



NCEL

National Caucus of  
Environmental Legislators

# Strategic Plan

## 2025 - 2029 Overview & Key Objectives



National Caucus of Environmental Legislators

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# Introduction

National Caucus of Environmental Legislators | 2025 - 2029 Strategic Plan



**Chris Lee**

NCEL President  
State Senator, Hawaii

*“NCEL’s work  
has never been  
more vital.”*

For nearly three decades, the National Caucus of Environmental Legislators has stood as a beacon of state-led innovation, collaboration, and courage. In an era of accelerating environmental impacts, rising prices, and federal retreat, NCEL’s work has never been more vital. This strategic plan marks a bold new chapter. One that recognizes the full power of state legislators to not just respond to challenges but lead in building solutions with permanence.

NCEL is evolving to meet this moment, expanding its reach, deepening its partnerships, and equipping legislators with the tools to drive durable, intersectional progress. From environmental justice to biodiversity, from affordable housing to resilient energy systems, this plan charts a course for collective action rooted in state leadership and national impact.

As Board President, I’m proud to stand alongside more than 1,300 legislators who are proving that the future of environmental progress and community wellbeing is being written in statehouses. Together, we are transforming challenges into opportunities and laying the foundation for a cleaner, healthier, and more equitable tomorrow.



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**Dylan McDowell**  
Chief Executive Officer  
NCEL

*“This plan ensures NCEL remains a trusted resource, connector, and amplifier to help legislators lead with confidence and impact.”*

This strategic plan reflects NCEL’s central commitment to further empowering state legislators as environmental champions. It is a roadmap designed to meet the urgency of our time with clarity, ambition, and action.

Over the next four years, NCEL will focus on **five core strategies: (1) cultivating bipartisan champions, (2) catalyzing policy innovation, (3) upholding environmental protections, (4) expanding the tools legislators use beyond legislation, and (5) fostering trusted partnerships across sectors.** These priorities respond directly to the challenges lawmakers face — limited time, staff, and resources — and offer scalable solutions rooted in peer-to-peer collaboration and evidence-based support.

We know that state legislatures are uniquely positioned to pilot bold ideas, protect hard-won progress, and shape the national narrative. This plan ensures NCEL remains a trusted resource, connector, and amplifier to help legislators lead with confidence and impact.

Whether you’re a seasoned lawmaker or newly elected, a partner organization or a concerned citizen, we invite you to join us. The path ahead is ambitious, but together, we can build a future where environmental leadership thrives in every state.

Thank you for being part of this journey.



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## Context

State action on the environment and energy is more important than ever. With federal rollbacks, vast reductions in funding, and anticipation of limited federal action in the coming years, there is a critical need for states to continue innovating and making progress on environmental and energy policies and goals. States can pilot new ideas that raise the level of ambition, hold the line of current progress, and influence action in the absence of federal leadership.

**NCEL has an extensive track record of fostering strategic peer-to-peer collaboration that has led to environmental successes across the country.**

Despite the urgent need for strong leadership, state legislators often lack the resources, time, and capacity needed to adequately support their work. Many factors contribute to this challenge, not the least of which is that many legislatures lack full-time staff support, even during the legislative session. In addition, at least 40 states have part-time legislatures, four states meet only every other year, and others meet for just 60 days. Currently, 16 states have term limits that often inhibit long-term leadership, and recent years have seen record turnover, with nearly 30% of lawmakers losing or leaving their seats in recent elections. And many state legislators receive little or no pay for their service, limiting who is able to serve.

NCEL helps states fill these gaps by serving as a trusted resource for lawmakers across the country. Through NCEL, legislative leaders can access evidence-based solutions and knowledgeable experts to support initiatives in their state. The NCEL network provides cross-state and regional connectivity to help develop comprehensive solutions and create peer-to-peer coordination in a way that is otherwise impossible with existing legislative capacity. This work will be more essential than ever in the coming four years, as states look to raise the level of ambition on environmental issues and ensure strong protections remain in place for a sustainable future.



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# About NCEL

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## Our Mission

Empower a nonpartisan network of legislative champions to protect, conserve, and improve the natural and human environment.

## Our Vision

NCEL's vision is state leadership that advances a clean and healthy environment for all.

