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DSIRE – Navigating The Maze of Energy Incentives

by Jim Arwood and Leo Wiegman

A few weeks ago, I needed to locate some information in a hurry. As the mayor of Croton-on-Hudson, a small village in New York's Hudson Valley, I needed to compose a presentation for the U. S. Green Building Council to discuss funding the nation's energy efficiency revolution. With the deadline fast approaching, I wanted to list the states had enabled property-assessed clean energy financing in the past few years. A database in North Carolina came to the rescue with an up-to-date map not available anywhere else depicting this information precisely and authoritatively. I am very grateful this database saved me hours of sifting through state web sites. And that "one-stop shopping" is a big reason Jim and I decided to feature the DSIRE database in this article. –Leo Wiegman

During its first decade, a modest database that started quietly had built up a nationwide following as the best source for keeping up with the renewable energy incentive programs in all the U.S. states and territories. The database and its published web-site had a simple name, the [Database of State Incentives for Renewable Energy \(DSIRE\)](#). Under director Larry Shirley, the [North Carolina Solar Center](#) created the database in 1995 to provide one-stop incentive shopping for business, government, industry, and the public on all state policies relating to renewable energy. The content grew steadily, as did the users who frequented the resource.

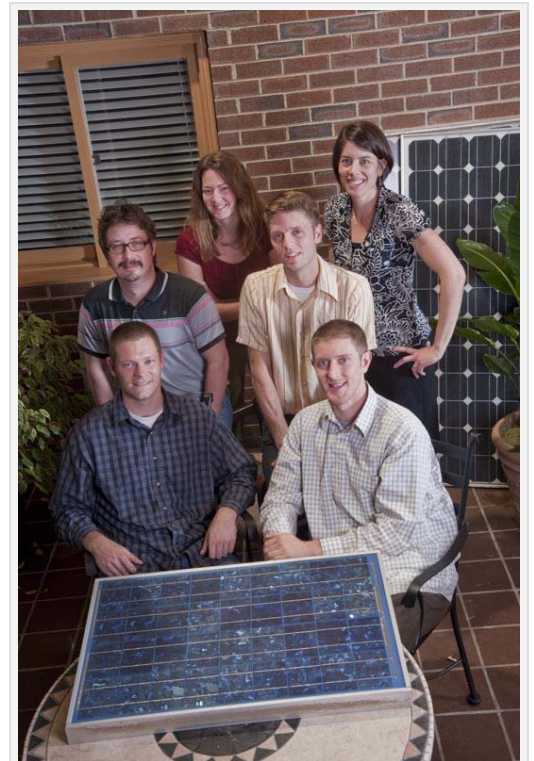
The Solar Center operates out of the College of Engineering at North Carolina State University in Raleigh, North Carolina, initially occupying the college's famous "Solar Home." Center staff canvassed the entire country for developments in solar, wind, and other renewables. By 2005, traffic was brisk for such a detailed policy-oriented website, with 25,000 monthly visitors using the state-by-state data.

Then, in mid-2006, one simple change led to an explosion of both information and traffic. As Rusty Haynes, program manager at the Solar Center, tells it, "DSIRE used to be renewables-specific, but we began adding energy efficiency summaries in 2006. During that time, the number of monthly DSIRE users has increased by a factor of ten—from about 25,000 per month to about 240,000 per month."

Today, the site tracks existing programs as well as breaking news on a very broad range of energy policy innovations. For example, do you need to know which states enable Property Assessed Clean Energy finance programs? DSIRE offers a downloadable map for use in your next slide show on the topic.

What led to the expansion of the mission and changing the name to Database of State Incentives for Renewables and Efficiency? In a word, seed money! Specifically, technology-acceleration funding arrived in 2006 to pay for the cost of building up the staff and site to handle the expanded scope.

In early November 2005, the [State Technology Advancement Collaborative \(STAC\)](#) announced eleven annual grant awards for a total of \$11.5 million. The Collaborative's mission is to spark energy-related innovation by leveraging expertise across state lines and pooling funding from multiple state, regional, and federal sources. The Collaborative's five-year pilot program was funded by the State Technologies Advancement Collaborative, a unique investment



The DSIRE team left to right: Justin Barnes, Brian Lips, Amy Heinemann, Rusty Haynes, Amanda Vanega, Ty Gorman. Photo by Greg Plachta

partnership jointly operated by the [National Association of State Energy Officials \(NASEO\)](#), the [Association of State Energy Research and Technology Transfer Institutions \(ASERTTI\)](#), and the [U.S. Department of Energy](#). “ASERTTI’s work in supporting the growth of the DSIRE database has been instrumental to our growth. DSIRE would be much smaller and less useful without ASERTTI and NASEO support, especially the STAC program,” said Steve Kalland, DSIRE’s Executive Director.

