

# OECA Ontario Energy Symposium 2026



## Insights from Ontario's First All-Stakeholders Energy Symposium

The 2026 Ontario Energy Symposium, convened by the Ontario Energy Collaborative Association (OECA), marked the first forum of its kind in the province. As acknowledged by the Premier, it brought together municipalities, utilities, regulators, ministries, industry leaders, and innovators in a neutral setting to speak candidly about Ontario's energy future under Chatham House Rules.

A central and unexpected insight emerged consistently across all sessions: there is a pervasive fear of not fully understanding "the grid," even among experienced professionals. Participants agreed that this uncertainty is not a personal failing or a skills gap, but a structural reality of Ontario's uniquely complex energy system. No single organization, discipline, or mandate can fully define or manage the grid in isolation.

This initial paper synthesizes the Symposium's discussions to articulate what "the grid" really represents in Ontario, why misunderstanding persists even among experts, and how this shared uncertainty is shaping and affecting decision-making, investment, and collaboration.

### The Grid Is Hard to Define in Ontario

Participants repeatedly noted that the grid is often discussed as if it were a single, coherent system. In practice, Ontario's grid is an interdependent socio technical system composed of:

- Indigenous participation and consultation in stewardship
- Physical assets (generation, transmission, distribution, storage)
- Market mechanisms and contracts
- Regulatory frameworks and rate structures
- Municipal planning decisions and land-use authority
- Federal, provincial, and local policy overlays
- Human behaviour, public trust, and political accountability

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Each stakeholder interacts with only a portion of this system, through a specific mandate. As a result, even highly experienced professionals may have deep expertise in one area while feeling exposed or uncertain in others.

The Symposium revealed that this fragmentation creates a fear of incomplete understanding, which in turn encourages cautious behaviour, siloed decision-making, and delayed action.

## A Shared Reality – No One Owns the Whole Picture

One of the most important outcomes of the Symposium was the normalization of uncertainty. Participants expressed relief in recognizing that no single person or institution fully understands the entire grid and that this is normal.

This recognition reframes the problem:

- The goal is better shared understanding
- Progress depends on collaboration, not control

The Symposium itself demonstrated that bringing partial perspectives together can reduce fear, build trust, and improve decision quality — even without resolving every technical detail.

## The Challenge Is Not Technical

The tools required to support electrification, economic growth, reliability, and decarbonization largely exist and are well understood across the sector. What is misaligned is the way decisions are coordinated, risks are allocated, and capital is enabled to move.

Participants identified several structural constraints that consistently slow or prevent action to meet Ontario's goals:

- Mandates and decision authorities that do not align across institutions
- Planning horizons that are shorter than infrastructure investment timelines
- Investment signals that are unclear, inconsistent, or contradictory
- Regulatory and approval processes that lag system need
- Risk frameworks that penalize early action more than late failure
- Limited shared visibility into actual system conditions and capacity

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In this environment, organizations become more concerned about making the wrong investment than about not making an investment at all. The result is delay, even when the cost of inaction is known and growing.

This dynamic was seen repeatedly in discussions on generation, transmission, distribution, efficiency, storage, and non-wires solutions. No single solution was viewed as sufficient on its own. Participants were clear, however, that coordinated application of multiple partial solutions can materially change outcomes when those investments are supported early and in combination. Dismissing any single solution did not advance the interests of the group.

Progress depends less on finding a perfect technical answer and more on creating conditions where capital, regulation, and planning can move together under uncertainty.

## Implications for Policy, Planning, and Investment

If Ontario's constraint is coordination and capital alignment rather than technology, then improvement depends on how decisions are made and funded.

Participants emphasized four practical priorities:

- Forums that allow candid, cross-mandate discussion of risk and trade-offs
- Shared, decision-grade visibility into system conditions and queued demand
- Incentive and risk-sharing mechanisms that support timely investment
- Governance approaches that allow staged, adaptive action within existing mandates

These changes do not require new institutions, but they do require better alignment between public funding programs, regulatory approval, utility investment frameworks, and private capital expectations.

When funding is only accessible after uncertainty has been removed, the system builds late and expensively. When risk is shared earlier, the system builds more efficiently and with greater flexibility.

This relationship between governance, risk, and capital is central to Ontario's ability to meet growth, reliability, and affordability objectives.

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## Roundtable Thoughts

### Municipality Collaboration

Municipalities and local distributors are now central to growth, electrification, and public trust. Participants noted that decisions at the municipal level are often made with limited visibility into broader system impacts and without financing tools that match the scale and timing of infrastructure need. This reinforces cautious investment behaviour, even where growth pressures are clear.

### Grid Modernization

Significant upgrades and 65-75% growth forecasts, increasingly require investment ahead of demand, under uncertainty. Participants emphasized that current regulatory and cost-recovery frameworks do not always provide sufficient confidence to act early, despite recognition that delayed investment ultimately carries higher system and economic cost.

### Transparency and Information Sharing

The challenge is not simply access to data, but the quality and context of information. Participants observed that unstructured transparency can increase confusion and risk aversion. Decision-making improves when information is curated, comparable, and framed around practical implications for capacity, cost, and timing.

### Innovation and Large Loads

Emerging large loads highlighted the growing misalignment between demand growth and the pace of system planning and delivery. Participants pointed to gaps between planning cycles, execution capability, regulatory processes, market structures, and municipal decision-making. As the system becomes more interconnected and multi-fuel, coordination across these interfaces is now a primary constraint.

### Generation and Transmission

Different parts of the system operate on distinct planning and investment horizons. While appropriate in isolation, these differences become limiting when growth and electrification require coordinated sequencing of generation, storage, transmission, and distribution. The result is not a lack of capability, but reduced confidence to commit capital where assets are interdependent.

### System-Level Reflections

Participants consistently stated that Ontario's energy system is constrained less by ambition or technology than by structure. Incomplete system visibility, differing mandates,

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and asynchronous planning and funding cycles create a cautious operating environment, even when the need for timely action is well understood. Improving coordination and shared understanding across these boundaries was viewed as more critical than assigning responsibility to any single institution.

## The Role of the OECA Going Forward

OECA's role, as reinforced by the Symposium, is not to advocate for specific technologies or policy outcomes, but to:

- Convene diverse stakeholders under trusted rules to hear constructive feedback
- Surface system-level insights that do not emerge within silos
- Reduce complexity and uncertainty through learning
- Support more informed, coordinated action

The sharing of raw, anonymous roundtable materials following the Symposium reflects this commitment to transparency, learning, and collective sense-making.

The 2026 Ontario Energy Symposium revealed a powerful truth: the greatest risk to Ontario's energy transition is not lack of technology, but lack of shared understanding in a system too complex for any single actor to master alone.

We need to acknowledge this reality and by creating spaces where uncertainty can be discussed openly rather than hidden, Ontario can move from hesitation to coordination, and from fragmented action to resilient progress.

This paper is intended not as a final answer, but as an invitation to continue the work that we started together.