



# A RURAL NEW DEAL

SEPTEMBER 2023

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# BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

A Rural New Deal is urgently needed to build and rebuild local economies across rural America, reverse forty years of wealth and corporate concentration, restore degraded lands, reclaim land and ownership opportunities for those whose land was taken by force or deceit, and ensure that communities and the nation can and do meet the basic needs of its people.

**This document proposes ten pillars essential to a Rural New Deal**, each with a modest amount of

detail about specific policies in order to understand what implementation of the pillar might look like.

At the heart of a RND is the recognition that rural places are fundamentally different from urban and suburban areas, not only culturally and

politically, but physically. They are “rural” because they are expansive and land-based. This does not mean that all efforts to rebuild rural economies and communities should revolve around farming or other land-based sectors. However, it does mean that land-based (also including rivers, lakes and oceans) enterprises must still play a central

role in rural development, even as internet access, virtual work and the tech sector grow in importance.

While rural and urban places are fundamentally different, they are also deeply intertwined. Many farmers, fishers, foresters and other rural businesses have come to rely on urban markets and in some cases, capital to sustain them. On the other hand, towns and cities need healthy, functioning rural

*“Those of us who have lived our lives on dirt roads, deep in rural America, know how much spirit and possibility it possesses. But to unlock all that creativity and power, we need the kind of policies outlined in this remarkable document.”*

**- Bill McKibben,**

Author of “The Flag, the Cross and the Station Wagon” and Founder of 350.org

communities for their food, fiber, energy and clean water, indeed for their very survival. Yet for too long, we've neglected, dismissed and underinvested in the people that provide these essential goods along with critical ecological services. This has caused great harm to rural communities and it has undermined our collective health and resilience as a nation. Rebuilding and renewing supportive social and economic connections across rural and urban lines, empowering rural people and communities, moving away from extractive relationships of the past, is the course we must chart together.

At the same time, a Rural New Deal must recognize that rural communities

**THE HEALTH AND WELL-BEING  
OF RURAL AMERICA IS A  
FUNDAMENTAL PRIORITY**

are not all the same, in the physical dimensions of the communities nor the people who live and work there. Thus, solutions must be adaptable to many different places from Indian country to the Appalachian coalfields, from rust belt towns to farm country in the Midwest. How we talk about solutions, even when they have much in common, may differ between regions and across communities.



**With this document, Progressive Democrats of America (PDA) is declaring that the health and well-being of rural America is a fundamental priority for our organization, and that we commit ourselves to making this a priority for all progressives, regardless of where they reside.**

Along with our partner, the Rural Urban Bridge Initiative (RUBI), we offer the Rural New Deal as a broad policy blueprint to help steer progressive priorities, building upon several other critical rural policy platforms that have recently been developed.

With the release of the Rural New Deal, PDA and RUBI invites others to join us in widely sharing and disseminating the document, working with community partners to adapt and prioritize its recommendations, and seeking ways to communicate the core tenets to preclude or minimize anticipated attacks from those currently benefiting from the toxic systems we are trying to heal.

Addressing the most pressing needs of working-class families is about people, not politics. For that reason, the RND reflects an apolitical, non-partisan tone in order to achieve the widest possible outcomes. Furthermore, the document emphasizes a moral imperative to make necessary societal changes that honor human dignity and ecological integrity. The authors of this document are identifying real-world stories that exemplify elements of the Rural New Deal and we invite readers to do the same.