## How We Work

- Coordinate experiential learning opportunities for lawmakers to see solutions first-hand.
- Develop concise resources with actionable policy information.
- Track more than 2,000 state environmental bills each session to inform policy analysis.
- Convene environmental legislators through national, regional, and state meetings.
- Organize virtual learning opportunities and Working Groups.

## NCEL's History

The National Caucus of Environmental Legislators (NCEL) began in 1996 with a small, bipartisan group of state legislators from across the country concerned about growing efforts that threatened environmental protection. These lawmakers coordinated to push back against anti-environmental efforts and collectively enacted many of the most notable environmental policies of the 21st century. Nearly 30 years later, the organization has grown into a network of more than 1,300 state lawmakers from across the country working together to create a clean and healthy environment for all. NCEL continues to be by and for state legislators and works with lawmakers in all 50 states.

NCEL believes that the key to advancing sound policy in the states is well-informed legislatures with strong champions who can advocate on behalf of the environment, coordinate strategies, and collaborate with their peers across the country on shared learning and action.

## Program Areas

NCEL divides its work across four main program areas – Climate & Energy, Conservation, Environmental Health, and Ocean – with environmental justice intersections woven into each topic. **NCEL is unique in its ability to showcase the intersectional nature of different environmental topics**, such as the connections between climate change and biodiversity loss.



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# NCEL Focus Areas and Key Objectives

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2024 NCEL National Forum.

## 1. Cultivate State Environmental Champions

High turnover in state legislatures results in loss of knowledge and expertise when key champions or leaders leave. NCEL addresses this challenge through a robust, bipartisan network of 1,300 legislators from all 50 states. By engaging newly elected legislators and cultivating deep relationships with legislative decisionmakers – including committee chairs and ranking members – NCEL builds stronger state environmental champions and creates opportunities for mentorship to grow knowledge, expertise, and connectivity among lawmakers. These champions are knowledgeable, informed, and willing to provide support, utilize their influence, mentor peers, and mobilize action to drive successful outcomes.

NCEL will continue to grow our dynamic and engaged membership, expand the number of bipartisan champions in each state and chamber, and provide targeted opportunities for multi-state collaboration to replicate and scale legislator success.

### Key Objectives We're Driving

- **Build effective, bipartisan champions within the chairs and ranking members of committees where environment and energy are being considered** by cultivating strong, trusted relationships and providing access to the right data, tools, resources, and connections.
- **Build durable environmental expertise in state legislatures across the country** through continued growth and expansion of a robust and engaged membership of bipartisan legislators in every state and region, with a focus on newly elected and new to NCEL legislators, including opportunities for deep engagement and peer mentorship.



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2025 NCEL National Forum Equity Workshop with  
The Greenlining Institute.

## 2. Catalyze Policy Innovations

States and legislators are seeking groundbreaking environmental and energy policies to safeguard against climate change and protect their local lands, waters, and communities. NCEL helps legislators accelerate their progress, raise the level of policy ambition, and build new or iterative policy designs with their peers. NCEL's member network enables innovative, proven policies to expand beyond impact in one geography to regional, multi-state, and national levels.

NCEL will continue to support policy innovation by fostering strategic collaboration between legislators, subject matter experts, Tribal Nations, and local communities to create new, locally relevant policy design. New policy designs and proposals create opportunities for replication and scale, driving greater progress on key issues and topics. NCEL staff and its member network will support ongoing engagement beyond any single event, providing assistance and connecting state leaders with strong local coalitions to support their impactful policy work.

### Key Objectives We're Driving

- **Spark development of new, locally relevant policy designs and approaches to complex challenges** to be piloted and replicated across the country by driving strategic collaboration between select lawmakers and alongside subject matter experts, utilizing place-based opportunities to learn from existing models.
- **Legislators are equipped to enable lasting progress on environment and energy issues specific to the unique situation in their state** and region through access to the most up-to-date insight, knowledge, data, and connections.



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2025 Outdoor Outing at the Boston Nature Center.

## 3. Uphold Environmental Protections

There is a critical, timely need for states to uphold the nation's bedrock environmental protections, which broadly underpin state-level policies. NCEL will deepen its work with legislators, helping them find opportunities to fill cuts to state budgets that result from federal actions and push back against rollbacks to regulations that impact states' abilities to set and enforce policies for their residents. NCEL will equip legislators to serve as spokespeople on the value of federal environmental protections and support them in articulating the impacts of cuts at the state level.

