



TIPS FOR DEALING WITH THE MEDIA

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INTRODUCTION

Solar is a hot topic and co-ops are increasingly being asked more questions about it. Hopefully you already are educating your members about solar and how it may impact them and their electric bill. With Amendment 4 on the ballot in August and Amendment 1 on the ballot in November, you also need to be prepared to deal with the media on solar issues. With an issue like renewable generation, specifically solar energy, it is imperative to stay focused on delivering a message free of speculation and personal opinion. **One must stick strictly to the facts.** This guide is primarily designed to help you in dealing with the media, but these concepts can help when dealing with hostile members as well.

Amendments 1 and 4 are Constitutional amendments that both deal with solar power. The co-ops support Amendment 1 and are neutral on Amendment 4. The amendments will appear on separate ballots, with Amendment 4 coming up first on the primary ballot Aug. 30 and Amendment 1 appearing on the general ballot Nov. 8. Brief summaries of each amendment are below. We are only working to educate our members generally about solar until after Aug. 30 to avoid any confusion about the amendments, and we will begin advocating for Amendment 1 on September 1 (please refer to the “Rules of the Road” document). However, the media and the public are intensely interested in and supportive of renewables, and we want you to be informed in case you need to respond to questions about either amendment before August 30. Below the amendment summaries are a suggested positioning statement, overall themes, key messages, media tips, and some questions to anticipate with potential responses.

A. Amendment Summaries

Amendment 1, also called Smart Solar, will be on the Nov. 8 ballot. This is a citizen’s petition that more than 700,000 Floridians signed in order for it to be placed on the ballot. Amendment 1 has three components. First, it creates a constitutional right for consumers to own or lease solar equipment on their property to generate electricity for their own use. Second, it ensures that State and local governments retain their powers to enforce reasonable health, safety, and welfare regulations for solar generation, including safety standards and regulations designed to prevent fraud, abuse, and overcharging. Third, it allows State and local governments to ensure that everyone who uses the electric grid helps pay to maintain it—including big, for-profit solar companies. A primary driver of Amendment 1 is the need to protect the public from the attempts by the solar industry to avoid “reasonable health, safety, and welfare regulations” of non-utility solar generators. Amendment 1 has several supporters, but the primary proponent is a group called Consumers for Smart Solar.

Amendment 4 will be on the Aug. 30 ballot. This is a legislative initiative that would exempt commercial renewable generators (such as solar) from property taxes. Note that residential renewable generation is already exempt from these taxes. There are several supporters of this amendment, but two organizations pushing for passage are Florida for Solar and Floridians 4 Lower Energy Costs.

B. Premise Statement (Your positioning statement for the interview.)

“Florida’s electric co-ops support solar programs that are affordable and safely integrated into the grid”.

Note: Whenever possible you should use your co-op name. For example, a premise statement for XYZ Electric Cooperative would be:

“XYZ Electric Cooperative supports solar programs that are safely and affordably integrated into the grid”.

The Premise Statement is a component of the Message Triangle, which is a tool containing key points to help you bridge back to your message if a reporter gets you off track. The Message Triangle is a separate, concise reference document included with the other solar documents.

C. Overall Themes (Extension of your premise, overall points of awareness.)

Florida’s electric cooperatives are committed to ensuring the delivery of safe, affordable, reliable power by ...

1. **Safety.** Following safety regulations and taking all other necessary precautions to protect our cooperative’s consumer-owners, linemen, first responders, and the public.
2. **Affordable/Cost Fairness.** Co-ops strive to keep electric rates as low as possible, and to operate in accordance with the seven cooperative principles, to ensure fairness to all consumer-owners of the cooperative from a cost causation point of view.
3. **Reliability.** Your co-op spends significant time and resources to protect, maintain, and re-engineer the power grid to insure reliability.

