

Utah State University

DigitalCommons@USU

---

Utah People and Environment Poll (UPEP)

Community and Natural Resources Institute

---

10-2023

## Utahns Strongly Support Renewable Energy Sources Such as Solar and Wind

Elizabeth Brunner

*Utah State University*, [elizabeth.brunner@usu.edu](mailto:elizabeth.brunner@usu.edu)

Stacia Ryder

*Utah State University*, [stacia.ryder@usu.edu](mailto:stacia.ryder@usu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/canri\\_projects](https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/canri_projects)



Part of the [Natural Resources Management and Policy Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Brunner, Elizabeth & Stacia Ryder. 2023. "Utahns Strongly Support Renewable Energy Sources Such as Solar and Wind" Research Brief # 2023-3. *Utah People and Environment Poll*.

This Report is brought to you for free and open access by the Community and Natural Resources Institute at DigitalCommons@USU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Utah People and Environment Poll (UPEP) by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@USU. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@usu.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@usu.edu).





## Utahns Strongly Support Renewable Energy Sources Such as Solar and Wind

Elizabeth Brunner & Stacia Ryder

Utah was the fastest-growing state in the nation by population between 2010 and 2020.<sup>1</sup> This growing population is bringing increased demand for energy. The build out of Utah’s electric vehicle (EV) infrastructure, with the state aiming to site electric vehicle charging stations at least every 50 miles along its interstate highway system by the end of 2025, will also increase energy demand. This growth will equate to increased carbon emissions if Utah does not change its electricity mix, which is currently composed of primarily carbon-emitting sources. As of 2022 (see Figure 1), 53% of Utah’s total electricity net generation came from coal, 26% from natural gas, and 16% from renewable energy sources, primarily solar power.<sup>1</sup>

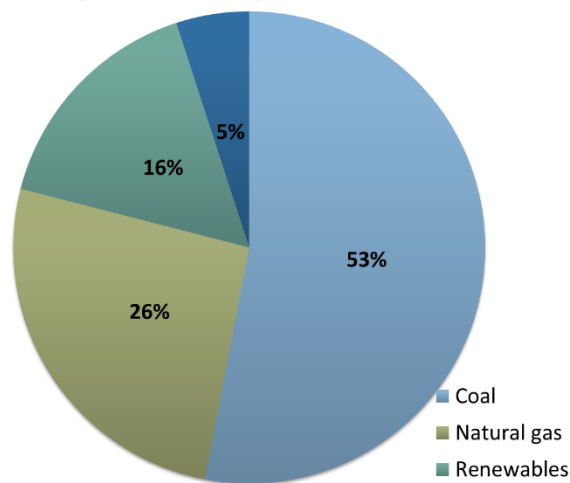
The state is, however, taking some action to transition to renewables in response to new federal laws. In 2023, Utah passed a bill (H.B. 426) that requires the Office of Energy Development to prepare a strategic energy plan. Utah also has a renewable portfolio goal requiring all electric utilities to pursue renewable energy when cost-effective. Utah power providers are taking more aggressive steps. PacifiCorp (parent company of Rocky Mountain Power) are seeking to increase wind and solar energy production and reduce 70% of greenhouse gas emissions by 2030. They are also exploring the possibility of siting advanced nuclear projects near retiring coal plants.

Given these demographic changes and the need to reduce carbon emissions, this brief examines Utahns’ views on energy and the environment, including support or opposition to different energy sources, using data from the 2023 Utah People and Environment Poll (UPEP).

### KEY FINDINGS

- In a representative statewide survey, just over half of respondents (55%) agreed that growing energy needs pose a threat to Utah’s natural environment.
- Residents indicated significant support for renewable energy projects, with solar (73%) and wind (72%) the most popular.
- Only 39% of respondents were willing to pay more for carbon-free electricity sources.

