Office of Indian Energy Policy and Programs

Leading the Charge: Jana Ganion Advances Blue Lake Rancheria's Climate Action Agenda

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Jana Ganion is the Energy Director for the Blue Lake Rancheria.

Change doesn't happen on its own. It's led by dedicated and passionate people who are committed to empowering Indian Country to energize future generations. Leading the Charge is a regular feature spotlighting the movers and shakers in energy development on tribal lands.

Tell us about your role in advancing the Tribe's strategic energy and climate goals.

I look for ways to transition from conventional energy sources—power and fuel—to clean, renewable, sustainable sources that help stall and reverse climate change. Mainly this involves seeking out clean energy initiatives and any favorable economic support for implementing energy efficiency upgrades; on-site distributed generation renewable energy, green fuels, and community resiliency projects; and greenhouse gas reduction measures. I work with tribal staff and our regional partners on feasibility, analysis, and environmental and economic performance metrics, which inform updates to our strategic planning process and individual projects.

The Tribe's first specific, focused climate action project in 2009 was to invest in (at the time) aggressive energy efficiency measures in a new hotel, which became the first in California to be used as a model by our local utility. This work, which was based on a series of strategy documents, created significant momentum. As a result of this work and dozens of follow-on projects, the Tribe was appointed to, and I serve as delegate for, ICEIWG, where we work on tribal energy policy and serve as conduits to other tribal governments.

What are the top energy and climate-related challenges for the Tribe and the Northern California region?

Energy security and ecosystem threats—drought, wildfires, and changing water levels and quality—are constant concerns. The Northern California region has historically been subject to fierce storms, with resultant impacts, so climate change–related events will be likely stronger, but not unfamiliar. But more frequent, stronger weather events have driven our focus on on-site energy development.

For the Tribe, at an operational level, our biggest challenge is internal capacity. There is a wealth of technical assistance and external resources—particularly for feasibility—available for tribal energy development, for which we are thankful. But implementation—actual clean energy and fuel projects on the ground and in operation—requires internal staff and capacities that we, and many other tribal governments, have in short supply. The transfer of knowledge from external resources to internal staff is a key part of strong long-term development. Institutional knowledge reduces expenses in many ways, and skilled, experienced staff creates more immediately deployable resources for subsequent projects.

What drives you to pursue and champion the Tribe's innovative solutions to these challenges?

Climate change, job creation, and clean technology advancement motivate me. Our efforts to deploy cleaner sources of power and creating new economic strength—which cascades to and from Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) education—have yielded demonstrable positive results and that's inspiring on a daily basis. And moving from feasibility phases to implement, implement, implement!—that's the most fun.

What energy projects are you currently working on?

We have a 175-kilowatt (kW) distributed generation bioenergy plant in final commissioning phase, with start-up projected this spring. We just received initial Notice of Proposed Award for a 500-kW ground-mounted solar array with a grid storage battery system, controlled with leading-edge microgrid technology. If all goes as planned, this will be under way in May or June. We will have two tribal residence solar systems installed in March. We have just launched two electric vehicle charging stations (and hope to add more). And we have numerous energy efficiency upgrades in various stages.

What have been some of the greatest challenges you've faced in developing and implementing these projects? Lessons learned?

The greatest challenges are related to the "leading-edginess" of some of our technologies, coupled with our fondness for pilot demonstration projects. The Tribe has a track record of pursuing scientific endeavor, even if it entails technical and financial risk. They do it because determining which technologies are going to work best in clean energy requires us to install and learn.

Becoming conversant with the "business language" of a utility in terms of tariffs, incentives, interconnection agreements, insurance requirements, and other utility-related aspects of energy development—even on a smaller scale—is challenging. We started a dialogue early with the utility, and we included their local, regional, and interconnection groups, which was very helpful. The economic frameworks for renewable energy development tend to appear, shift, diminish, and sunset, so staying current with financial tools throughout a multi-year project timeline is key.

Low-voltage electrical contracting is a significant part of any project, and having a trusted electric contractor is essential. Cost-effective engineering can be difficult to find, especially where tribal lands are isolated. We partnered with Humboldt State University's engineering department and the Schatz Energy Research Center for engineering and systems integration work. These partnerships helped offset a lack of internal engineering capacity. Another benefit of the tribal/university partnership is synchronized outreach into STEM education in our region, as educators have first-hand knowledge of the projects and transfer that knowledge to their students.

Codes and regulations are a specific focus, and we were fortunate to have DOE technical assistance on this. And, I'd say that because the Tribe's lands are in a rural, difficult geographic location, the shipping and transport costs and logistics are not insignificant.

Describe the impact of the Tribe's recent selection as a White House Climate Action Champion.

First it was (and is) an enormous honor to be recognized. More broadly, these kinds of competitions serve to validate the Tribe's work and its considerable investment in greenhouse gas reductions and community resiliency, and they invigorate the entire region's climate action efforts. The Climate Action Champion award is a catalyst for far greater interaction with other governments and agencies on these serious issues, and the ability to exchange information is a huge benefit. Personally, it has been an honor to work with the people and the government of the Blue Lake Rancheria—their vision of a healthier environment underscores all these activities.

What do you see as the greatest opportunities for tribal leadership on climate action?

The Blue Lake Rancheria has executed on many opportunities available to develop their own clean energy platform, primarily on a distributed-generation community scale, where more control of the feasibility and economics is possible, and the scale of investment and risk is manageable. And because these clean energy systems work to provide energy security in emergency events, they provide a triple benefit—reducing greenhouse gases, reducing net costs of energy (in most cases), and providing energy for the tribal community whenever they need it.

Tribal governments are in a position to lead the way, aggressively and quickly, in the transition to clean energy, and we are seeing stunningly successful examples of this across the U.S. The national climate action priority also supports local, regional, and national networking and collaborations to pull together all the resources and move as quickly as possible to stem climate change. Lastly, we need hard data to make effective decisions, both on broad policy and focused projects. New and updated best-available data sets for water, air, and species/habitats on tribal lands (and which impact tribal lands) are certainly on my wish list. As co-managers of the environment, tribal governments have the opportunity to drive all these activities forward at the most effective pace.