# FIVE PRINCIPLES

Before presenting the ten pillars, we suggest five principles that should guide efforts to develop and implement a Rural New Deal:

- 1** RND policies must be flexible, adaptable and locally driven to the greatest degree possible; state and federal agencies must accommodate and enable this bottom-up approach by investing in this work, dramatically streamlining their requirements, integrating their many rural programs and building the capacity of rural communities to successfully compete for resources
- 2** RND policies, programs and investments must be worker-focused, promoting widely shared prosperity, and the accumulation of real wealth at the household and community level
- 3** Farmers and business people, non-profit innovators, union and worker advocates, and community and political leaders must be part of the design of specific initiatives for their communities - rather than simply being recipients or implementors of top-down programs - requiring sustained investment in building the capacity of local leaders and groups leading these efforts
- 4** RND policies must encourage and invest in innovative, effective solutions, in pilot projects that test and develop the best solutions, and in shared learning among communities across the country
- 5** Certain issues cut across the ten pillars, most notably:
  - Reversing corporate concentration and the extreme economic and political power that has been enabled by it
  - Focusing on real and durable wealth instead of abstract financial riches
  - Addressing generations of racially based discrimination and exclusion from the means of wealth accumulation (home or land ownership, for example)
  - Restoring degraded landscapes to their full productive and ecological potential for carbon sequestration, protection of air and water and multiple other reasons.
  - Investing in the organizational infrastructure and local leaders that sustain rural programs such that impactful local organizations are not constantly at risk of losing the people doing this essential work

These cross-cutting goals can and should be woven into each of the pillars to the greatest degree possible

# TEN PILLARS OF A RURAL NEW DEAL



# 1 REBUILD FARM, FOREST & FOOD ECONOMIES

STRENGTHEN FAMILY FARMERS, FISHING &  
FOREST-BASED BUSINESS THROUGH INVESTMENT  
IN REGENERATIVE PRACTICES AND EXPANSION OF  
MARKETS & INFRASTRUCTURE

Dramatically expand access to affordable land, particularly for producers who are newer, younger, people of color or previously displaced farmers

- Land banks, land trusts, land matching programs
- Curtailing or penalizing land speculation by investors
- Revising USDA lending and subsidy programs to favor small to mid-size producers over large corporate owners
- Restoring water resources and assuring water rights for indigenous communities
- Direct support – grants and zero interest loans – to farmers of color and farmworkers seeking farm, forest or fisheries ownership

Institute price parity policies for grain and commodity farmers to reduce overproduction and improve prices paid to family farmers.



Support regenerative farm, forest and fishery businesses through investment in on-site infrastructure that increases productivity, reduces waste and energy use and adds value to products

Expand public and private systems of payments that reward farmers, forestry and fishing businesses for practices that sequester carbon, conserve water or energy or provide other ecological benefits

Invest in local and regional markets that more directly connect producers with consumers and which increase producers' share of the retail dollar

Distinguish small and mid-size farms from corporate mega-farms, legislatively and institutionally, in order to focus resources and support on family farms and farmers



# 2 REWARD WORK & ENSURE LIVABLE WAGES

PUT **WORK & WORKERS** AT THE CENTER OF THE PROGRESSIVE AGENDA WITH A GUARANTEED LIVING WAGE & CONCRETE SUPPORT OF ESSENTIAL OCCUPATIONS NOT REQUIRING A COLLEGE DEGREE

Adopt a federal jobs guarantee that includes living wage and essential benefits as a minimum threshold for workers across the country

- Include provisions that address the significant cost of living differences across the country
- Enable smaller or newer businesses to meet the living wage requirement through subsidies, grace periods or exemptions for companies below a certain size
- Provide support to family farmers to enable them to increase pay and benefits to farm workers

Eliminate barriers to unionization and penalize companies that unfairly restrict or undermine unionization efforts

Provide public subsidies as needed to enable farmers and small businesses to meet livable wage levels

Expand and improve workforce development programs that train people for both blue and white-collar jobs through increased funding, greater involvement of local businesses and provision of “wrap around services”, including childcare, transportation assistance and others as needed

Encourage every economic development council, advisory board, planning group or similar entities to include meaningful representation from farmers, small businesses, unions, and rural people