SOLAR DONE RIGHT



D. Key Messages (Brief phrase to support your premise in bold, with an explanation.)

1. **When considering the installation of rooftop solar, a strong emphasis must be placed on safety, integrity of the grid, and fairness in terms of cost to all consumer-owners.** Any time generation is connected to the grid, the safety of cooperative employees, consumer-owners, and the general public must be given top priority. When generation is owned by a co-op consumer-owner, the installation must meet certain requirements to allow [co-op name] to maintain the integrity of the electric grid and minimize the costs to other consumer-owners.
2. **Florida's electric cooperatives are committed to delivering safe, reliable, and affordable power to our consumer-owners. We monitor available technologies that may be beneficial to meeting the needs of our consumer-owners.** Several renewable resources are currently being monitored to determine if they can be economically incorporated into a reliable energy mix. Solar and other renewables have some very beneficial attributes, but they also have significant drawbacks that must be considered as we strive to responsibly meet the needs of our members. A key limitation of solar is that it is available to produce electricity only when weather conditions permit and the sun is shining, and the options for storing electricity are both limited and expensive. Without affordable storage capability, solar energy is not available during peak demand periods such as early winter mornings and summer evenings. Members that own or lease solar generation rely on [co-op name] to provide backup power for solar generation during these times and on days when it is rainy or cloudy, and there is a cost for the co-op to provide this service.

Additional key message for cooperatives currently using or pursuing renewable resources

3. **Electric cooperatives and their consumer-owners realize the importance of renewable resources. Cooperatives are investing in new technologies to contribute to a cleaner environment.** Electric cooperatives realize that all electric generation has environmental impacts. Electric cooperatives want to be part of the solution and are investing in solar and other new technologies that have less impact to the environment than other generation options. For example, at [co-op name] we have invested in ...[discuss renewable programs that your co-op/G&T is promoting].

E. Key Media Principles:

1. When answering any question from a reporter, always use the question as an opportunity to bridge to your premise statement and key messages.
2. **Remember to never parrot the negative.** It's easy to do so during the heat of an interview, so practice and anticipate questions you may be asked. Quite often those questions represent an opposing view and you don't want to be quoted repeating their statement. Instead, use it as an opportunity to get your message out.

3. Whenever possible, keep your responses to less than 30 seconds. Broadcast reporters are most likely to use sound bites of 15 seconds or less and print quotes that average about 40 words. Keep your message concise.
4. Insert your specific co-op data when appropriate to lend credibility to your statements, especially when quoting figures.
5. **Before answering any questions from the media, STOP and ask some key questions:**
 - What is your deadline, how much lead-time do you need to meet it, and what is the subject of the interview?
 - If it is a 5 o'clock deadline, what is the latest time they can conduct the interview? Remember, the reporter will have to draft the article to prepare to meet the deadline.
 - If possible, always try to buy time. This will allow you to prepare mentally for the interview.
 - Have an idea of how long the interview should last and try to stick to it, especially if you are dealing with a hostile reporter.
 - Find out if/when this piece be published (or broadcasted)?
 - Figure out who is the expected/intended audience of the publication/outlet with which you are speaking. (Only if not familiar with the publication, station, etc.)

Occasionally, a print reporter may also give you the opportunity to e-mail your responses. You can request that option, but be careful. Make sure you frame it as a “convenience” to the reporter. Reporters want accurate information, yet they don’t want to be told how they must ask you the questions in order to get a response. You may try something like, “Would it be helpful to you if I e-mailed you responses to the questions? Or would you prefer to conduct an actual interview?”

F. General Media Tips

1. **Do no harm.** How many times have you seen a public figure get into trouble over a media misstep? Failing to plan is planning to fail. Practice interviewing and learn the messages. Preventing unforced errors is one thing everyone can take part in.
2. **Is the interview being recorded?** If you are being interviewed by phone, the reporter is required by law to tell you when you are being recorded. If you’re not certain, you should ask. Also, consider recording the interview on your own in case you need to rebut inaccuracies, but be sure to inform the reporter he is being recorded.
3. **Begin with the basics.** Begin at a basic level. Avoid industry technical jargon; explain special terms or acronyms if you must use them.
4. **Take control of the interview.** **Control** is a key word in planning for a successful interview. Don’t sit back and hope the reporter will ask the right questions — take control. Work your key messages into the interview early.

