

Shaping the Future

EPRI Takes the Lead at Incubatenergy

By Scott Sowers

This June, EPRI takes the reins of [Incubatenergy](#), a network of technology incubators and accelerators that supports more than 500 startup companies. Incubatenergy was launched in 2014 through a partnership among EPRI, the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE), and the National Renewable Energy Laboratory (NREL). When DOE funding ends this year, EPRI will continue to support the network.

Incubators in the network include more than a dozen organizations such as [Greentown Labs](#) in Boston and the [Los Angeles Cleantech Incubator](#). The startups have received about \$1.5 billion in funding from various sources, generate \$440 million in revenue, and employ more than 3,300 people. They have access to hundreds of technology experts and business development mentors across the incubators, NREL, and EPRI's utility members.

"We have seen great value in connecting our utility members with the innovative entrepreneurs supported by members of the network," said EPRI Project Manager Beth Hartman. "EPRI is continuing to support the network as integral to our innovation scouting."

Incubators and accelerators play a critical role in supporting new energy technologies along the challenging journey from concept to commercialization. While incubators typically work with entrepreneurs for longer, more flexible periods, accelerators offer shorter, more standardized programs. Incubators and accelerators often aggregate themselves into networks for sharing best practices and new methods. EPRI is linking with other incubators and accelerators.

Going Global

Incubatenergy has expanded its reach internationally through a partnership launched in 2016 with [InnoEnergy](#), a Netherlands-based accelerator for sustainable energy startups in Europe. The two organizations share company referrals between Europe and North America to facilitate and expand global coordination among technology developers, incubators, and accelerators—and to help startups break into new markets. For example, as a result of the Incubatenergy/InnoEnergy partnership, San Francisco-based accelerator [Powerhouse](#) is hosting Barcelona-based energy forecasting firm [Nnergix](#).

In 2017, Incubatenergy—in collaboration with the California Clean Energy Fund, the World Bank, the World Wildlife Foundation, and the Asia Development Bank—organized the Accelerate Energy Summit in Shanghai. The summit convened 66 organizations from 21 countries to consider strategies for supporting entrepreneurs.

"At the Shanghai summit, Incubatenergy continued to develop important connections with groups that can help expand our international reach," said Hartman. "We plan to host similar gatherings to expand connections among energy incubators and accelerators around the world." For example, the upcoming [Electrification 2018 conference](#) hosted by EPRI will include stakeholders such as global energy entrepreneurs as well as incubators, accelerators, utilities, investors, government staff, and corporate partners.

The State of Innovation in Electric Power

According to Hartman, particularly active areas of technology innovation in the electric power sector include electric vehicle charging systems, data analytics and artificial intelligence applications, and indoor agriculture that uses electricity to run fans, lights, and other equipment. "Several new startups are using shipping container-sized structures to grow everything from tomatoes and lettuce to flowers," she said.

Another hotbed of innovation is end-use technologies. For example, Pick My Solar, supported by Los Angeles Cleantech Incubator, helps residential customers find the best bids for rooftop solar projects. More companies offer home energy storage that can be paired with solar panels and serve as backup power or a grid resource.



Indoor agriculture is an active area of technology innovation in the electric power sector.

“There are more and more ‘prosumers’—people who both produce and consume energy,” said Hartman. “As utilities adapt their business model for the future, they are thinking of innovative ways to work with prosumers.”

Hartman points to technology innovation in small modular nuclear reactors as an important trend. “Nuclear is an established carbon-free energy technology, and there are several interesting startups working in that space such as Transatomic and TerraPower,” said Hartman.

Hartman also sees utilities expanding collaboration with incubators and accelerators. “Increasingly, utilities are realizing the importance of partnering with innovation groups as disruption in the industry is happening faster and more frequently,” she said. For example, Ameren recently launched its own [accelerator](#), and a consortium of international utilities supported the [Free Electrons](#) program last year. Other utilities are working more closely with incubators in their areas, such as Duke Energy with [Joules Accelerator](#) in Charlotte, North Carolina, and National Grid with the [ACRE incubator](#) in New York.

Key EPRI Technical Experts

Beth Hartman