

## Column: Expand clean energy with federal help

By Brian Kealoha • Jan. 23, 2022 • Updated 2:11 pm

Since Hawaii made history in 2015 as the first U.S. state to mandate 100% renewable energy by 2045, much of the focus has been on achieving this aggressive goal and the milestones leading to it. Now, the impending retirement of Oahu's AES coal plant in September has increased the urgency to find solutions that won't leave Honolulu County residents in the dark.

The Hawaii Public Utilities Commission (PUC) has asked industry parties to present innovative and actionable projects that will ease our island's energy burden. In our role administering clean energy programs in the islands, Hawai'i Energy is stepping up our efforts to decrease energy usage through efficiency measures and incentives.

With the recent passage of the federal Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) this past November, our team has carefully analyzed the bill, looking for opportunities that Hawaii can capitalize on. Billions of federal dollars are now on the table to support infrastructure improvements, including clean energy and transportation. This may very well be one of the most significant opportunities to drive clean energy initiatives across our state. And we are fortunate that Hawaii has a number of state and local programs able to deploy these funds

Some of the money coming to us will be on an allocation basis, such as the Weatherization Assistance Program which increases energy efficiency and reduces energy costs for low-income households by hundreds of dollars every year.

On the transportation front, there will be \$5 billion available to states through the Electric Vehicle (EV) Formula Program. This money will go directly to the state Department of Transportation for the deployment of EV charging infrastructure. The timing is opportune to continue the momentum from the Legislature's passing of EV-focused bills last year, including more funding for the EV charging rebate, a program that we at Hawai'i Energy administer.

The IIJA also includes competitive grants that could provide even more funding to Hawaii beyond our state's allotment. This includes the Energy Efficiency Materials Pilot Program, which is offering \$50 million in grants to nonprofit organizations to upgrade their buildings with energy-efficient equipment.

We know firsthand how grants can spur efficiency projects and create energy-saving opportunities for organizations that wouldn't be able to cover the costs on their own. In late 2020, Hawai'i Energy launched our own grant program as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic's economic impact on small businesses and nonprofits, providing \$2 million in grants to 210 unique organizations for a total of 271 energy efficiency projects. We are currently implementing our second year of the grant program, which drew more than 200 applicants.

Another IIJA competitive grant that we've taken note of is the Grants for Energy Efficiency Improvements and Renewable Energy Improvements at Public School Facilities, with \$500 million allotted for public schools to make repairs or renovations that directly reduce energy costs, including renewable generation.

We encourage Hawaii businesses and nonprofits to take a serious look at the opportunities the IIJA offers to expand clean energy programs and initiatives across the islands. Our team has compiled a list of IIJA clean energy and transportation funding opportunities on our website at [HawaiiEnergy.com/Federal-Funding](https://HawaiiEnergy.com/Federal-Funding). We also are tracking the federal Build Back Better bill, which included additional funding for clean energy; although the omnibus bill has stalled, important portions still could be passed.

What we need now is for stakeholders to partner in submitting the best applications to secure funding for Hawaii. Let's channel much-needed federal dollars to our state so we're better positioned to address urgent energy needs and continue the pathway toward our 100% clean energy goals.

**Brian Kealoha is executive director of Hawaii Energy, the state's Public Benefits Fund administrator, that focuses on energy-efficiency education and clean-energy initiatives.**

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**Correction:** An earlier version of this column misidentified Hawaii Energy as a state agency, which it is not.



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