National Laboratory of the Rockies

Facilitating Connections Between Innovators and the Energy Industry: Insights From the American-Made Network

Paige Skur and Denise Barber

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The National Laboratory of the Rockies is a national laboratory of the U.S. Department of Energy, Office of Critical Minerals and Energy Innovation, operated under Contract No. DE-AC36-08GO28308.

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Executive Summary

In 2018, the U.S. Department of Energy established the American-Made program to offer prizes and competitions as a government funding mechanism in addition to traditional funding options like grants. The American-Made program is a U.S. Department of Energy (DOE)-funded program that works to advance domestic energy innovation. The program is broken into two branches, which work together to achieve this mission: American-Made Challenges and the American-Made Network. American-Made Challenges are prizes and competitions that award non-dilutive funding and other incentives to startups, entrepreneurs, students, and beyond for solving a defined energy innovation challenge. The American-Made Network is an ecosystem of energy industry partners representing a wide breadth of energy and business expertise, including national laboratories, incubators, manufacturers, law firms, test facilities, business development experts, and more. Those competing in challenges are encouraged to leverage the network as they seek partners and vendors to test, validate, and grow their businesses during and beyond the prize, bringing them closer to commercialization.

The primary goal of the network funding secured for this scope of work was to accelerate the development, commercialization, and adoption of innovation in energy technologies. This project expanded the network to create an ecosystem of over 500 organizations across the nation that are primed to quickly support DOE programs. American-Made staff funded by this project evaluate all organizations prior to membership acceptance to ensure they can provide valuable, consistent support. Within the network is a subset of organizations known as Power Connectors, which are companies contracted with the National Laboratory of the Rockies (NLR) to provide specific services and complimentary support to applicants in select prizes and competitions.

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1 Network Management

1.1 Network Growth (Orientations and Insightly)

To support a growing network, NLR developed and hosted a twice a month onboarding process, which supported the addition of approximately 10-20 new organizations per month. The onboarding process existed in three distinct phases: intake, orientation, and follow-up. Intake was done via an interest form that an interested organization could fill out on the American-Made website. Orientations included an overview of the program's history, network member success stories, and opportunities for network members to support competitors. Finally, the post-orientation follow-up included the presentation slide deck and directions to join the private American-Made Network LinkedIn group.

In FY23, NLR continued efforts with the Network Matching Tool, which was created in FY22 to match organizations with prize competitors' specific needs. While the original project budget included funding to create the tool, a there was a lack of additional funds to maintain the effort. Consequently, the impact of the tool was reduced as network members did not respond to competitor requests. The team continued offering bi-weekly orientations for new members, informed members on program growth, and shared prize advancements to multiple DOE offices. In total, the team vetted and approved more than 80 network applications per fiscal year.

Given the upkeep challenges of the network matching tool, the team successfully proposed a longer-term solution with less maintenance requirements. In FY24, NLR successfully transitioned from the Network Matching Tool to a new customer relationship management platform called Insightly, which allowed the team to easily vet and approve over 200 new organizations—the largest growth of the network in a single fiscal year. By early 2025, the network had grown to include a total of 596 organizations that had expressed interest in being participants in the American-Made Network.

1.2 Audience Impact (Communication)

The NLR team integrated network announcements within the suite of communication tools used by the American-Made program. Through 52 editions of the American-Made bi-weekly newsletter, NLR was able to effectively promote 244 network-related events or prize deadlines. The American-Made communications team ran a sign-up campaign leading up to each of the annual network summit events. These saw an average open rate of 50% and an average click rate of 11% across the two campaigns in 2023, and 2024.

Within the bi-weekly newsletter, the "Connection Corner" section was dedicated to promoting relevant network member-led events. Every other week, administrators would email the network to collect submissions for events relevant to the prize, innovator, or entrepreneur communities. These events were then vetted and promoted to the full distribution list of the American-Made newsletter. Since 2022, 244 non-prize related network member events were submitted, eliciting 1,412 clicks from readers.

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2 Prize Support

2.1 Recognition Rewards

Each prize in the American-Made program has access to the network, to add value for their competitors. In some cases (depending on the individual program rules and guidelines), network members, excluding Power Connectors, are eligible to receive monetary Recognition Rewards for their documented support in helping competitors achieve goals and win competition phases. This incentivizes members to proactively spread awareness about prizes, connect with businesses that need their support, and form early partnerships.