Invest in affordable childcare that meets community and worker needs



# 3 DISMANTLE MONOPOLIES, EMPOWER & SUPPORT LOCAL BUSINESS

SUPPORT SMALL BUSINESSES & FAMILY FARMS THROUGH VIGOROUS ANTITRUST ENFORCEMENT, REDUCTION OF CORPORATE SUBSIDIES, ENDING PREDATORY LENDING, & OPENING OF MARKETS & CAPITAL TO SMALL TO MIDSIZE COMPANIES

Strengthen and enforce antitrust laws in order to reduce corporate mergers, reverse extreme levels of corporate concentration and restore anti-trust policies to their original intent of constraining the economic and political power of big business

Reign in private equity's unbridled power through elimination of the carried interest tax loophole, caps on fees charged, requiring them to have joint liability for debt in the firms they purchase, and mandating far greater transparency in their actions

Support workers displaced by anti-monopoly or energy transition policies through strong economic transition assistance programs, such as comprehensive training, apprenticeships with established businesses, or small business start-up services

Level the playing field for independent businesses and local manufacturers by restricting subsidization of chain stores, big boxes and other corporations, by and by requiring Community Benefit Agreements with those outside corporations that do locate locally

Require state and federal agencies and institutions to meet significant local procurement targets for the food, materials and services they utilize

Reduce “economic leakage” by incentivizing local businesses to source the materials and services they need from other local businesses

Provide grants and loans to small businesses and family farms on terms they can afford and through simpler, quicker and more straightforward application processes

Invest in effective “land link” programs that match retiring farmers with new and aspiring farmers in order to keep land in farming while increasing access to affordable farm land for new producers

Support and encourage cooperatives, worker-owned and locally-owned businesses through appropriate training and technical assistance and easier access to capital



# 4 INVEST IN COMMUNITY & REGIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE

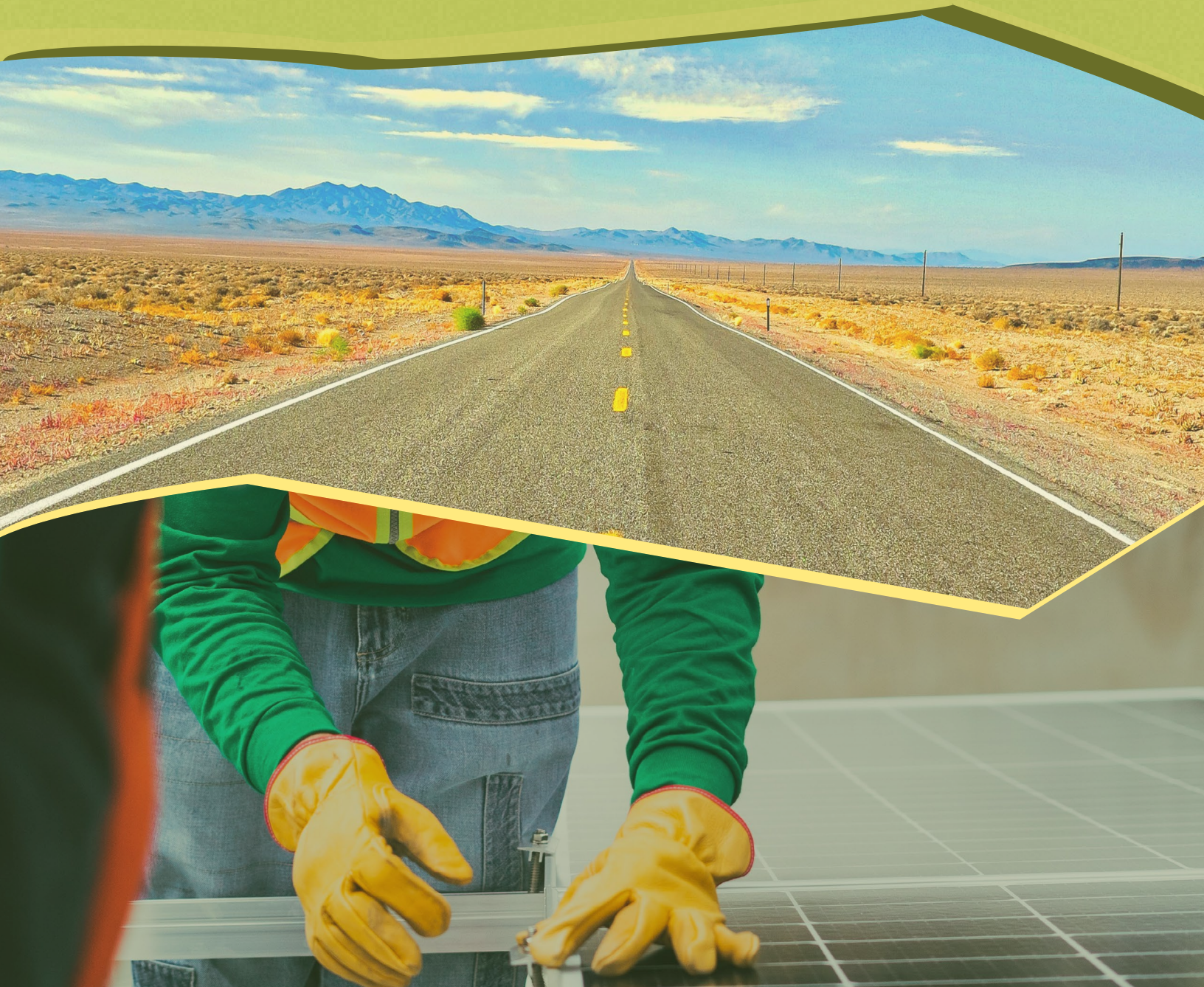
CREATE & EXPAND COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE THAT ADDS VALUE TO PRODUCTS, INCREASES MARKET ACCESS & ENABLES DEVELOPMENT OF LOCAL/REGIONAL SUPPLY CHAINS

