



Hydrogen Hub Communications Dilemma – Engage Now or Wait?

As no fewer than 30 aspiring hydrogen hubs await the U.S. Department of Energy’s (“DOE”) decision to award USD7 billion in federal investment¹, what are the crucial next steps applicants can undertake to position for success?

Speak Now?

During this anticipated pre-award quiet period, hubs have a choice – develop a communications strategy and engage or wait. For most applicants, engaging now is the smart move.

- Hydrogen hubs represent a transformative moment and opportunity to rethink how energy is produced, transported and consumed locally and across the United States. These efforts will be years in the making and require significant physical infrastructure developments.
- Widely reported by media, a community’s clean energy enthusiasm lessens when considering the physical buildout required to make that energy possible – from wind and solar farms to hydrogen alike. While there’s a [growing understanding](#) of the [necessary infrastructure](#) for a low-carbon future,^{2,3} hubs – and the companies participating in them – need well-informed and engaged stakeholders to fully capture commercial goals.
- Where commitments aren’t binding and projects are still in flux, high level messaging and initial engagement from

a hub organization – especially focused on listening and education – can go a long way in building reputation and advancing broader goals.

- Even for applicants that aren’t ultimately selected, proactive engagement with relevant communities will provide valuable learnings for future engagement or generate new investment opportunities for organizations involved.

Staying Quiet?

Silence heightens risk. While these considerations may be new to hydrogen, the principles are not. From oil and gas to solar and wind, all technologies have faced similar challenges to physical buildout – including permitting, local opposition, and partisan blowback.

- Failure to effectively engage with local communities can be disastrous to hydrogen development. Permitting concerns in Louisiana have [indefinitely paused](#)⁴ one project; [“Over our dead bodies”](#) read a headline from

*The Wall Street Journal*⁵ detailing backlash to a proposed Kansas wind farm; and an Oregon hydrogen blending demonstration was [cancelled entirely](#)⁶, to name a few.

- Engagement's no longer optional, as the Biden administration's environmental justice priorities – including the Justice40 initiative – come into play. Applicants are required to submit a Community Benefits Plan, which accounts for 20% of total score⁷, is a means for the federal government to drive growth in historically underinvested and underserved communities.

Who's Engaging Today?

External engagement efforts from hub applicants are mixed. Based on an analysis of publicly available materials conducted by FTI Consulting's hydrogen team, we found:

- Fourteen of the 33 “encouraged” applicants made formal statements on the process. Another 10 have been identified through media engagements or individual member company statements.
 - In contrast, at least eight encouraged applications have little to no information publicly available.
- Twenty hubs have identified some, if not all, supporting members and 12 have more robust publicly available details and overviews.
 - Several have attained support of relevant Members of Congress, who amplify hub actions through their own communications channels.
 - However, only four applicants publicly discuss resources for community engagement within their proposals, with just one hosting regular community meetings in their proposed areas.

Expected Caution

Many groups are understandably hesitant to allocate resources to projects that may not be selected or share too much information with potential competitors. They're engaging with the DOE, but not the public or other applicants, for fear of giving away a “competitive edge.”

- Hub awards are not a zero-sum game. Once selected, awardees (anywhere from six to 10) will be on the journey together – at least to an extent. As the focal points of national hydrogen buildout, successes or failures of one hub will likely impact perception of other hubs, and hydrogen at large. Community engagement issues at one hub could snowball across the ecosystem.

Engage Early, Engage Often

At a recent D.C. event focused on community engagement and featuring speakers from think tanks, industry, and the DOE, panelists agreed that too often in the past, the first communities heard about projects was at the litigation phase.⁸

- The clean hydrogen hub program offers an opportunity to change that paradigm by engaging early and understanding a community's priorities – from jobs and economic security to access to grocery stores, health care programs, and education and reskilling needs.
- This paradigm shift should come with a change not only in how all stakeholders engage, but also how they approach the engagement – as co-leaders participating in the process together.

Generate Lasting Value

Hubs should think holistically about how they want to be viewed among stakeholders, the long-term value generated for communities, opportunity for transparent, two-way communication, and how to establish the community's trust to avoid issues that have plagued prior energy systems.