Eight prizes used Recognition Rewards from September 2022 to March 2025, including Solar Prize Rounds 6 and 7; the Solar Desalination Prize; the Geothermal Geophone Prize; the Geothermal Manufacturing Prize; the Perovskite Startup Prize; the Envelope Retrofit Opportunities for Building Optimization Technologies (E-ROBOT) Prize; and the Equitable and Affordable Solutions to Electrification (EAS-E) Prize. In all, Recognition Rewards have totaled $2.7 million across three DOE funding offices (buildings, geothermal, and solar). The average award amount was just over $12,000.

These cash funds serve as incentives for network members to provide high-quality support to competitors. The competitors benefit from the support and the DOE funding office benefits from higher-quality submissions and increased innovation speed. The exact rules vary by challenge, but usually, competitors that have won a phase are allocated a set amount of cash to be awarded to network members that supported their application.

Recognition Rewards incentivize the network members to provide pro bono support with the opportunity to win a cash prize to accelerate technology development, commercialization, and adoption; expand the number of prize applicants; and strengthen connections of companies across the U.S. that are engaging in DOE programs.

The chart below shows how many network members assisted teams in each round of the Solar Prize Ready! Contest. Many network members supported multiple teams. For example, in Solar Prize Round 7, 46 different Network members were listed on 69 submissions.[1] Additionally in network member utilization trends higher for the best 40 submissions in Solar Prize Round 7, 58% compared to 40% for all submissions. This result suggests that support provided by network members can produce higher quality submissions. The organizations who received the recognition rewards substantially remain strong advocates of the Department of Energy's funding programs, prizes in particular, and have remained engaged in directing their contacts towards these funding opportunities even when recognition awards were not offered for later prizes. The win-win relationship between these convening organizations and DOE to complete a one-to-many, or network-of-network approach to dissemination and support of applicants without becoming an official part of a team seems to improve quality of applications and long-term relationships.

[1] Gomach, Sarah, et al. "Incentivizing and Supporting Early-Stage Solar Innovation in the United States." , Oct. 2024. https://doi.org/10.2172/2473208

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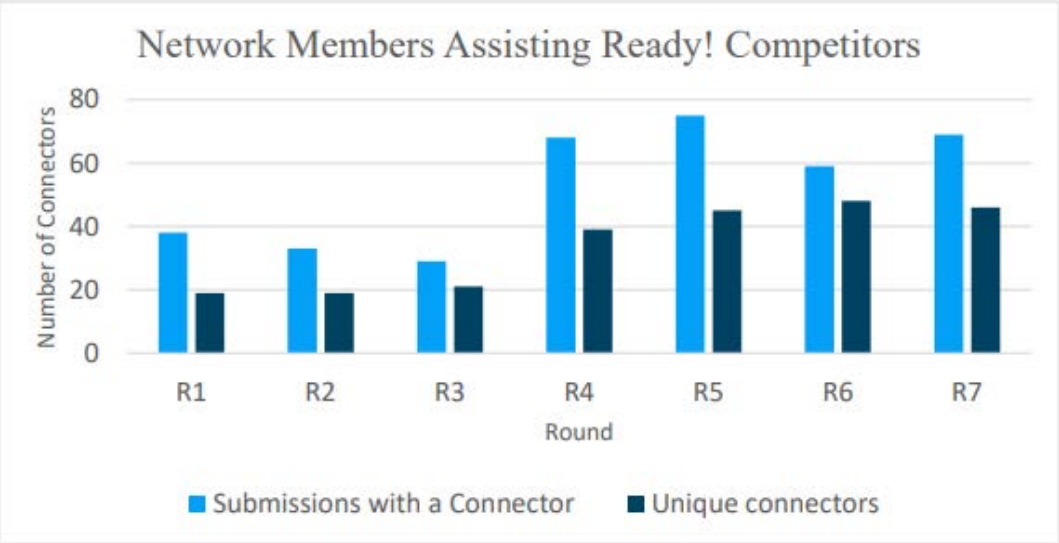