Figure 1 Utah’s Energy Generation Mix



Source: U.S. Energy Administration



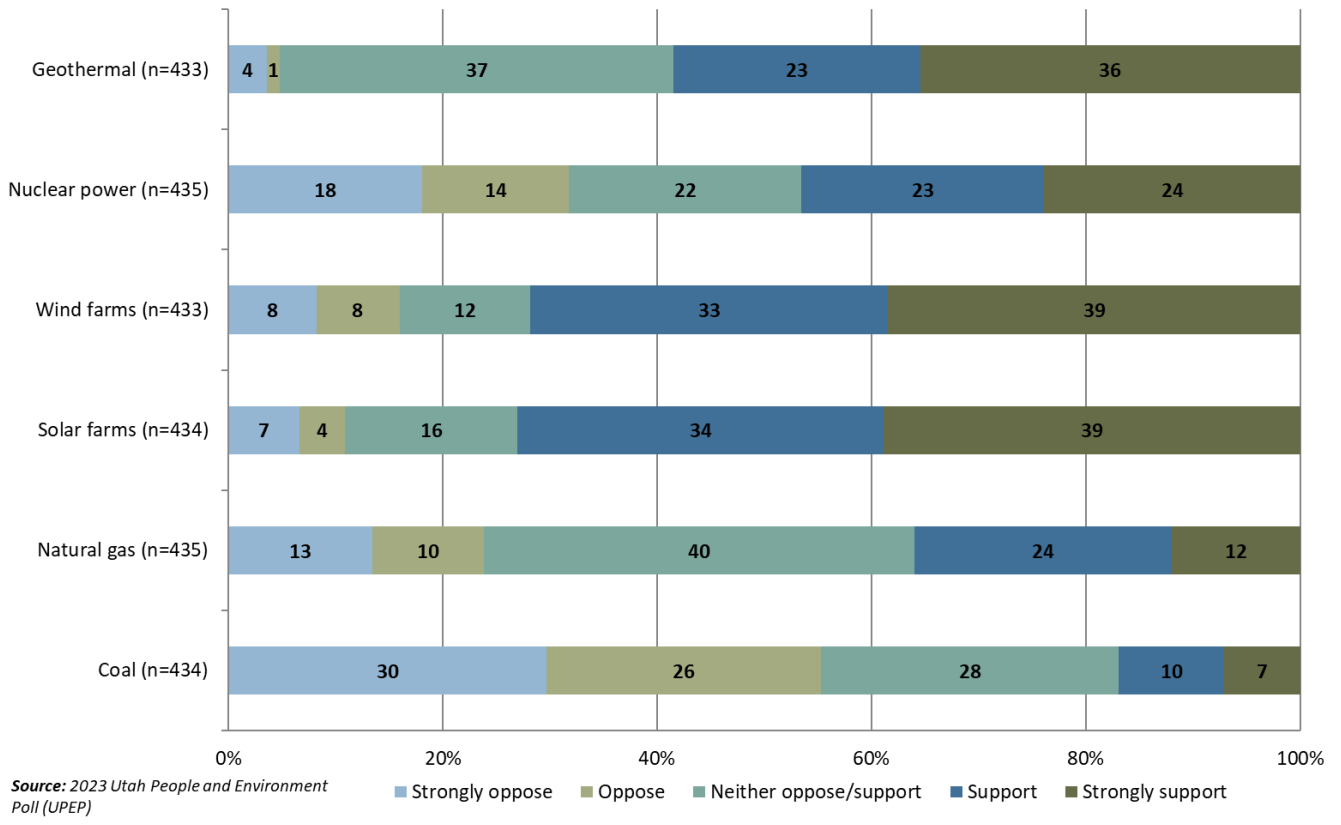
## What do Utahns think about energy and the environment?

Just over half of respondents (55%) indicated they agreed that growing energy needs pose a threat to Utah’s natural environment and marginally more (58%) agreed that transitioning to carbon pollution-free energy sources would lessen the negative impacts of climate change. However, fewer (40%) were willing to pay more for carbon-free electricity sources, despite Utah being in the bottom five for energy costs in the United States. Access to carbon pollution-free energy sources was important to only half of respondents (50%).