By creating relevant tools and resources, building connections to networks and coalitions, and driving direct to legislator communication, NCEL equips and prepares legislators across the country with the information and support they need to take relevant local actions and communicate the importance and value of state-level environmental protections.

### Key Objectives We're Driving

- State legislators are **equipped to successfully advance efforts to uphold state-level environmental protections** and funding mechanisms through access to NCEL's robust tools, support, and connections.
- Legislators in every state are **equipped to serve as informed spokespeople on the value of state-level environmental protection and investments** through regular updates on the most relevant information, tools, and resources to support their efforts.



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2024 PJM tour and discussion for Mid-Atlantic legislators.

## 4. Utilize the Full Power of State Legislators

Beyond bill introduction and legislation, legislators can build long-term impact in their states by leveraging and maximizing the full power of their office. Legislators can drive impact through a variety of means including increased collaboration with the executive branch, impacting the state budget process and productive engagement with state financial management offices, empowering and delegating to boards and commissions, building relationships with Tribal Nations, facilitating partnerships with public institutions and nonprofit organizations, hosting public meetings, and giving a public voice to issues that might otherwise go unnoticed or unheard.

NCEL helps legislators across the country to discover, understand, and utilize innovative and effective ways to make change possible through the broad variety of available paths in addition to legislation.

### Key Objectives We're Driving

- Legislators in every state are equipped to utilize their public profile to raise awareness of issues beyond specific policies, **creating momentum and broader public commitment to action.**
- Legislators are equipped with tools and resources to **effectively engage outside of the legislative process to drive environmental progress**, including direct engagement with state agencies and offices, Tribes, and facilitation of strong cross-sector partnerships.



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NCEL members attend the 2025 Ocean Plastics Leadership Network (OPLN) CIRCLE Expeditionary Summit.

## 5. Foster Trusted Partnerships

NCEL serves as a trusted and enduring partner to legislators, philanthropic organizations, and media — providing actionable insights, policy intelligence, and collaborative networks at the intersection of legislators, environment, and energy.

NCEL will continue expanding its reach and depth of engagement with key stakeholder audiences, providing trusted data, insight, guidance, tools, and expertise to support the range of organizations and sectors crucial to the success of environment and energy outcomes.

### Key Objectives We're Driving

- Committee chairs, ranking members, and legislative staff in every state **actively seek out NCEL's timely insights, trusted support, and partnership to help advance their efforts.**
- Newly elected and new to NCEL legislators are empowered to **lead effectively on climate and environmental priorities from day one** because of NCEL's support, networks, mentorship, and resources.
- Philanthropic organizations turn to NCEL for data, knowledge, and insights on state legislation, helping **ensure their investments are informed and connected to the real-time needs of legislators and communities.**
- Media outlets rely on NCEL for credible **data, expert commentary, and narrative on the evolving landscape of environment and climate policy, and legislators** at the state level.



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# Implementation

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## Looking Ahead and Implementation

The next four years will be full of change related to environment and energy issues. NCEL has shown an unwavering commitment to environmental progress for nearly 30 years. The lessons learned and best practices from that experience, and the core focus on states, sets NCEL up to ensure state leadership on environment and climate will continue. NCEL's strategic goals are designed to be nimble and adaptable to changing conditions, while building a solid foundation of state action that will enable the passage of durable state policies that enable a healthy environment for all.

Environment and energy are two of the many important issues facing state leaders right now. NCEL works to find complementary connections with topics like economic development, housing, and public health, to support legislators in taking a holistic view of policy approaches. NCEL's broad and diverse set of programmatic topics provides a unique ability to connect environmental topics like climate and conservation that are often separated in policy conversations. Through our efforts to integrate environmental justice across all program work, we will continue to demonstrate how justice-centered approaches support stronger policymaking overall.

Achieving these goals will require significant investment in organizational capacity to support policy outcomes and program priorities in response to a rapidly changing state and federal landscape. NCEL will prioritize investments in network building, communication support, staff development, and experiential learning opportunities to build a robust and well-informed community of lawmakers able to work across the country for collective impact.



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