

How To Combat Renewable Energy Mis- and Disinformation: A Helpful Guide

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Introduction

First of all: thank you! By choosing to counter renewable energy mis- and disinformation in your community, you are taking a powerful step to support both economic growth where you live and the clean energy transition of our country as a whole.

We know that local opposition is [one of the biggest factors](#) preventing the widespread rollout of renewable energy in the U.S.—and much of this resistance is fueled by inaccurate information. Some of these inaccuracies stem from genuine misunderstandings of how these new technologies work (that's **misinformation**—false information that is spread, regardless of whether there is intent to mislead), but much of it is cynically propagated by a fossil fuel industry that is threatened by the competition (that's **disinformation**—deliberately misleading, biased or manipulated information.) This guide will teach you how to address both types of false claims.

Second: This guide will not be what you think! Most people looking for a guide like this are seeking factual arguments with which to counter the inaccuracies they are hearing within their communities. But this emphasis on "mythbusting" is the wrong approach. Researchers have found [time and again](#) that focusing on factual corrections in public rebuttals to mis- and disinformation can actually further its spread, rather than stopping it.

Instead, here's what you can expect from this guide: A list of "do's and don'ts" to follow in addressing renewable energy mis- and disinformation, and a primer on how to use a proven-effective tactic for combatting disinformation: the "truth sandwich," which lets you discredit false claims without amplifying them by wrapping your message in truth.

Combatting Renewable Energy Misinformation: Do's and Don'ts

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| <p><i>DON'T Take the Bait.</i> It's very tempting to respond to lies about clean energy projects by correcting the record: sharing facts that show those lies for what they are. But most of us don't remember the details of what we read or hear, particularly on the Internet; we remember headlines and controversies. If you're talking about whether solar panels leak chemicals into the groundwater, or whether wind turbines lower property values—even if you're talking about how those things are false—most people are just going to remember that there's some controversy about whether solar panels leak chemicals into the groundwater, and conclude that it might be a bad idea to build them. This is why factual corrections can do more harm than good in fighting mis- and disinformation.</p> | <p><i>DO Stay On Message & Keep It Local.</i> Instead of responding to the opposition's arguments in detail and accidentally spreading them in the process, spend most of your time talking about why the project would be good for your community. The strongest message communicates the real benefits the community will experience as a result of building a renewable energy project—benefits that almost everyone who lives there would agree are positive. This is also why climate change usually isn't a winning message: Unless everyone in your community agrees climate change is an important problem, it won't necessarily help motivate them to support a local solar farm. Even if they are concerned about climate change, that's a reason to build a solar farm <i>somewhere</i>, not necessarily in <i>your community</i>.</p> |
| <p><i>DON'T Get Lost in the Weeds.</i> Opponents of clean energy projects typically raise and repeat a lot of different counter-arguments all at once. This isn't an accident; it's a deliberate strategy. There are lots of different ways for projects to get delayed or blocked, and lots of different details that could trigger concerns from different groups of people who live nearby. Opponents may throw all of these details at the wall to leave an overwhelmingly negative impression that confuses and sows doubt with listeners. If you find yourself lost in the weeds, pull yourself out and pivot back to your core message—the project's local benefits!</p> | <p><i>DO Sell the Brownie, Not the Recipe.</i> (Source: Anat Shenker-Osario.) People generally don't want to know how many solar panels a project will have or how many megawatts it will produce—that would be the recipe. They usually want to know how many homes it will provide power to. Similarly, they probably don't want to know how many millions in tax dollars or voluntary payments a project will provide. They want to know what your community can do with the money—a new school building, bolstering the fire department, better roads—the benefit community members will see or feel. That's the brownie. Focus your messages on payoff, not process and policy.</p> |