Prior funding awards had included many applied technology and demonstration projects, from estimating carbon sequestration in coal seams in North Dakota and Montana, to electrifying truck stops in the South to reduce engine idling, to developing next-generation central air-conditioning performance ratings optimized to hot and humid climate zones. In this third and final round of funding, as much as 60 percent of the funding would come from non-federal entities collaborating with each other and with the federal government. Significantly, a new topic, Rebuild America, appeared in this final round in recognition of the need to build capacity to move building performance projects from concept to completion.

As one of the three awardees, the North Carolina Solar Center, an ASERTTI member, and DSIRE received \$430,000 in Collaborative funds to accompany \$108,500 in cost sharing among the participants to expand the existing database to include building energy efficiency financial incentives and regulatory policies from state, local, federal, and utility sources. The team participants included North Carolina State University as the lead, the Texas State Energy Conservation Office, Washington State University, the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection, and the North American Insulation Manufacturers Association.

The Collaborative’s program manager summed up the deliverable at the time as follows: “The team will develop and maintain an accurate expanded database through literature searches, communication with its extensive network of State, local and utility contacts, reviewing utility and agency websites and attending relevant conferences.”

“We have seen a huge explosion in our monthly tally of visitors since adding efficiency to the database,” notes Solar Center and DSIRE program manager Haynes, “but due to the ubiquity of efficiency programs, we’ve also seen a large expansion in the content of DSIRE. As of May 2006, we had 699 total policies and incentives in DSIRE. As of today, after adding the efficiency domain, we have 2,353 total policies and incentives in DSIRE—a 337% increase.”

As Solar Center and DSIRE policy analyst Brian Lips reports, “Since renewable energy and energy efficiency have such close ties and this country needs to invest in both to ensure a sustainable energy future, adding efficiency to DSIRE allowed us to better leverage our renewable energy work, and to make DSIRE a more robust comprehensive tool for the consumers, businesses and policy makers who increasingly depend on the one stop incentive shopping that DSIRE provides. . .The STAC funding was the necessary seed money for the efficiency components of DSIRE.”

This program has been so successful, it has ensured its future, as Lips explains: “Following the end of the STAC funding period, we were able to modify our core contract with [National Renewable Energy Laboratory \(NREL\)](#) to enable us to keep our energy efficiency program information up to date. So, the STAC funding was a one-time investment in a project that will live on.”

The new contracts with National Renewable Energy Laboratory include approximately \$600,000 of annual funding that, among other operational expenses, has allowed the full-time equivalent Solar Center and DSIRE staff to double from three in 2006 to six this year. As Haynes notes, “Our scope of work is not limited to what appears on the DSIRE web site!” The staff wear multiple hats while delivering the database to its visitors.

The DSIRE home page displays a U.S. map that allows visitors to choose either renewables or energy efficiency incentives in any given state. Clicking on a state serves up a list of all the available incentive programs. In addition, the DSIRE site makes summary maps (in handy MS PowerPoint slide format) available for more than a half dozen key topics. To help visitors gain a comparative overview across states and types of programs, the DSIRE staff constantly update summary tables as well as capture a snapshot of government, utility, and nonprofit financial incentives that promote renewables or energy efficiency in the United States. These tables allow viewers to quickly compare the number and types of incentives in each state.

Jim Westberg, State Energy Program manager in Arizona, frequently visits the DSIRE website for the latest information before making public presentations on incentives available to the public and private sector. “The DSIRE website is the first one that I recommend to people,” Westberg says. “I usually copy the Arizona pages and distribute as part of my presentations.”

Larry Shirley, now Director of the Green Economy in North Carolina’s Energy Division, under whom the database got its start fifteen years ago, notes, “I find myself going to the DSIRE website time after time to look at what other states are doing with incentives for renewable energy and energy efficiency. I’m not proud—I’ll gladly steal a great idea for an incentive from my other state brethren. I even go back to DSIRE to get the latest information on my own state’s incentives since they are so quick to update our state information and relay it in a clear and concise manner.”

Although DSIRE was already well regarded among state and local energy agency staffers, many sectors within the business community—from finance and manufacturing to retail—have embraced DSIRE as a one-stop energy

reference in real time. “We use this site quite often in our Energy Department,” notes Anita L. Gordon, a regional energy manager for Walmart, which identified \$88,000 in rebates awarded by Progress Energy Florida for installing cool roofs and air-conditioning efficiency upgrades at the retailer’s facilities in Orlando, St. Petersburg, Sebring, and Mount Dora. By all accounts, hundreds of businesses have used the DSIRE tools to identify incentives directly applicable to their location and circumstance.

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