

Playbook Lesson Learned Phase 6: Process Improvement

Energy Permitting Wizard Helps Reduce Project Barriers in Hawai‘i

Similar to many jurisdictions, the complex permitting process for renewable energy projects has been identified as a critical barrier to renewable energy development in Hawai‘i. The inability of project proponents to reliably predict the duration, outcome, and cost of the permitting process increases the investment risk for renewable energy projects, preventing the construction of projects that align with the state’s clean energy goals.

The Hawai‘i Clean Energy Initiative (HCEI) is a multiyear partnership between the U.S. Department of Energy and the state of Hawai‘i to encourage collaboration between state utilities, business leaders, policymakers, and citizens committed to reducing the state’s dependence on imported fossil fuels. With the support of the National Renewable Energy Laboratory (NREL) and others, HCEI has been involved in streamlining Hawai‘i’s permitting processes to help alleviate delays, improve the feasibility of renewable energy projects throughout the state, and aid Hawai‘i as it strives to achieve 70% clean energy by 2030.



To specifically address these permitting challenges, HCEI and its partners developed the Renewable Energy Permitting Wizard to assist project teams with siting and designing a project according to the permitting requirements identified, resulting in more appropriate project siting and shortened permitting timelines.

Challenge

Prior to the development of the Renewable Energy Permitting Wizard, there was no central resource providing information on multijurisdictional (federal, state, and county) permits required for renewable energy or other projects in Hawai‘i. People looking to determine the permitting requirements of a specific project needed to consult multiple sources and/or agencies, which required considerable time and resources. Because permitting impacts the financing of projects, reducing the permitting time or reducing the number of permits required can significantly impact total project costs.

The project team held three meetings with county planning agencies and local renewable energy professionals to identify and discuss Hawai‘i’s permitting processes. Through these meetings, a number of renewable energy project developers and industry professionals identified specific permits that were so difficult or time consuming to obtain that the developer either considered stopping or completely halted work on a project.

Project developers and industry professionals identified the following as the greatest barriers to renewable energy use in Hawai‘i:

- Utility permitting and Public Utilities Commission processes can take a long time
- Community and political opposition to renewable energy

- Environmental agency inflexibility
- Unsuccessful implementation of the mandate to expedite permit reviews for renewable energy projects
- Large number of permits required and therefore large number of agencies involved in the process
- Unclear regulations and associated interpretations
- Applicant confusion about permitting requirements resulting in the frequent submission of incomplete applications.

Solution

During the stakeholder meetings, industry representatives identified four main streamlining priorities:

1. Standardized checklists
2. Permit application templates (e.g., digital and Web-based)
3. Reduce level of application detail as appropriate
4. User fees for expedited permit review.

In order to act on these recommendations, the Hawai‘i Department of Business, Economic Development, and Tourism (DBEDT) partnered with NREL to develop a series of guidebooks to provide project developers with a comprehensive resource on permitting renewable energy projects in Hawai‘i. These guidebooks summarize the types of permits that a renewable energy project developer may need to acquire and provide information on how to determine if a permit would be necessary based on the specifics of the project. Permit packets were also developed for each permit to provide more detailed information on the permit requirements and the process for applying for the permit.

DBEDT decided to use the information provided in the initial guidebooks to develop an online permitting tool that would help renewable energy project developers quickly determine the permits that would apply to a renewable energy project in Hawai‘i. The tool works by presenting a series of questions about the proposed project and based on responses, a list of permits potentially required is displayed with typical timeframes for each permit. The Permit Packets available through the Renewable Energy Permitting Wizard provide details and relevant information for each individual county, state, and federal permit. The tool allows developers to understand early in the planning phase not only the expected timeframe for acquiring permits, but also how altering the design or location of the project could change which permits are needed.

Key Takeaways

The Renewable Energy Permitting Wizard helps utilities, developers, and policymakers meet Hawai‘i’s renewable energy goals by simplifying and expediting review. The tool helps those proposing renewable energy projects understand the county, state, and federal permits that may be required for their individual project and works for projects ranging in size from residential solar installations to large utility-scale facilities. The Permitting Wizard also provided information on the processing of more than 160 federal, state, and county permits, and links to the various agencies and other resources needed to satisfy permitting requirements.

Such insights can also be used by permitting agencies and other organizations pursuing the difficult task of improving the permitting process for renewable energy projects in Hawai‘i and elsewhere.

This lesson learned is one of many provided in the Energy Transition Initiative Islands Playbook—an action-oriented guide to help island communities successfully initiate, plan, and complete a transition to a clean energy system and eliminate dependence on imported fuels. See the full Islands Playbook at www.eere.energy.gov/islandsplaybook.

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The Energy Transition Initiative leverages the experiences of islands, states, and cities that have established a long-term vision for energy transformation and are successfully implementing energy efficiency and renewable energy projects to achieve established clean energy goals. Through the initiative, the U.S. Department of Energy and its partners provide government entities and other stakeholders with a proven framework, objective guidance, and technical tools and resources for transitioning to a clean energy system/economy that relies on local resources to substantially reduce reliance on fossil fuels.