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| <p><i>DON'T Get Stuck in the Mud.</i> Opponents will sometimes yell, shout people down or make personal attacks. It can be tempting to respond in the same way, but it won't help. At the end of the day, you all will have to live with each other as a community. And local officials may be less likely to go forward if they associate a project with conflict and controversy. Take the high road whenever you can. And remember: data shows that renewable energy opponents are a vocal minority. In reality, most people support these projects.</p> | <p><i>DO Name the Outside Agitators.</i> Factual arguments rarely convince people not to believe disinformation, and they run the risk of amplifying the falsehood further. Instead, whenever possible, it's most effective to show that a particular lie comes from an organization from outside your community, one that doesn't have your and your neighbors' best interests at heart. It may seem counterintuitive, but undermining the source of a particular inaccuracy is far more effective than attempting to factually disprove it in detail!</p> |
| <p><i>DON'T Get Duped.</i> There are real issues to mitigate with almost any large building projects. But overwhelmingly, clean energy can be built in a way that minimizes the negative impact on the community and environment. If you're hearing a question or concern that makes it seem like there's no possible way to build clean energy in your community, chances are good that it's not just the question of a civically engaged neighbor, but rather the strategy of someone who wants to make sure clean energy isn't built.</p> | <p><i>DO Affirm, Address & Redirect.</i> Not all of the questions and concerns about a project are disinformation. Many of them come from your neighbors, and many of your neighbors might genuinely be wrestling with what to think about the project. The best way to show respect and warmth for people, without taking the bait or getting sidetracked, is to affirm the feeling that might be motivating their question, address any immediate question it poses, and redirect to why the project is good for your community.</p> |

Putting it All Together: The “Truth Sandwich”

To unite these best practices into a single technique, consider a [proven-effective technique from linguist George Lakoff](#): the “truth sandwich.”

Research shows people tend to remember what they hear first, last, and most often, which is one reason why arguing the facts on mis- and disinformation is counterproductive. The truth sandwich lets us counter inaccuracies while minimizing the impact of repeating them. (Here's some further reading about this approach from [PBS](#) and [Poynter](#).)

Here's how to apply the truth sandwich in the renewable energy context:

1. When countering mis- and disinformation in your community, always **start with a true, shared value**. This helps establish common ground with the people putting forth the inaccuracies, making it easier for them to genuinely consider your rebuttal.
2. Next, succinctly discredit the false claim:
 - a. If you can, it's best to **name the outside source of the false claim** and show why they are not credible.
 - b. If you want, **briefly refute the claim with a quick, true fact**, without repeating or amplifying the substance of the original claim. Move on quickly to the final step.
3. Finish with a **pivot to the specific benefits your community will experience as a result of the project**. Remember to give them the brownie, not the recipe!

By starting off your counter to the mis- or disinformation with shared values, then briefly discrediting the inaccuracy and its source, and closing with how your community will in fact be bettered by this project, you'll leave listeners with an overall positive impression of the arguments in favor of renewable energy, and increased skepticism of the arguments against.

Let's try this approach out. Say you hear an opponent arguing that a wind energy proposal in your community will hurt nearby homes' property values. There's [no evidence](#) to support this claim—[studies like this one](#) have not found any consistently negative impacts on property values from nearby wind farms (or from [solar farms](#), for that matter!). The same can't be said of fossil fuel plants, which [one study found](#) can decrease nearby property values up to 7%.

This false claim can be traced to renewable energy opponent groups, who get millions in funding from Big Oil. Here are a couple of examples of truth sandwiches you could use to combat this falsehood, both with and without an outside agitator:

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| 1. Start with a true, shared value: "We all want what's best for our local economy, and we especially want to create a better future for our kids." | |
| 2a. Name the outside agitator: "A lot of these claims about wind energy come from outside groups who want to keep profiting off oil and gas rather than helping our community—and there's just no truth to what they say." | 2b. Succinctly refute the false claim: "Thankfully, studies haven't found any consistent effects on property values near wind projects like this one—while the same can't be said of fossil fuel plants." |
| 3. Move on to the important community benefit: "I'm supporting 'Our County Wind' because not only is it a good move for our local economy and a sustainable future, it's going to help us get a new school building built and will bring new supplies for our students." | |

The Bottom Line

This approach is adaptable for a range of claims and situations, whether you're chatting with a friend or speaking up at a public hearing. It's important to keep in mind that not all opponents of clean energy projects have a shady motive—far from it. Many people have genuine concerns about issues like safety or conservation. They may even support the idea of clean energy, but are hung up on specific worries about a local project. And, these worries may have been influenced by false information. Naming the outside actor behind those falsehoods, when possible, can be a powerful tool. It's up to you to decide what will resonate with your community.

Above all, **remember: don't focus on mythbusting when publicly countering mis- and disinformation.** You don't need to remember all the facts—you just need to remember the truth sandwich, and why it works. Keep your response out of the weeds and focus on local benefits. Sell the brownie, not the recipe, and don't amplify the claim by trying to unpack it in detail.

Ready to learn more? Head to our [Local Resource Hub](#), where you'll find lots of information about how solar power, on- and offshore wind energy and battery storage work—plus the truth behind common false claims and the outside groups spreading them—as well as resources that show why supporting clean energy projects in your community is so important and impactful.