

California Energy Commission Tribal Program

Program Profile

Investing in Tribal Energy Projects Across California

The [California Energy Commission](#) (CEC), the primary energy policy and planning agency in California, has taken a leading role in collaborating with and investing in low-income and Tribal communities.¹ CEC manages a variety of energy programs and set-asides for California Native American Tribes are vital components of them. Through these programs, CEC aims to foster effective government-to-government collaboration with Tribal communities in California, as well as promote clean energy and energy efficiency in these communities.

CEC established the [Tribal Program](#) in 2014, after the first Tribal consultation policy was passed in California.² [Executive Order B-10-11](#), issued in 2011, mandates that every state agency implement effective consultation with Tribes, of which there are 109 federally recognized in California.³ Additionally, CEC adopted a resolution in 2023 committing to support Tribal energy sovereignty and independence.⁴ The Tribal Program extends eligibility to non-federally recognized Tribes in California, widening the impact of the projects that are funded.

Through the Tribal Program, CEC aims to serve approximately 170 Tribes in California. As of 2023, CEC administers 13 programs related to research and development, transportation, renewable energy and energy efficiency, and climate efforts. For example, the [Renewable Energy for Agriculture Program](#) (REAP) incentivizes clean energy in agriculture operations. The [Clean Transportation Program](#) aims to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and dependence on petroleum through \$100 million in investments in low-carbon technologies each year.⁵ This program released the first Tribal specific funding opportunity in early 2024. To support Tribal

Fast Facts

Program scope: 13 programs invest in Tribal energy projects and research across California.

Communities served: California Native American Tribes.

Funding: Funding is legislatively directed but made as accessible as possible for California Native Tribes, prioritizing set-asides in existing programs and the development of Tribal specific funding opportunities.

Key partners: State and Federal agencies and nonprofit organizations.

Promising practices: Establish and maintain key partnerships, embed equity into all program aspects, engage with and learn from California Native American Tribes' clean energy work.

¹ California Energy Commission, 2023. [About the CEC](#).

² Katrina Leni-Konig, California Energy Commission. Personal Communication.

³ California Conservation Corps, 2020. [California Consultation Policy](#).

⁴ California Energy Commission, 2023. [CEC Adopts Resolution Supporting California Tribal Energy Sovereignty](#).

⁵ California Energy Commission. [Tribal Program](#).



climate research, California's [Fifth Climate Change Assessment Tribal Research Grant Program](#) supports energy-related projects that are deemed a priority by Tribes. Overall, CEC has funded more than \$100 million in grant programs benefiting California Native American Tribes.

Throughout the entire lifecycle of projects funded by these programs, CEC provides technical assistance to Tribes. For example, technical assistance is incorporated into various programs. One example is that the staff working on the [ECAA-Loans program](#), work with energy auditors to help Tribes maximize their energy savings.⁶ CEC also connects Tribes to other valuable resources, such as advisory committees.

Community History

In the late 18th century, the Spanish entrada traveled to San Diego to establish settlements along the California coast. The first Spanish mission on Tribal land was founded in 1769, beginning an era of tension between Tribes and Spanish settlers. The population of California Natives decreased from 310,000 to 100,000 during this time, largely due to disease, homicide, and the loss of their native environment.⁷ Struggles to reclaim Native lands and Tribal sovereignty continued into the 20th and 21st centuries, but the State of California has taken steps to work with Tribes to redistribute land and issue reparations for the dislocation and discrimination they experienced.

Today, California's Native American Tribes are located across the state, including in populous cities, rural areas, high deserts in southern California, and along the borders of other states. As of 2010, California's Native American population comprised 12 percent of the total Native American population in the United States.⁸ This large and diverse population faces unique challenges depending on the region in which they reside.

Given the historical dislocation of California Tribes, the state has committed to working with its Tribes to promote community and energy sovereignty in these communities.⁹ California Tribes are geographically diverse and have different goals and priorities, so CEC promotes a wide variety of funding opportunities in efforts to reflect this diversity.