5. **Stick to your main points.** Know your message and stick to it. Repetition builds definition, so bridge back to your key points whenever possible. Don't allow yourself to get drawn off on tangents. Most people make the mistake of talking too much. Answer questions but steer the conversation back to what you want to get across.
6. **Don't overestimate a reporter's knowledge of your subject.** When a reporter bases a question on information you believe is incorrect, do not hesitate to set the record straight. Offer background information when necessary.
7. **Confused by the question?** If you do not understand a question, ask for clarification rather than talking around it. If you do not have an answer, say so. Tell the reporter where to find the information, if possible.
8. **There is no such thing as "off the record".** If you state something to a reporter, be prepared to see it in the news.
9. **Learn the reporter's name.** Using the interviewer's first name positions you as a warm, caring, and courteous individual. In contrast, addressing the reporter by his/her surname may suggest coldness or stiffness. In broadcast interviews, this can resonate to the audience and create an artificial barrier, which is not what you want.
10. **Play offense and defense.** It is not enough to simply provide key messages, be prepared to defend them. Attacks may come during an interview, but are more likely from the opposition or hostile media outlets. Be prepared not only to promote the co-op's messages, but to defend them as well.
11. **Recognize crises.** If there is a situation brewing in co-op territory, take action quickly. Don't fall into a "paralysis of analysis" loop that prevents action. There are professionals available at Statewide to help deal with potential crises that can play out in the media.
12. **Know what is happening in the news.** It is important to know what's in the media that day. Is there a reason why this particular reporter picked today to call your electric cooperative? Knowing what is happening in the media can help you anticipate questions and responses.
13. **Don't feel obligated to take a cold call interview.** If you are not prepared to do the interview, tell them you are busy and ask if you can get back to them later.

G. Questions to Anticipate

The issue of renewable resources and the role they play in meeting generation needs is a hot topic among consumer-owners, the media, legislators, etc. Because of this issue's environmental component you are more likely to find that questions may be posed in a sharper tone — perhaps even with a tone of interrogation. It is critical that we speak with a consistent message. Stick to your premise statement and back up that statement with key messages when appropriate. Do not let yourself be led down a path of giving an answer that forces you into drawing conclusions or giving answers you may not be comfortable providing to the reporter.

Listed below are some potential questions and answers members of the media may ask. Remember, ***stick to the facts***. Do not speculate on how other utility providers will respond to including solar generation as part of their energy mix. And, ***never*** repeat a negative question in your answer – it may end up being the five-second sound bite the reporter uses.

SAMPLE QUESTIONS AND RESPONSES

The following examples provide sample questions a reporter may ask, along with potential responses. The “wrong” answers, while a bit dramatic, illustrate how easily a co-op representative can be thrown off key message tracks. Often a wrong answer can have some factual accuracy, but have an incorrect tone, or leading point. Sometimes, the key is not in what you say, but instead how you say it. Below, where possible, we’ve flagged what is “wrong” with some answers.

QUESTION: WHY ARE CO-OPS AGAINST SOLAR POWER?

WRONG Answer: *The electric cooperatives are against solar energy because it isn’t reliable and it is expensive. If consumers were forced to rely on solar to cool their homes in the summer, they would often be without air conditioning. Unlike more traditional generation sources, such as coal, solar is not available 24/7.*

[Wrong, because the negative is repeated and makes the co-ops sound anti-solar, and never mention coal. If you must reference coal/natural gas then use terms like “traditional energy resources”.]

Better Answer: *Florida’s electric cooperatives support generation that is safe, reliable, cost-effective, and environmentally responsible. Sometimes solar can meet those conditions.*

QUESTION: WHY DO YOU STILL USE COAL?

WRONG Answer: *Coal is the cheapest power source and we have an ample domestic supply. Also, global warming may or may not be occurring, and even if it is, who knows what is causing it.*

[Wrong, because the answer is not illustrating how co-ops are moving forward and planning for their future energy needs.]

Better Answer: *Electric cooperatives realize that all electric generation has environmental impacts, including solar and wind. We select environmentally responsible options that also keep electric rates as low as possible. Florida’s co-ops have no plans to build additional coal plants. We plan to continue using our existing power plants throughout their useful life to avoid economic hardship for our consumer-owners. All of our power plants that use traditional energy resources have state-of-the-art environmental control technologies. As part of our continued commitment to the environment, Florida’s electric cooperatives are involved in numerous large- and small-scale solar projects. As solar energy continues to become more affordable and energy storage technology advances, we will be able to add more of these resources to our system.*

QUESTION: WHY ARE THE ELECTRIC CO-OPS NOT SUPPORTING AMENDMENT 4?

WRONG Answer: *Amendment 4 will encourage more solar and subsidies between our consumer-owners. Amendment 4 will probably force the co-ops to build more peaking generation to back up the solar generation. All in all, it may save the consumer-owners some money in taxes, but will result in other consumer-owners having higher rates to accommodate those that use solar.*

[Wrong, because it makes co-ops appear to be against solar and incentives.]

