

Podcast Script
OPP Director Elin Katz
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Tamara Young-Allen: Welcome to Open Access, I'm Tamara Young-Allen. Today we're sitting down with Elin Katz, who joined FERC in October 2021 as director of FERC's newest office, the Office of Public Participation. Congress directed the Commission to establish an Office of Public Participation in 1978 so there's no doubt its establishment is not only overdue but very welcome. The Office of Public Participation works to educate members of the public on the Commission and its work, as well as help the public participate in FERC proceedings. Elin, welcome to Open Access!

Elin Katz: Thank you. It's great to be here.

Tamara Young-Allen: Before we jump into a discussion of OPP, Elin, could you tell us a little bit about yourself? Your background, particularly your work as a consumer advocate, seems an ideal starting point. How are you bringing those experiences to your work at the Commission?

Elin Katz: Thank you for the question Tamara. I actually think my background has framed up well for me to lead the office here. I come to FERC with a long background as an environmental and energy attorney and a great deal of experience as a consumer advocate. I led Connecticut's Office of Consumer Counsel from 2011 to 2019 and the consumer counsel is the public advocate in the state of Connecticut for issues relating to energy, natural gas, water, telecommunications, so there's actually a lot of overlap with those issues at FERC. I was also president of NASUCA, which is the National Association of State Utility Consumer Advocates and in my work with NASUCA I was able to see a national level and hear on a national level about constituent's concerns and interests in energy. I was also VP of utilities a company called Tilson Technology Management, right before I came to FERC and what I was at Tilson I worked with electric utilities on building infrastructure to bring broadband to unserved areas and closing the digital divide and actually that work to is really relevant because we hear a lot about folks who would like to access for but live in more rural areas that don't have access to broadband and also when I was president of NASUCA, I signed letters to FERC to members of the legislature advocating for creation of something like the office of public participation. So it's really exciting to now be here and come full circle and be the inaugural director of the office.

Tamara Young-Allen: That then brings us to your office, the Office of Public Participation, or as everyone has been referring to it, **OPP** – what is OPP's mission, and how many people are in your office?

Elin Katz: OPP's mission is to coordinate and provide assistance to members of the public for participation in FERC's proceedings and we sort of break down our responsibilities as providing procedural information assistance to the public, identifying constituent partners and suggestions for reaching key constituencies through a robust outreach effort, building up technical assistance and education program and developing our outreach with social media and through our websites. So, there is a lot obviously that were trying to do, our team is at the moment pretty small. We have a team of six and that includes our Deputy Director, Nicole Sitarama and who is also the inaugural Deputy Director of OPP and she comes to us with an extensive background also in consumer advocacy in the solar industry and in the sustainable finance industry. So she's been a great addition to the team and the other

members are people with extensive experience both internally at FERC. As consumer advocates and also we have some a great resource whose our administrative support person.

Tamara Young-Allen: Do you see that number of staff increasing over time?

Elin Katz: Yeah, absolutely. We have our small but mighty team of six but we are actually interviewing right now to hire some more people, and there is a plan to keep doing that, I'm hoping to double or even triple our staff by the end of year. Tripling it involves getting to 18, so that would be fantastic and were also going to see where they need to take us grow to meet the mission, so to speak, and I'm really pleased because we've got a lot of support from the folks at FERC from the commission for building the office and getting the resources need to really do the job right.

Tamara Young-Allen: I think many of our long-time listeners may be wondering, how does an office like OPP operate within the framework of the highly technical and legal aspects of what FERC does?

Elin Katz: That's a great question because our first responsibility is to assist members of the public but we obviously engage with the other offices and we are part of what were doing is learning how first works from the inside out. Many of us who in the office have worked with FERC as external stakeholders but now that we are on the inside is very important that we also understand and build relationships with the other offices and that is a great experience so far there's been so much support and enthusiasm for OPP and our mission, so you know it's a broad mission and a broad mandate, but I think as we are building this office we are excited to see just how much support were getting.

Tamara Young-Allen: So now that you and this new office are staffing up, how do you work with members of the public – do you meet with people where they are, say, at public scoping meetings? Do you wait for people to contact your office?

Elin Katz: The answer is all of the above and more. We get regular inquiries from members of the public and they can reach out to us directly through the website, they can call us and we will answer questions for those people who might not have broadband access, our telephone number is 202-502-6595, and so we respond to many inquiries that we get and we are probably about over 500 at this point since the beginning of the office just a few months ago and we think that is the bread and butter. We want to be the place that people feel like they can go and get an answer and so I think of us is the soft place to land and then we help people understand where they need to go in FERC, how they can bring the voices in and if they need to talk to someone about a particular question they may have. So that's sort of the start, but then we will also once Covid protocols are sort of rolling back, hopefully over the next several months we will definitely be meeting people and engaging through first public meetings like the public scoping meetings, but were also on a very extensive outreach mission ourselves where we are contacting organizations that are related to our constituents and you know our focus on our constituents for outreach is been on landowners impacted by infrastructure proposals, environmental justice communities, citizens of native nations, and consumer advocate environmental and community organizations. So we are very much involved in an outreach program where we are contacting and meeting with representatives of those groups that effort actually is being led by our deputy Nicole Sitaraman and she's doing a fantastic job. We are talking with organizations all over the country and gathering information about the experiences that they and their members have or there are landowners who might have been impacted by an infrastructure project or consumer advocates who are even though they might be experienced consumer advocate attorney still feeling intimidated by how to

engage with FERC. So, we are doing a lot of that outreach ourselves, and we are also very much developing educational materials we will be putting on some webinars as in the in the coming year, in the coming months. We expect to continue to grow the information on the website and to continue to build our social media presence. That's another way that we reach out to people right now we have a pretty new presence on Twitter under director Katz's is one and then FERC OPP is the other twitter account that we have and so we are working on using those avenues as a way to push out information quickly and actually really excited because we have two summer interns coming in from two different colleges who are going to help us build that social media profile and am really excited to see what they bring to the table with their enthusiasm and experience in what to me is still an exciting but somewhat intimidating platform so.