⁶ Katrina Leni-Konig, California Energy Commission. Personal Communication.

⁷ National Park Service, 2004. [A History of American Indians in California](#).

⁸ California Tribal Court-State Court Forum. [Frequently Asked Questions: Indian Tribes and Tribal Communities in California](#).

⁹ California Energy Commission, 2023. [CEC Adopts Resolution Supporting California Tribal Energy Sovereignty](#).



Community Engagement

Based on needs identified by Tribes, CEC has set funding carveouts for specific programs that cover Tribal needs. For example, CEC set aside \$10 million for Tribes to pursue clean transportation projects¹⁰ and the [Equitable Building Decarbonization Direct Install Program](#) set aside \$30 million for Tribal recipients.¹¹

The program team hosts listening sessions to identify potential barriers for applicants and shape the application according to Tribal priorities. Additionally, the team hosts workshops and office hours with Tribes to ensure that each opportunity is accessible, and that Tribes have the information needed to apply. CEC has taken these steps to embed equity into every part of the application process, and it especially wants to ensure opportunities are inclusive before applications are even released. Through listening sessions and other interactions with Tribes, CEC also strives to make contracts for funding opportunities consistent with Tribal sovereignty.

Engagement also includes attendance at in-person Tribal events, as Tribal Program administrators believe this is the most effective way to connect with Tribes. For this reason, CEC staff and leadership regularly participate in Tribal conferences and visits where they disseminate information about funding opportunities.

Since its inception, the program has increasingly engaged environmental justice communities. The [Disadvantaged Community Advisory Group](#), among other advisory groups, has helped the program evolve to be more inclusive, fair, and effective. This advisory group, which was formed in 2015, reviews CEC's clean energy programs and policies to ensure disadvantaged communities benefit from them. Through feedback from this group, CEC adjusted its scoring criteria for funding applications to leverage and unlock more opportunities in Tribal communities. The criteria are now more reflective of CEC's goals for environmental justice and tribal work.¹⁰

Key Partners

CEC's Tribal Program partners with the following agencies to achieve its goals:

- [Office of Planning and Research](#) (OPR) – The state's comprehensive planning agency responsible for guiding land use, assessing climate risk and resilience, promoting economic development, and engaging in long-range research on key priorities.¹²

¹⁰ Katrina Leni-Konig, California Energy Commission. Personal Communication.

¹¹ California Energy Commission, 2023. [Equitable Building Decarbonization Direct Install Program Guidelines](#).

¹² California Governor's Office of Planning and Research. [About Us: Responsibilities](#).



- [California Strategic Growth Council \(SGC\)](#) – An advisory body managed by OPR that promotes equity, health, and resilience for all communities.¹³
- [Bureau of Ocean Energy Management](#) – A state agency that manages energy and mineral resources off the California coast in an environmentally and economically responsible way.¹⁴
- [California Natural Resources Agency](#) – A state agency that leads efforts to restore and enhance natural, cultural, and historical resources across the state.¹⁵

CEC values its partnerships with state agencies, especially for certain programs that are funded by other agencies. For example, SGC administered the [Tribal Government Challenge](#), which funds Tribal climate planning efforts, alongside CEC.¹⁶ These partnerships leverage the strength of each agency, and Tribes benefit from more funding opportunities as a result.

Depending on the program, other partners occasionally oversee competitive funding opportunities. For example, the [Center for Sustainable Energy](#) (CSE), a national nonprofit organization seeking rapid clean energy adoption, took on the administrator role for the [California Electric Vehicle Infrastructure Project](#) (CALeVIP) program.¹⁷ Through CALeVIP, CEC incentivizes the purchase of electric vehicle charging infrastructure. Generally, CEC has found that state funding can sometimes be distributed more rapidly with private partners leading some of the efforts.

Funding Mechanism

CEC's funding levels are set by the state legislature. The agency aims to increase set-asides and direct funding to California Native American Tribes when possible. While CEC does not have a budget specifically for the Tribal Program, the agency draws funding from across CEC's other programs to make funding accessible to California Native American Tribes.¹⁸

For this reason, funding distribution varies across the different programs. The [Tribal Specific Zero-Emission Vehicle Program](#) allocates \$10 million to California Native Tribes that apply for funding to support workforce development, energy planning, or deploy zero-emissions vehicle

¹³ California Strategic Growth Council. [Our Vision](#).