Better Answer: *[Co-op name] is committed to delivering safe, affordable, and reliable power to our consumer-owners. As part of this commitment, [Co-op name] is tracking new technologies and policies that can benefit our consumer-owners' needs. Amendment 4 appears to offer a benefit to our non-residential owner-consumers interested in solar and to [co-op name] on future solar projects. However, we have not taken a position on Amendment 4 because we do not yet know how the local governments plan to make up for the tax revenues that they will lose on commercial solar generation.*

QUESTION: WHY ARE THE ELECTRIC CO-OPS BACKING AMENDMENT 1?

WRONG Answer: *Co-ops are backing Amendment 1 because it eliminates the headaches that come along with solar. Solar is a problem and Amendment 1 is a solution.*

Better Answer: *[Co-op name] supports solar programs that are affordable and safely integrated into the grid. In addition to safety and affordability, other features such as consumer protection are important to [co-op name]. There are several special interest groups that want to exempt non-utility solar generation from "reasonable health, safety, and welfare" regulations, including consumer protections. We believe our members should not have to sacrifice safety or financial peace of mind to have solar power and that is why [co-op name] supports Amendment 1.*

QUESTION: ALL AMENDMENT 1 APPEARS TO DO IS KEEP THE STATUS QUO. ARE ELECTRIC CO-OPS ONLY INTERESTED IN PROTECTING THEIR BUSINESS INTERESTS?

WRONG Answer: *Yes, status quo will help protect our business model and Amendment 1 protects the status quo. Supporting Amendment 1 will ensure that special interests cannot dictate how we run our co-op.*

[Wrong, because it sound anti-solar and does not explain what Amendment 1 does to protect our consumer-owners]

Better Answer: *[Co-name] supports solar, but it must be done right. Amendment 1 would accomplish many things that benefit our consumer-owners. For instance, ensuring the safety measures that protect our consumer-owners, linemen, first responders, and the general public are kept in place. Amendment 1 also would guarantee Floridians the right to own or lease solar panels. It seems each year special interests try to force policies on consumers that could affect this right. Amendment 1 also would make sure that local and state governments can protect consumers from predatory practices.*

The amendment would allow State and local governments to ensure that everyone who uses the electric grid helps pay to maintain it—including big, for-profit, out-of-state solar companies. [Co-op name] does not believe our consumer-owners should have to sacrifice safety or financial peace of mind to have solar power and that is why [co-op name] believes the protections in Amendment 1 need to be added to Florida's Constitution.

QUESTION: **WON'T AMENDMENT 1 REQUIRE CONSUMERS USING THEIR OWN SOLAR POWER TO PAY SPECIAL FEES FOR ACCESS TO THE SOLAR GRID?**

WRONG Answer: *Yes, they need to make up for the unfair subsidies that result from net-metering.*

Better Answer: *The amendment would preserve the state and local government's ability to ensure that consumers who don't opt to install solar equipment aren't required to subsidize the cost of backup power and electric grid access for those who do install solar.*

QUESTION: **WHY ARE CO-OPS SO NEGATIVE ABOUT SOLAR ENERGY?**

WRONG Answer: *Solar power is expensive and causes many problems for the co-op because it is intermittent.*

Better Answer: *Florida's electric cooperatives, including [co-op name], continue to monitor and carefully analyze our energy situation. We are proactively examining the best solutions to ensure long-term, reliable, and affordable energy for our consumer-owners. We must continue to recognize the need to proactively diversify our energy portfolio by balancing consumers' supply and demand. We expect that solar will be part of the long-term solution. To reliably meet the needs of our consumers, we must acknowledge the pros and cons of all energy resources. Currently there are limitations with solar energy including the fact that it can't be stored cost-effectively. Therefore, it usually is not available when it is needed most.*

QUESTION: ISN'T SOLAR POWER MORE COST-EFFECTIVE THAN BUILDING NEW POWER PLANTS? ISN'T THE ANSWER RIGHT HERE IN OUR OWN BACK YARD IN THE "SUNSHINE STATE"?

WRONG Answer: No, and it still doesn't solve the problem of supplying Florida's future generation needs. Although we may be called the Sunshine State, we are really the partly cloudy state. Solar isn't reliable nor does it generate when we reach our daily peak. That's why we need to build more generation.

[Wrong, too negative of a tone.]

