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Energy & Environment

Conservative leaders launch statewide energy policy coalition

By **Becca Oken-Tatum**, June 5, 2018 at 3:00 AM



(Photo / Thinkstock)

A group of conservative leaders from across the state kicked off efforts in May to advance support for diverse energy policy in Pennsylvania. The group's goal is to amplify the right's voice on an issue that it views as monopolized by the left.

The nonprofit coalition, called the Pennsylvania Conservative Energy Forum, or **PennCEF**, supports an "all-of-the-above" approach to energy policy that promotes economic growth, new jobs and cost-effective innovative technologies, conserves natural resources and improves national security.

The forum hopes to engage Pennsylvanians who feel disenfranchised and excluded from the discussion about energy, said Chad Forcey, the coalition's executive director.

"Unfortunately, things have been so politicized in recent years that that type of conversation has fallen off," Forcey, a longtime energy organizer, said.

"When you strip away the politics and branding and just ask a voter, 'Do you support more clean and renewable energy sources?' ... 60, 70, 80 percent say yes," Forcey said.

Forcey emphasized that part of what sets PennCEF apart from energy policy organizers on the left is the belief that renewable energy markets, like wind and solar, don't have to exist at the detriment of other established energy sectors, like coal and oil. That approach, Forcey said, has alienated workers and companies in those industries. Instead, PennCEF is working to rekindle the conversation, especially with coal workers who own land and small family farms.

"We support those workers in a very difficult and challenging field ... We want to help them and give them the expertise and tax incentive for putting up renewables on their farms," Forcey said. He added that Pennsylvania's coal companies should also be open to diversification, just as some oil companies like Chevron have branched into natural gas, Forcey said.

"I'm not suggesting it's going to be easy ... They might be a little uncomfortable when they're used to seeing it on the other side of the aisle. We'll have to overcome that," Forcey said.

PennCEF aims to reconnect modern conservatives with President Teddy Roosevelt's conservatism, balancing free-market solutions with land stewardship policies, Forcey said.

Another demographic PennCEF is reaching out to is evangelicals who support conservation efforts but don't identify with the left.

"As citizens and people of faith, we are celebrating the word 'conserve,' which is inherent in the word 'conservative,'" said Rev. Mitch Hescox, a PennCEF leadership council member from York, in a statement in May. Hescox is also the president and CEO of the **Evangelical Environmental Network**, a faith-based environmental stewardship ministry.

A key principle of PennCEF's approach is improving national security by lessening dependence on foreign oil through domestically produced energy, like wind, solar and hydropower.

Colleagues in clean energy

Rob Altenburg, director of the **PennFuture** Energy Center, said he is encouraged to see a group like PennCEF stepping into the clean energy arena. PennFuture is a statewide nonpartisan environmental sustainability and clean energy nonprofit with offices in Harrisburg, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh and Northeast Pennsylvania.

Although renewable energy and energy efficiency should not be political issues, they have become just that, Altenburg said. "A segment of the population is outright anti-environmental. A lot of the rhetoric around that is political ... We're certainly happy to see organizations from all across the political spectrum talking about this issue."

Altenburg said that PennFuture is willing to collaborate with any potential partners that share its interests, PennCEF included.

Three-pronged approach

PennCEF's work will be focused in three areas. First, its leadership will work at the grassroots level, visiting individuals in hunting groups and churches and at trade shows and Republican gatherings.

Second, PennCEF leaders will work with elected officials to understand their values and start the conversation. Even though PennCEF is not an explicitly Republican organization, they hope to work across party lines, Forcey said.

"We're going to talk to anybody who wants to listen to us," Forcey said, adding that he recently had a good conversation with Pittsburgh's Democratic mayor Bill Peduto.

Forcey also cited a recent legislative success for PennCEF with Gov. Wolf's **signing of a bill** to help fund commercial energy-efficiency projects.


Finally, PennCEF's third focus will be building relationships with the leaders of the major sectors that have a stake in the organization's work, like farm bureaus, gun and hunting organizations and the press.

PennCEF's leadership council is made up of a range of conservative voices, from businesspeople to clergy, all from Pennsylvania, including:

- Chad Forcey, executive director of PennCEF
- John Easoz, president of Solar PV Consulting and CEO of **Direct Gain Consulting, LLC**
- Tom Stevenson, partner at **Green Roads Solar Energy & Iceburgh Associates**
- Rev. Mitch Hescox, president and CEO of the Evangelical Environmental Network
- Ron Gdovic, president and CEO of **WindStax**
- Brian Kennedy, senior vice president of operations and government affairs for the **Pittsburgh Technology Council**
- David Jason, another partner at Green Roads
- Mark DeSantis, CEO of **RoadBotics**
- Jim Seif, consultant and board member of **BioChem Technology Inc.**

In its early stages, PennCEF receives most of its funding from donors to the **Conservative Energy Network**, a national clean energy policy network with about 20 member states. As it establishes itself, PennCEF will grow in membership, Forcey said.

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