¹⁴ U.S. Bureau of Energy Ocean Management, 2022. [About BOEM](#).

¹⁵ California Natural Resources Agency. [Who We Are](#).

¹⁶ California Energy Commission. [Tribal Government Challenge](#).

¹⁷ Center for Sustainable Energy. [About Us](#).

¹⁸ Sierra Graves, California Energy Commission. Personal Communication.



infrastructure.¹⁸ This program's unique payment structure allows for upfront infrastructure costs to be paid immediately and subsequent invoicing to occur at short time intervals to limit barriers to tribes. Additionally, the Energy Conservation Assistance Act (ECAA) provides California Native American Tribes with quick access to capital through a revolving one-percent interest loan. The ECAA loan program repayments are based on energy savings, ensuring a cost-neutral payback while allowing Tribes to complete projects more quickly.¹⁹ Once the loan is approved, the recipient can be reimbursed throughout the course of the project.

CEC has faced challenges identifying and joining multiple funding streams. While funding from the ECAA program can be used as match funding for larger projects according to CEC's criteria, some federal programs have advised applicants that they may not count it as match.¹⁸ Improving funding accessibility at the state and federal levels remains a constant priority for program staff.

Program Impact

Through the Tribal Program, CEC serves all California Native American Tribes, including 109 federally recognized Tribes and over 60 non-federally recognized Tribes.¹⁸ CEC has seen significant success with its microgrid programs. It has funded eight Tribal microgrids in total. Two microgrids are among the largest energy grants provided for the benefit of California Native American Tribes. One project was implemented for the Viejas Tribe of Kumeyaay Indians. CEC awarded the Viejas Tribe \$31 million for a 60-megawatt-hour long-duration energy storage system. In the event of an emergency, this microgrid can provide renewable backup power to the Tribal community.

The Blue Lake Rancheria's microgrid project is the program's premier example of resilience. Funded by the Electric Program Investment Charge (EPIC), a public-interest research program driving clean energy innovation, this microgrid allowed a casino in Humboldt County to become independent from the grid when a 6.4 magnitude earthquake left the area without power. As a result, the microgrid recharged life-saving equipment and saved four lives. Residents could also rely on the microgrid to refuel and recharge their vehicles.

- California Energy Commission, 2023. EPIC Highlights, 2022

¹⁹ California Energy Commission, 2023. [ECAA Program Fact Sheet](#).



Barriers and Challenges

The CEC has struggled to acquire adequate funding for technical assistance, capacity building, and Tribal participation. Because state programs are typically designed for communities and organizations that have greater initial resources, it can be difficult to close funding gaps needed for technical assistance.

Recommendations from the Field

CEC recognizes that Tribal input is necessary to implement energy efficiency and clean energy projects, so its program staff engage with Tribes in a meaningful way, early and often. Tribes and Tribal communities provide their input on strategic energy plans before they are implemented. For example, CEC recently consulted with California Native American Tribes on the AB525 offshore wind strategic plan. In the process, Tribes weighed in directly to leadership and provided feedback directly to the report writers to help shape the report. This engagement strategy has proven to be very inclusive and valuable in extending the benefits of clean energy and energy efficiency projects to Tribal communities.

Additionally, CEC learns from Tribes that have already implemented clean energy and energy efficiency projects. Learning from these energy projects helps CEC understand how Tribal communities can balance energy savings, emissions reductions, and their own goals. CEC also takes advantage of opportunities to connect Tribes with each other. Through these experiences, Tribes can learn how other Tribal communities work with local governments and other partners to achieve their clean energy goals. CEC hopes to expand these efforts with increased funding access for Tribal projects in the future.

For More Information

- [California Energy Commission](#)
- [California Strategic Growth Council: Tribal Programs and Projects](#)