- Make broadband access universal across rural America
- Expand, repair and upgrade rural rail lines, roads and transportation infrastructure
- Ensure equitable access to water and water rights by eliminating or reducing corporate ownership or control of critical water resources
- Provide grants and low/zero interest loans for independent processors of meat, fruits and vegetables and grains and cereals, prioritizing those producing sustainable and healthy foods
- Support community-based “value chains” that reduce transportation distances and increase local access by aggregating and marketing products from small farmers and other producers
- Create or expand independent market outlets that enable local producers of food, fibers, building materials and related products to increase sales and avoid below-cost pricing

Include private, cooperative, non-profit and community/public owned markets

Support Research & Development, as well as operational investment in new, energy-efficient building materials such as concrete blocks made from hemp, SIPS (Structurally Insulated Panel Systems) panels and similar products

Support systems and technologies that reduce food waste, including means to increase access to perishable foods, expansion of composting, etc



# 5 RE-BUILD SMALL TOWN CENTERS

REVITALIZE & DIVERSIFY TOWN CENTERS IN SMALL & MID-SIZE TOWNS TO SPAWN NEW BUSINESSES & TO RETAIN OR ATTRACT YOUNG PEOPLE

Expand historic tax credits and other means for rehabilitating and repurposing existing vacant buildings for commercial and residential use, encouraging land trusts and cooperative ownership to help ensure affordability regardless of income

Incentivize “building up” rather than sprawling out

Expand and improve workforce training, apprenticeship and other programs to increase opportunities for laid off and/or non-college educated workers to remain in their communities and earn a good wage

Help diversify both the residential and business sectors in small towns through support of ‘art zones’, music, theater, recreational and cultural centers, programs and businesses, and mixed-use zoning that brings residences closer to commercial centers



Promote public transportation, sidewalks and pedestrian areas and other means to reduce problems of parking and congestion

Provide low-cost capital and training and support tailored to young entrepreneurs and entrepreneurs of color

