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by Julie Anderson

### **Celebrated Biden-era EPA grants frozen by Trump and then restored**

The Environmental Protection Agency's regional office says Nebraska recipients now can access nearly \$370 million in greenhouse gas reductions grants the agency awarded last year under the Inflation Reduction Act — though state officials have not yet received official notice that funding is restored.

Disbursement of the funds was paused last month. The largest share of the funds, \$307 million, was awarded to the Nebraska Department of Environment and Energy to finance projects aimed at reducing emissions, particularly in the state's agricultural sector, while bolstering the state's economy.

Nebraska Gov. Jim Pillen had hailed the award, which a top EPA official said would help the ag industry tap a growing market for goods produced in more sustainable ways, as a "once in a lifetime, extraordinary opportunity." The award was announced in August at a farm near Omaha.

The Center for Rural Affairs was awarded \$62 million to make solar energy more accessible and affordable for residential customers across the state and help grow the industry in Nebraska.

### **Conflicting information, uncertainty about federal grants**

An NDEE spokeswoman said in an email Friday that federal agencies had been directed in President Donald Trump's Jan. 20 executive order Unleashing American Energy to immediately pause disbursement of funds appropriated through the Inflation Reduction Act pending a 90-day review of program alignment with the administration priorities.

The agency paused work on what's known as ONE RED, a package of voluntary programs with incentives for producers, while awaiting guidance from the EPA on its status.

When asked about the status of the review, the regional EPA spokesman said in an email Monday that the agency had "worked expeditiously" to enable payment accounts for Inflation Reduction Act and Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act grant recipients, "so funding is now accessible to all recipients."

The NDEE spokesperson said Tuesday, however, that the agency had not yet received communication from EPA regarding the status of the award.

Laura Strimple, a Pillen spokesperson, said regarding the funding situation: "While Nebraska is keenly focused on getting its fair share of federal funding, the state recognizes the importance of ensuring that the federal government is identifying necessary funding sources that are best utilized toward balancing the nation's budget."

Brian Depew, the Center for Rural Affairs' executive director, said funds awarded to the nonprofit organization through the Solar for All program were unfrozen in the federal payment portal Thursday.

That's an improvement, he said. But the organization never received an explanation for why the funds were frozen.

"That level of uncertainty for organizations like ours and others (makes it) legitimately difficult to manage projects," Depew said.

He said he believes some funds awarded through other components of the Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund, for which the organization is a subrecipient, still are frozen. And another of the organization's contracts with EPA was terminated Friday under a clause that allows for cancellation due to a change in administration priorities.

The canceled contract allowed the group to provide technical assistance to small communities seeking to navigate federal support for sewer and drinking water infrastructure and brownfields remediation, under the EPA's Environmental Justice Thriving Communities Technical Assistance Centers Program.

Together, the center was awarded \$78 million in Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund monies, with the \$62 million for the Solar for All program making up the bulk of that funding.

“The overriding thing here is that these are all funds that Congress appropriated, passed into law,” Depew said, “ ... and were obligated into contracts by agencies following the laws that Congress passed.

“It’s paramount in our view that Congress take action to ensure that the money they appropriated that is legally obligated in contracts continues to be honored.”

The organization delayed some hiring during the pause, as well as the issuance of requests for proposals from contractors, who would build solar arrays, often in conjunction with homeowners, housing developers and utilities.

“It’s our full intention to implement this program as it was designed, to build solar arrays that help reduce the energy cost burden for everyday, working Nebraskans and to partner with utilities to make sure we’re generating the energy resources we need for the state,” Depew said. “That’s the work we’re eager to get back to.”

Separately, he said, the organization is urging members of Congress not to reduce or repeal the IRA’s tax credit provisions, an array that includes credits for homeowners and investment tax credits for new solar production.

At the state level, ONE RED, which stands for Opportunity for Nebraska: Reducing Emissions and Decarbonization, includes programs in eight areas aimed at bolstering energy efficiency and reliability as well as reducing agricultural emissions.

One would capture methane — a particularly potent greenhouse gas — from cattle waste and turn it into fuel. Another would use precision agriculture to reduce fertilizer use, with the added environmental benefit of reducing runoff and increasing water quality.

All eight programs are in various stages of development. On Jan. 22, NDEE finalized a \$1.7 million agreement with the City of Lincoln for a biochar production facility. Farmers would receive incentives to put the charcoal-like substance in fields, reducing the need for fertilizer and helping sequester carbon in the soil. Funding for the facility, however, has been stopped pending information from EPA concerning the status of the award.

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