Tamara Young-Allen: So, what have your public interactions been like so far? What types of assistance are members of the public seeing?

Elin Katz: They are seeking answers to questions that they may have about all kinds of energy and utility issues. As I mentioned were probably getting close to 500 interactions and probably 30% of them are questions that don't have anything to do with FERC jurisdictional issues, but have some relation to energy or water or natural gas, and we try to answer those questions. I think our experience as a consumer advocate and I have three former consumer advocates in my office, including myself, that gives us a pretty good base of knowledge for how to help people where to send them if they have a question about energy bill or a solar array in their, in their neighborhood or if they have a question because they are about to get the got a notice that they can get their gas shut off. This has of nothing to do with FERC jurisdictional issues. Nonetheless, we want be as helpful as we can. So I think we are pretty good at pointing people to the next stop to get information if it's not at FERC and obviously we answer a lot of questions about FERC. We answer questions about what's going on with a particular proceeding or who do I call to get information on this thing or they're building known down the street from me. We get a lot of questions about I'm interested in seeing something about this particular proposal that's come out of FERC, how do I file a comment. How do I intervene in a proceeding and what is an intervention, that's a question we get a lot, an intervention is when you formally moved to be calm part of a proceeding and we help people understand how to do that as well. We get a lot of questions about the FERC website. As you noted this is a highly technical and complex area and sometimes it can feel difficult to get the information from the website. If you don't understand the process, so we help people navigate the website understand the E-library and people also may see us providing assistance by being present. I feel it's very important for us to bring government to the people because people don't understand or appreciate government if they don't feel like they don't have a voice in it or it is not transparent and so that's part of what were trying to do reach out into the communities with these meetings that were having, and provide knowledge of our services there. We also feel it's important to build trust so that our constituents feel that they know who we are, so when question comes does come up or they have an issue of concern, they think of us rather than us parachuting in in the middle of what feels like a crisis. So, we also will be having some webinars were already are doing a lot of speaking on webinars and panels at various conferences and educational opportunities but in the coming months, you will also see OPP ourselves putting on posting webinars and these continuing opportunities for the public to see assistance from us.

Tamara Young-Allen: Shifting topics a bit, FERC just released its first ever Equity Action Plan. Listeners, you can find that plan at [FERC.gov/Equity](https://www.ferc.gov/Equity) for more information. Elin, so that our listeners understand the inner workings of the Commission a bit better, tell us a little more about how OPP works with Senior Counsel Montana Cole and the Environmental Justice and Equity Teams.

Elin Katz: Well, thank you for noting the release of the equity action plan that is really groundbreaking here at FERC, it is a direction and a map for how to increase the considerations for equity and environmental justice. FERC's own proceedings and decision-making and we work very closely in coordination with Montana Cole and the environmental justice and equity teams and I have to say Montana is just a fantastic resource here at FERC and I've learned so much from her and our work is very complementary. If you look at the equity plan, In fact, there's a there's a very extensive discussion of OPP so it just sort of illustrates how interwoven our work brings members of the public into the preceding relates to making our decisions reflect a greater sense of equity and address environmental justice concerns that come up, and in particular situations. So, I look at our work as I said, very complementary and I think the more we are here, because Montana herself I think is been here a year or less. As we continue to work together as our teams continue to grow in our work matures that collaboration will just continue to thrive and so I'm excited for what comes around that as well.

Tamara Young-Allen: Thank you for sharing that insight. And – I'll close on this final question – tell us one thing about you that our listeners may not know but you'd love to share!

Elin Katz: That was such a great question. I will not try and say anything too embarrassing. I was actually a field hockey player throughout my high school and college career and I actually played at Cornell University when I was a college student, I was a goalie so I would like to say I am great at defense, but that taught me a lot about teamwork and I think all of that is been relevant to collaborating and working with all kinds of teams throughout my career.

Tamara Young-Allen: Well thank you so much for joining us on Open Access today. And thanks to all you listening out there. We'll see you all next time on Open Access.

Anthony De Young: FERC is an independent regulatory agency that oversees the interstate transmission of electricity, natural gas and oil. FERC reviews proposals to construct and operate interstate natural gas pipelines and liquefied natural gas terminals and oversees the licensing of nonfederal hydropower projects. FERC protects the reliability of the high-voltage interstate transmission system through mandatory reliability standards, and it monitors interstate energy markets to ensure that everyone in those markets is playing by the rules. Unless otherwise noted, the views expressed in these podcasts are personal views and do not necessarily express the views of individual Commissioners or the Commission as a whole. This podcast is a production of the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission's Office of External Affairs. We will be updating our posts when we've got more news, so be sure to check out our website, www.ferc.gov, and follow us on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and LinkedIn to find out when our next podcast airs.