Preclude or minimize gentrification and speculation impacts by expanding land trusts as well as cooperative and public ownership of commercial and residential land and buildings

Encourage or require farm and business owners to also be operators of the business to reduce absentee ownership and speculation



# 6

## CULTIVATE SELF-RELIANCE & RESILIENCE

CULTIVATE SELF-RELIANCE & RESILIENCE IN RURAL COMMUNITIES, & THE NATION AS A WHOLE, THROUGH A DRAMATIC EXPANSION OF ENERGY EFFICIENT, AFFORDABLE HOUSING, DECENTRALIZED CLEAN ENERGY & LAND RECLAMATION & WASTE REDUCTION

Reduce emissions and create tens of thousands of jobs through retrofitting and insulation of existing residential, commercial and public buildings across small towns and rural communities.

- Work through both for profit and non-profit contractors to ensure that homes are upgraded regardless of income
- Offer incentives to landlords to retrofit and insulate their buildings to ensure that renters are not excluded

Accelerate installation of solar on buildings, over parking lots, in vacant lots and on non-prime farmland through both direct incentives and through cooperative and community solar arrangements

Support farm and other land-based businesses to become energy self-reliant through farm-scale renewable energy, micro-grids and energy storage systems

Reclaim mined and degraded land for productive use, as appropriate to the landscape, including for grazing, crop production, reforestation, trails and recreation and renewable energy production

Enact "Right to repair" legislation to enable farmers and individuals to fix their own equipment rather than being subject to corporate control and high cost of repairs

Work with farmers and landowner to expand and site wind turbines and solar farms such that they are compatible with family farming and provide economic return to landowners and the community

Provide Research & Development funds, loan guarantees and technical assistance to encourage development of a wide range of 'green' manufacturing enterprises in energy efficiency, renewable energy, recycling and reuse, composting, healthy foods, etc



# 7

## INVEST IN RURAL HEALTH CARE

INVEST IN RURAL HEALTH THROUGH UNIVERSAL ACCESS TO CARE COMBINED WITH COMMUNITY-BASED HEALTH, PREVENTION & RECOVERY INITIATIVES

Expand Medicaid and Medicare access to help stabilize rural hospitals and increase health care access, particularly for the working poor

Promote community innovation in prevention and health care through expansion of healthcare and mobile clinics in areas with limited access

Increase investment in the most effective programs for addiction prevention and treatment

Incentivize and facilitate health through expansion of "Farmacy" or Veggie Rx programs that allow health care providers to write prescriptions for purchase of local produce and other healthy foods

Incentivize and facilitate health through expansion of bike paths, trails and pedestrian-friendly downtowns

# 8

## FULLY FUND RURAL SCHOOLS

REQUIRE PUBLIC EDUCATION FUNDING EQUITY FOR RURAL & EXPAND INVESTMENTS IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES, TECHNICAL SCHOOLS & EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

- Incentivize states to invest in under-resourced school districts through federal grants and matching programs

- Work for state constitutional amendments that require funding equity in public education

- Expand and fully invest in vocational training to increase employment in essential trades

- Expand experiential learning opportunities, including mentorships, apprenticeships and outdoor learning to meet a broader range of students' needs while mobilizing community resources

- Make community college free to all and invest in community college infrastructure and faculty



# 9 MAKE RURAL & SMALL TOWN HOUSING AFFORDABLE

EXPAND ACCESS TO AFFORDABLE, QUALITY RENTAL HOUSING AND HOME OWNERSHIP IN SMALL TOWNS AND RURAL COMMUNITIES

Expand housing land trusts and cooperatives that eliminate land speculation but allow homeowners to build wealth

Support and expand community-based initiatives that enable people living in mobile homes to purchase and make improvements to their homes

Incentivize home builders community-based affordable housing groups to construct more affordable housing, for both rental and ownership, through tax credits and loan guarantees