Figure 1. Number of network members who assisted teams in the Solar Prize Ready! Contest [2]

2.2 Power Connectors

Power Connectors are a subset of network members that provide outreach and in-depth support to competitors at a level that other network members may not be able to provide. Organizations are selected as Power Connectors through a competitive request for proposal process and receive a subcontract with NLR to] support the American-Made Program. As of March 2025, the network has placed more than 140 work orders for a total of over $3.9 million across 56 competitions and 11 DOE offices. Of that, Power Connectors primarily provide recruitment, outreach, and mentorship support for select prizes. NLR has worked with three cohorts of Power Connectors: 6 organizations were contracted in 2021, another 14 in 2022, and finally, 17 in March 2024.

The most recent group, consisting of 10 organizations from the prior year and seven new organizations, helped American-Made expand its potential reach to more than 100,000+ professionals and organizations. These organizations have professional services that include marketing, communications, financial modeling, business strategy development, commercialization services, and more.

Due to their contract status with NLR, Power Connectors are uniquely suited to provide support for technology prizes. Their support can increase the quality of submissions that each prize receives as well as the quality of work and businesses that are active in the energy industry.

Power Connectors benefit DOE beyond just supporting prize competitors. DOE benefits from leveraging increased visibility for their programs through the network-of-networks ecosystem provided by Power Connectors. The access to expertise different than those accessed through

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DOE's typical channels also provides new perspectives to inform DOE decisions and direction.

2.3 Examples of Network Support

As one of the American-Made program's most engaged Power Connectors, Jade Garrett of Positive Deviancy has supported over 450 teams participating in 63 different American-Made prizes over the past seven years. Positive Deviancy has helped teams win roughly $14.8 million in cash prizes, with 14 of those teams being grand prize winners. Those competitors remain active in the energy industry and have raised millions more in private investment, hired additional employees, and brought innovative products to market.

Since joining the network as a Power Connector in 2020, ADL Ventures has supported competitors in more than 30 prizes. One particular prize, the Perovskite Startup Prize, engaged ADL Ventures to identify and strengthen connections to the perovskite industry. By screening more than 2,000 innovators and providing targeted outreach to 64 high potential candidates, the organization supported efforts to build a vast competitor pool that, in many cases, did not have prior experience applying for or receiving federal funding. Their comprehensive support—from connecting teams with mentors to hosting specialized workshops—is intended to help teams strengthen both technical and business outcomes.

3 Leveraging American-Made to Connect Energy Industry Organizations and Innovators

3.1 American-Made Network Innovation Summit 2023

On Nov. 7–8, 2023, network administrators held the first in-person American-Made Network Innovation Summit at NLR. Over 100 people attended, including network members, industry experts, prize alumni, and DOE and NLR staff. Attendees gathered to review successes and discuss opportunities for programmatic growth. The event featured a keynote address from American-Made program founders; panels featuring highly engaged network members and Power Connectors; presentations from prize alumni; an alumni "startup jam session"; a session on government and private industry collaboration opportunities; and working sessions on network-related challenges.

The summit resulted in new relationships and education around prize initiatives. One participant reflected on their favorite part of the summit, saying, "Every aspect of the summit was excellent. That being said, the opportunity to network in person was the most valuable aspect of the experience." Another individual expressed a similar note saying, "More than other conferences, I felt like this was engaging and fostered collaboration/relationship building very well." In all, the American-Made Network Innovation Summit 2023 fostered interactions between industry and prize alumni while creating direction for the upcoming year of network activities.

3.2 American-Made Network Innovation Summit 2024

The 2024 summit was held on Oct. 22-23, 2024, at the University of Tulsa in Tulsa,

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Oklahoma, in partnership with network member Rose Rock Bridge. With 134 attendees, the event included a keynote address from DOE and NLR leadership on the current state of the network; success stories from prize alumni; brainstorming sessions on building the quality and utility of the network; status updates from regional hub leaders; a session on maximizing engagement in the network; a panel on energy impacts from data center expansion; and breakout sessions to help inform annual network planning. DOE leadership spoke about how the network is helping achieve DOE's goals, by integrating competitions and projects integration into the broader American energy innovation system. Event partner Rose Rock Bridge also hosted two networking events for summit attendees to further engage and connect outside of the event.