## Do Utahns support clean energy projects?

More than half of respondents (55%) opposed coal-fired power plants in their area. Respondents were rather neutral about natural gas power plants, with 40% neither supporting nor opposing them. Renewables sited in their area garnered the greatest support with 73% supporting solar, 72% wind, 59% geothermal, and 47% nuclear. Many respondents indicated they neither support nor oppose geothermal (37%) and nuclear (22%), possibly indicating a need for greater education about these technologies.

**Figure 2** Utahns' Support and Opposition to Energy Projects or Policies in their Local Areas





## Conclusions

As Utah seeks to make the transition to more carbon pollution-free energy sources, it will need to site new electricity generation projects. Doing so will present challenges unique to the state. For example, approximately 71% of Utah consists of public lands managed by federal or state agencies, including five national parks, seven national monuments, and 43 state parks (the latter of which alone total over 95,000 acres). Acquiring approval to expand transmission and distribution lines across protected lands can take decades, which will impact where Utah can efficiently site energy projects. Thus, understanding which energy projects are supported can help government representatives and utilities make more informed decisions about which energy options to pursue. It can also help identify where more education and outreach is needed to inform voters about the benefits and risks associated with each technology. Ensuring that the public is meaningfully included and risk concerns are adequately addressed can increase public support, which can help projects to move forward more smoothly. Understanding to what degree Utahns associate energy generation with adverse impacts on the environment will also be helpful to nonprofits and advocacy groups seeking to help Utahns better understand the link between electricity consumption and climate change impacts.

## Data and Methods

In spring 2023, Utah State University (USU) faculty and students started the Utah People and Environment Poll, or UPEP, to track Utahns' perceptions on environmental issues of importance to the state to help inform policy to address environmental issues. A random sample of 3,750 households were contacted using postal mail to respond to the survey online or on paper. 441 individuals responded to the survey for a final total response rate of 12%. Weights for survey design and to adjust for age, education, and gender representation are applied. To access other briefs and learn more about the UPEP, please visit: <https://chass.usu.edu/sociology/canri/upep>

## About CANRI

The Community and Natural Resources Institute, or [CANRI](#), produces and promotes interdisciplinary and applied social science and humanities research focused on challenges at the intersection of people and the environment in the Intermountain West.

## Acknowledgements

Funding for the UPEP was provided by the USU College of Humanities and Social Sciences (CHaSS), the USU Mountain West Center for Regional Studies, and [Made by Fell](#). We would also like to thank Jessica Schad and Jennifer Givens for their exemplar leadership on this project.

## About the Authors

**Elizabeth Brunner** ([elizabeth.brunner@usu.edu](mailto:elizabeth.brunner@usu.edu)) is a Visiting Assistant Professor in Communication Studies at Utah State University.

**Stacia Ryder** ([stacia.ryder@usu.edu](mailto:stacia.ryder@usu.edu)) is an Assistant Professor in Sociology at Utah State University.

## Suggested Citation

Brunner, Elizabeth & Stacia Ryder. 2023. "Utahns Strongly Support Renewable Energy Sources Such as Solar and Wind" Research Brief # 2023-3. *Utah People and Environment Poll*.

## References

1. U.S. Energy Information Administration 2023. "Utah State Profile and Energy Estimates." Washington, DC: U.S. Energy Information Administration. Retrieved October 24, 2023 (<https://www.eia.gov/state/analysis.php?sid=UT>).
2. Shaw, Karena, Stephen D. Hill, Amanda D. Boyd, Lindsay Monk, Joanna Reid, and Edna F. Einsiedel. 2015. "Conflicted or constructive? Exploring community responses to new energy developments in Canada." *Energy Research & Social Science* 8:41-51.