Better Answer: *Florida's electric cooperatives are committed to responsibly delivering safe, reliable, and cost effective power to our consumer-owners. We constantly monitor available technologies that may be beneficial to meeting the needs of our consumer-owners. Several renewable resources, including wind and solar currently, are being monitored to determine if they can be part of a reliable energy mix. And while some solutions may have cost benefits, there are other issues, such as reliability.*

While there are some benefits associated with solar energy, it also has limitations that must be considered as we strive to responsibly meet the needs of our consumer-owners. One of those issues involves storage. At this time, the technology to cost-effectively store solar power for future use has not been developed. Without this storage capability, it is often impossible to totally rely on solar as an energy source during peak demand periods. Because the sun doesn't shine when it rains, or during early morning and evening hours when home energy usage is high, traditional generation is still needed to provide around-the-clock power.

H. Quick-Reference for Common Questions

The previous section had thorough answers, along with examples of what not to say. This section is a quick-reference guide for when you need to immediately answer a question.

QUESTION: WHY ARE CO-OPS AGAINST SOLAR POWER?

Answer: *Florida's electric cooperatives support generation that is safe, reliable, cost-effective, and environmentally responsible. Sometimes solar can meet those conditions.*

QUESTION: WHY DO YOU STILL USE COAL?

Answer: *Electric cooperatives realize that all electric generation has environmental impacts, including solar and wind. We select environmentally responsible options that also keep electric rates as low as possible. Florida's co-ops have no plans to build additional coal plants. We plan to continue using our existing power plants throughout their useful life to avoid economic hardship for our consumer-owners. All of our power plants that use traditional energy resources have state-of-the-art environmental control technologies. As part of our continued commitment to the environment, Florida's electric cooperatives are involved in numerous large- and small-scale solar projects. As solar energy continues to become more affordable and energy storage technology advances, we will be able to add more of these resources to our system.*

QUESTION: WHY ARE THE ELECTRIC CO-OPS NOT SUPPORTING AMENDMENT 4?

Answer: *Amendment 4 appears to offer a benefit to our non-residential owner-consumers interested in solar and to [co-op name] on future solar projects. However, we have not taken a position on Amendment 4 because we do not yet know how the local governments plan to make up for the tax revenues that they will lose on commercial solar generation.*

QUESTION: WHY ARE THE ELECTRIC CO-OPS BACKING AMENDMENT 1?

Answer: *There are several special interest groups that want to exempt non-utility solar generation from "reasonable health, safety, and welfare" regulations, including consumer protections. We believe our members should not have to sacrifice safety or financial peace of mind to have solar power and that is why [co-op name] supports Amendment 1*

QUESTION: ALL AMENDMENT 1 APPEARS TO DO IS KEEP THE STATUS QUO. ARE ELECTRIC CO-OPS ONLY INTERESTED IN PROTECTING THEIR BUSINESS INTERESTS?

Answer: *[Co-op name] supports solar, but it must be done right. Amendment 1 would accomplish many things that benefit our consumer-owners. For instance, ensuring the safety measures that protect our consumer-owners, linemen, first responders, and the general public are kept in place. Amendment 1 also would guarantee Floridians the right to own or lease solar panels, which is good for our consumer-owners.*

QUESTION: WON'T AMENDMENT 1 REQUIRE CONSUMERS USING THEIR OWN SOLAR POWER TO PAY SPECIAL FEES FOR ACCESS TO THE SOLAR GRID?

Answer: *The amendment would preserve the state and local government's ability to ensure that consumers who don't opt to install solar equipment aren't required to subsidize the cost of backup power and electric grid access for those who do install solar.*

QUESTION: WHY ARE CO-OPS SO NEGATIVE ABOUT SOLAR ENERGY?

Answer: *We expect that solar will be part of our long-term solution. However, to reliably meet the needs of our consumers, we must acknowledge the pros and cons of all energy resources. Currently there are limitations with solar energy, including the fact that it can't be stored cost-effectively. Therefore, it usually is not available when it is needed most.*

QUESTION: ISN'T SOLAR POWER MORE COST-EFFECTIVE THAN BUILDING NEW POWER PLANTS? ISN'T THE ANSWER RIGHT HERE IN OUR OWN BACK YARD IN THE "SUNSHINE STATE"?

Answer: *While there are some benefits associated with solar energy, it also has limitations that must be considered as we strive to responsibly meet the needs of our consumer-owners. One of those issues involves storage. At this time, the technology to cost-effectively store solar power for future use has not been developed. Without this storage capability, it is often impossible to totally rely on solar as an energy source during peak demand periods.*