Feedback on the previous summit indicated that participants were interested in developing a more systematic approach to the network. One individual shared about the 2023 summit: "(I'd like to) have breakout sessions with ecosystem builders so that best practices can be discussed further." The 2024 breakout brainstorming sessions worked to incorporate this feedback. Session questions included:

- What could the American-Made Network learn from other communities or successful networks you are a part of?
- What metrics are important for the network to measure?

These discussions spurred conversations around having regular meetups on a regional scale and collecting impact metrics from prize participants. From these discussions, network administrators incorporated themes into strategic initiatives for FY24 including continuing regional hubs, tracking initial network member engagement via Insightly, and beginning to develop standardized metric questions to incorporate in prize submission forms.

3.3 Regional Hubs – Fostering Connections Across the Country

In FY24, NLR established technology-specific regional hubs to tap into established regional networks of expertise. NLR noticed within Insightly datasets that organizations related to certain topics tended to cluster in specific cities or regions within the United States. To explore the potential of regional hubs, a meeting was held in each area, including Detroit, Michigan; Raleigh, North Carolina; Tulsa, Oklahoma; and Portland, Oregon. The hubs focused on the following areas:

- **Detroit** (primary partner: Centropolis Accelerator at Lawrence Technological University): Advanced manufacturing and hard-tech expertise in transportation and design.
- **Raleigh** (primary partners: RIoT and the Research Triangle Institute): Academic and research communities in cyber, Internet of Things, and battery/storage.
- **Tulsa** (primary partners: VentureWell and Tulsa Innovation Labs): Wind, solar, and geothermal.
- **Portland** (primary partner: Lemelson Foundation): Battery/storage and hydropower.

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These were small, collaboration-focused meetings emphasized vision-casting for how each region was interested in supporting prizes and the American-Made Network as a whole. The typical attendance was approximately 75 attendees at each and consisted of startups, investors, accelerators, incubators, and energy industry associations. The goal of each of these convenings was to cement connections to organizations in each region that could execute future industry, broader, convenings in their cities. The host organiations of VentureWell, Tulsa Innovation Labs, Research Triangle Institute, and Centropolis continue as strong advocates for energy innovation and the prize programs as a means to achieve increased commercialization and small business engagement.

Attendees of the regional conveners indicated, anecdotally, stronger relationships between related opportunities and likely collaboration on future projects. Some attendees have indicated they learned of other opportunities, such as regional pitch events, accelerators, or incubators at the regional convenings, to which they then applied. However, due to the absence of multi-year funding and scope, impact-reporting following the events was not collected. By inviting network members, organizations, and investors with a particular interest in the region, the likelihood that work would continue beyond the convening was increased. Reviews of attendee lists across multiple years indicate correlation between continued engagement and success in American-Made prizes as well as related energy industry innovation programs. It is notable that the areas of focus for the convenings such as advanced manufacturing, cyber security, batteries, geothermal, and hydropower continue to remain as priorities at the time of this final technical report. For future related efforts, we would recommend a follow-up tasks 3 or 6 months following a convening to reconnect with attendees and understand the impact of their attendance on their commercialization and success.

3.4 Non-American-Made DOE Program Support

In addition to supporting competitors in the American-Made program, DOE has leveraged the network in other government funding opportunities. DOE's Federal Energy Management Program (FEMP) Assisting Federal Facilities with Energy Conservation Technologies (AFFECT) program offers grants to federal agencies that are developing energy and water efficiency projects and processes at government-owned facilities. In FY24, FEMP benefitted from the American-Made Network when the project team was able to commit to providing a list of at least 80 organizations that could review grant proposals. After reaching out to the network to gauge interest, NLR provided FEMP with 103 total organizations that were interested in participating. FEMP selected 62 reviewers, of which they approved 56. This project created and oversaw the structure that enabled the efficient and timely distribution of 56 honorarium payments to participating organizations. This opportunity allowed another DOE program to benefit from the investment of building the network. It also gave a significant number of network members a chance to expand their connections within the federal space and play a critical role in the FEMP AFFECT program.