Encourage or require that affordable housing be highly energy efficient and include renewable energy generation on-site wherever feasible

Incentivize farmers and other rural landowners to make portions of their land available for on-site housing for farm workers and new or beginning farmers

Prevent monopolies on rental housing to reverse the trend of private equity and other absentee corporations buying up available rural housing and then pricing out most local people

# 10 RE-LOCALIZE RURAL & SMALL TOWN BANKS

TRANSFORM THE BANKING SYSTEM BY LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD FOR COMMUNITY BANKS AND CREDIT UNIONS, AND EXPANDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR EVERYDAY PEOPLE TO INVEST LOCALLY

Create or expand access to local capital by creating investment pools, crowdfunding systems, or other means for everyday people to reinvest in their communities rather than investing in Wall Street

Reverse the decline of small to midsize community banks, in part through stricter limits on mergers and in part through scale-appropriate regulations that don't favor the larger banks.

Increase the resources and capacity of CDFI's (Community Development Financial Institutions) and other community lenders

Reverse corporate consolidation in the banking industry and reinstate the rules of Glass-Steagall Act

Increase penalties and enforcement on banks and lenders that use deceptive or unfair practices in mortgage lending or that capitalize on home buyers struggling with payments

Adopt and enforce standards for payday lenders, credit card companies and similar businesses that eliminate usurious interest rates, excessive late fees and other unfair lending practices

Recognize land resources as our most important form of capital by reducing lopsided incentives to “develop” farmland, forest land and open space





# CREDITS

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Justin Maxson, former USDA Rural Development staff and rural advocate

Sarah Jaynes, Rural Democracy Initiative

Sarah Lloyd, Wisconsin Farmers Union

Marjorie Kelly, Democracy Collaborative and author of *Owning Our Future*

Ray Daffner, Former Director of Asset-based Development, Appalachian Regional Commission

Cody Lonning, Eastern Washington University and Rural Urban Bridge Initiative

Heidi Binko, Just Transition Fund

Brandon Dennison, Coalfield Development Corporation

Jamie McLeod-Skinner, Candidate for the US House of Representatives, OR-5

Annie Contractor, Rural Organizing

Dee Davis, Center for Rural Strategies

Tim Marema, Daily Yonder

Peter Hille, Mountain Association

Stacy Mitchell, Institute for Local Self Reliance

John Ikerd, retired economist, University of Missouri

Prof. Tom Kriegl, University of Wisconsin, Agriculture and Applied economics

Beverly "Bev" Stein, activist, lawyer and politician

Chuck Willer, Executive Director of Coast Range Association

Ira Cuello-Martinez, Policy and Advocacy Director of Pineros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste (PCUN)

Joe Scott, Siletz, Tribal Culture Bearer, Cultural Fire Practitioner

Brandon Maka'awa'awa, Deputy Head of State of the Nation of Hawai'i

Dr. Chas Jones, Program Director of Climate Resilience Program, Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians and Mayor of Philomath, Oregon

Laura Anderson, Local Ocean Seafood, Food Hub leader of Central Coast Food Web, Ocean Cluster Initiative

Rep. Mark Gamba, OR House - 41

Rosa Colquitt, Chair of the Democratic Party of Oregon

## PHOTOS:

Robert Schrader; Anna Shvets; Josh Hild; Any Lane; Jan Kopřiva; Eberhard Grossgasteiger; Cottonbro Studio; Oziel Gómez; Zen Chung; Artem Saranin; Yury Kim; Veronika Bykovich; Ron Iach; Roman Parshin; Pixabay; Erik Scheel; Mikael Blomkvist; Karolina Grabowska; Rdne Stock Project; Elina Sazonova; Andrea Piacquadio; Nextvoyage; Los Muertos Crew; Randy von Liski, licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.0; Mikael Blomkvist; Rachel Claire; Jozef Fehér, Andrea Piacquadio; Katie Spencer; Colin Harris, licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.0