of the \$17,000 total prize pool went unclaimed.

6. Path Forward

Year 1: Inclusive Solar Outreach Awards

Recognizing the valuable insights provided through these awards, the Inclusive Solar Outreach Awards were wrapped into a different prize with similar objectives (the 2023 Sunnys). The ongoing need to discover and promote successful communication initiatives proves the importance of this initial competition and highlights the need to find ways of discovering these diverse efforts, whether it's an additional round of these awards or through a different solar-related prize.

Providing a monetary prize could increase public interest in participation and convey a higher sense of recognition for the efforts of the solar organizations that apply. Additionally, as SETO-related programs grow, such as the National Community Solar Partnership and the Community Power Accelerator, so will awareness for prizes funded by this office and opportunities to connect with interested, invested competitors.

Year 2: 2023 Sunny Awards for Equitable Community Solar – Engagement Awards for Community Participation and Inclusive Outreach

The Sunny Awards provided valuable insight in a variety of ways and will likely be funded for another round in the future. As the need for solar adoption continues to grow, so will the need for inclusive solar outreach and initiatives that provide meaningful benefits to underserved and often overlooked communities.

Currently, there are potential plans to include similar bonus prizes for inclusive outreach across other prizes in the American-Made portfolio. For example, the Large Animal and Solar System Operations (LASSO) Prize is considering an additional prize for inclusive outreach as part of their total prize package.

From our experience with the 2023 Sunny Awards, we would recommend more flexible eligibility criteria that allow bonus prizes to be awarded in addition to main prize winnings. Additionally, the overall prize design and awards structure can significantly contribute to the success of any bonus prizes. Teams should ensure that the main prize amounts are right sized to offer strong incentives for team participation, which would broaden the pool of eligible submissions for both the main prize as well as the bonus prize.

Year 3: Hit Me with Your Sun Shot: Solar Photo Competition

This prize may fund an additional round in the future but not within the next few years, unless SETO identifies additional areas of need for their communications and outreach efforts, such as solar-related video or illustration. The plethora of photos submitted gave the team a variety of unique and diverse viewpoints of solar in the U.S. and will sustain the need for exciting, inclusive imagery for countless campaigns to come.

7. Products:

Year 1: Inclusive Solar Outreach Awards

- Prize Listing (energy.gov): <https://www.energy.gov/eere/solar/american-made-inclusive-solar-outreach-awards>
- HeroX Page (official prize platform): <https://www.herox.com/OutreachAwards>
- Winner Announcement (energy.gov): <https://www.energy.gov/eere/solar/articles/energy-department-recognizes-inclusive-solar-outreach-award-winners>
- Media Hits (General Orgs):
 - [Energy Outreach Colorado](#)
 - [Lightsource bp](#)
 - [Duke University](#)
 - [Positive Change Purchasing Co-op](#)
- Best Practices Guide for Inclusive Solar Outreach (energy.gov): <https://www.energy.gov/eere/solar/best-practices-guide-inclusive-solar-energy-communications>

Year 2: 2023 Sunny Awards for Equitable Community Solar – Engagement Awards for Community Participation and Inclusive Outreach

- Prize Listing (energy.gov): <https://www.energy.gov/communitysolar/2023-sunny-awards-equitable-community-solar>
- American-Made Prize Page (official American-Made site): <https://americanmadechallenges.org/challenges/sunnyawards>
- HeroX Page (official prize platform): <https://www.herox.com/2023SunnyAwards>
- Initial Funding Announcement (energy.gov): <https://www.energy.gov/articles/biden-harris-administration-announces-new-investments-support-and-accelerate-community>
- Finalist Announcement (NREL): <https://www.nrel.gov/news/program/2023/american-made-2023-sunny-awards-finalists-announced-this-week.html>
- Winner Announcement (HeroX): <https://www.herox.com/2023SunnyAwards/update/6142>
- Media Hits (General Orgs):
 - [Sunwealth](#)
 - [Illinois Power Agency](#)
 - [Global Renewable News](#)
 - [Solar Washington](#)

Year 3: Hit Me with Your Sun Shot: Solar Photo Competition

- Prize Listing (energy.gov): <https://www.energy.gov/eere/solar/american-made-solar-photo-competition-hit-me-your-sun-shot>
- American-Made Prize Page (official American-Made site): <https://americanmadechallenges.org/challenges/solar-photo-competition>
- HeroX Page (official prize platform): <https://www.herox.com/solarphoto>
- Winner Announcement (energy.gov): <https://www.energy.gov/eere/solar/articles/hit-me-your-sun-shot-photo-contest-winners>
- Media Hits (General Orgs):
 - [North American Clean Energy](#)
 - [Streamline Climate](#)
 - [Philadelphia Solar Energy Association](#)
 - [Solar Farm Summit](#)
 - [Sol Smart](#)

8. **Project Team and Roles:** List all participants along with their individual roles and/or intellectual contribution (e.g., DOE personnel, students, collaborating organizations).

Year 1: Inclusive Solar Outreach Awards

- Jackie Petre: American-Made Prize Team (Communications/PI)
- Sarah Gomach: American-Made Prize Team (General Support)
- Susanna Murley: DOE Personnel
- Gabby Laverghetta: DOE Personnel

Year 2: 2023 Sunny Awards for Equitable Community Solar – Engagement Awards for Community Participation and Inclusive Outreach

- Lisa Trope: American-Made Prize Team (Prize Lead)
- Carlie Ortiz: American-Made Prize Team (Communications)
- Anna Balzer: DOE Personnel (NCSP)
- Ben Burch: DOE Personnel (NCSP)

Year 3: Hit Me with Your Sun Shot: Solar Photo Competition

- Jackie Petre: American-Made Prize Team (Communications/PI)
- Carlie Ortiz: American-Made Prize Team (Communications/PI)
- Rebecca Bennett: American-Made Prize Team (General Support)
- Susanna Murley: DOE Personnel
- Sabrina Patel: DOE Personnel
- Julia Durmer: DOE Personnel

9. **References:** List all literature references cited in the report.

None listed.