4 Conclusion and Next Steps

Connection is at the core of the American-Made Network. The funding provided for this project allowed the NLR team to establish the network as a clearly structured, consistently utilized,

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technology-agnostic ecosystem of innovators, professionals, investors, mentors, associations, and researchers that, collectively, can increase the speed and scale of energy innovation. Since its inception, network administrators have continued to build an ecosystem of strong technical and business resources. Regularly scheduled convenings, a systematic onboarding process, a data-focused customer relationship management system, and continued communication efforts have resulted in the network's robust support of the American-Made program and the wider energy ecosystem.

Because of the network, prize competitors have access to accelerators, incubators, investors, subject matter experts, facilities, researchers, and related contacts that will help to maintain the company's momentum and impact on the energy industry.

A well-funded American-Made Network maximizes the impact of prizes and other DOE funded programs. It ensures that each prize receives a sufficient number of quality applicants and that progress made during the prize is impactful.

With continued multi-year funding, future iterations of the network are expected to provide more sustained support throughout a team's prize journey, helping innovators navigate the valleys of death on the path to commercialization. Administrators will provide ongoing American-Made alumni support, strengthening pipelines of high-potential innovators, and building a durable, insight-driven ecosystem that enhances commercialization success, reinforcing long-term knowledge sharing, and positioning the American-Made Network as a national hub for innovation, collaboration, and energy-sector advancement.

5 Appendix (Project Milestones)

The following list represents all project milestones that were incorporated as part of the project agreement between the National Lab of the Rockies and the Department of Energy over the course of the project, inclusive of several modifications and adjustments to reflect adjustments to budget and priorities.

1.1.1 Successfully execute Power Connector Contracts to support SETO FOAs and build a pilot educational module for engaging with SETO in cooperative agreements and the SBIR Program
1.1.2 Education pilot through calls for PC support
1.1.3 Educational Pilot Final Report and Assessment
1.1.4 Power Connector FOA Support
1.2.1 Define Preliminary Engagement Criteria for Network (V0)
1.2.2 Define and Start Tracking Engagement Criteria for Network (V1)
1.2.3 Development of Network Strategy and Programming
1.2.4 Development of the annual Connector Impacts Report
1.2.5 Manage the Network and all of its assets to deeply engage connectors
1.2.6 Strategy and Plan for Alumni Network and AMN Finance in 2024
1.2.7 Development of TWP (mid November) with other offices involved
1.3.1 Alumni Network Scoping and Proposal
1.4.1 Investor Network Scoping and Proposal
1.5.1 Low-level Maintenance of the Matchmaking Tool to keep it live and cyber compliant and add educational module links

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1.6.1 Development of Alumni and Finance Network Roadmap and pitch
1.6.2 Launch of Additional Programming for Alumni Network or AMN Finance
1.7.1 AMN Innovation Summit
2.1.1 Collect and summarize reports from Power connectors who work on the FOA support project
2.2.1 Quarterly updates to DOE on AMN work, achievements, progress, etc
2.2.10 Work with the web development team to manage all events, content, communications and development of new web pages
2.2.11 Launch the CRM and work with identified stakeholders to train them on the system and processes tied to the CRM
2.2.12 Create a reporting dashboard that tracks Connector and Power Connector engagement statistics
2.2.13 Create an annual report dashboard that summarizes network engagement and impact reports
2.2.2 Executive Summary on AMN work, achievements, impact and forward looking strategy
2.2.3 Create a plan for additional funding created through a prize fee and additional DOE offices contributing to AMN
2.2.4 Implement AMN administrative fee
2.2.5 Launch Alumni, Finance and Learn platforms on the AMN website
2.2.6 Recruit and build the Alumni & Finance sub-networks
2.2.7 Create Learn platform content and link to resources provided by Connectors, Power Connectors and other partners
2.2.8 Create a calendar of virtual events, programs, and engagement opportunities for Alumni and Finance networks
2.2.9 Create an engagement “roadmap” that helps all Alumni organizations understand what resources, activites and support is available to them
2.7.1 Attend a regional event focused on recruitment for network members and Finance growth
2.7.2 Plan and attend an event focused on Alumni support and engagement
2.7.3 Plan and/or support the AMN Innovation Summit ’24

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