- **Public Opinion Research:** How do local residents understand a hydrogen hub? What are their expectations, particularly around community investment, jobs and economic growth? What are their concerns and how can those best be addressed? Conducting public opinion surveys can identify opportunities, inform communications, and help the hub navigate challenges.
- **Messaging, Narrative:** A cohesive, aligned message communicates the value of the hub to community stakeholders, private companies, and policy leaders at local, state and federal levels. Working to craft and advance that narrative – via various creative mediums, news, and social channels – positions the hub for growth.
- **Direct Community Engagement:** Authentic, two-way communication can be a difference maker in understanding and responding to community needs. Not only can this be an effective risk-management strategy, it can also help inform site location, hiring, and investment decisions.
- **Stakeholder Education:** While hub details will undoubtedly evolve, organizers should start the education process now. Invite elected officials, reporters,

and community leaders into the conversation to demystify the process and transparently advocate for the hub's vision and the opportunity it holds.

- **Long-Term Perspective:** With the DOE estimating full hub development taking 12+ years from initial awards⁹, organizers should be prepared to manage expectations and sustain support over a long time horizon, while dealing with any setbacks, which are inevitable for every energy or technology project.

How We Can Help

FTI Consulting's Strategic Communications team has been supporting hydrogen scale-up for more than a decade, building coalitions to elevate and shape conversations domestically and abroad. We're ready to help hub leaders engage stakeholders today so they can position themselves – and the sector at large – for success over the long term.

Endnotes

- 1 Lucie Bioret, Yuqi Zhu, Alan Krupnick, "Hydrogen Hubs: Get to Know the Encouraged Applicants," Resources for the Future (02/07/23) <https://www.resources.org/common-resources/hydrogen-hubs-get-to-know-the-encouraged-applicants/>.
- 2 "The case for an environmentalism that builds," The Economist (April 5, 2023), <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2023/04/05/the-case-for-an-environmentalism-that-builds>. (Subscription required)
- 3 Bill McKibben, "Yes in Our Backyards," Mother Jones (May 2023), <https://www.motherjones.com/environment/2023/04/yimby-nimby-progressives-clean-energy-infrastructure-housing-development-wind-solar-bill-mckibben/?linkId=100000200058906>.
- 4 David Iaconangelo, "La. legal showdown may preview national battle over hydrogen," E&E News Energywire (November 16, 2022) <https://www.eenews.net/articles/la-legal-showdown-may-preview-national-battle-over-hydrogen/>.
- 5 Jennifer Hiller, "'Over Our Dead Bodies': Backlash Builds Against \$3 Trillion Clean-Energy Push," Wall Street Journal (May 8, 2023) <https://www.wsj.com/articles/inflation-reduction-act-backlash-clean-energy-wind-solar-f3d4d900>.
- 6 Adam Duvernay, "NW Natural cancels west Eugene hydrogen blending project," The Register-Guard (Eugene) (November 3, 2022) <https://www.registerguard.com/story/news/2022/11/02/nw-natural-cancels-west-eugene-hydrogen-blending-project/69612987007/>.
- 7 Department of Energy, "About Community Benefits Plans," Clean Energy Infrastructure, <https://www.energy.gov/infrastructure/about-community-benefits-plans>.
- 8 "Hydrogen Forward and EPRI – A Community Approach to Infrastructure Development," Hydrogen Forward (May 10, 2023) <https://www.hydrogenfwd.org/hydrogen-forward-epri-a-community-approach-to-infrastructure-development/>.
- 9 Regional Clean Hydrogen Hubs Funding Opportunity Announcement, U.S. Department of Energy, <https://oed-exchange.energy.gov/Default.aspx#Foald4dbbd966-7524-4830-b883-450933661811>.

IVANA JEMELKOVA

Senior Managing Director
ivana.jemelkova@fticonsulting.com

JEFF BECHDEL

Managing Director
jeff.bechdel@fticonsulting.com

JOHN SUTTER

Managing Director
john.sutter@fticonsulting.com

DEIDRA JACKSON

Senior Advisor
deidra.jackson@fticonsulting.com

HANNAH FISHER

Senior Consultant
hannah.fisher@fticonsulting.com

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