

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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ecoAmerica Announces 2026 American Climate Leadership Awards Finalists

Washington, DC: ecoAmerica announced the finalists for the 2026 [American Climate Leadership Awards](#) (ACLA), showcasing a nationwide group of leaders working to broaden participation in climate action. Collectively, the finalists will receive **more than \$200,000** to scale their work, representing sectors including agriculture, health, faith communities, civic networks, and youth movements.

These **30 individuals and organizations are being honored** for driving meaningful climate action in communities across the country. Their work spans grassroots initiatives to national coalitions, all focused on building a more sustainable future and mobilizing broader community engagement.

In the General category, awards include **\$50,000 for the winner, \$25,000 for the runner-up, \$5,000 for 8 finalists, and \$1,000 for 25 semifinalists.**

In the Youth category (ages 14–24), the **winner will receive \$10,000, with 8 finalists receiving \$5,000 each.**

Winners will be announced live during the **April 16 awards broadcast**. Register to watch [HERE](#).

“Across the country, these finalists demonstrate that climate leadership is strongest when it is locally grounded and broadly supported,” said **Bob Perkowitz, president of ecoAmerica**. *“They represent practical, community-based approaches that others can learn from and replicate.”*

2026 General Category Finalists:

- **Acterra: Action for a Healthy Planet, by Lourdes Arce** (California): Empowers youth and families to drive the transition to a healthier future, preparing the next generation to become confident climate leaders.

- **ACESWorld, by Linda Jackson** (National, HQ in Washington, DC): Equips youth and families in vulnerable communities with practical tools to understand, prepare for, and respond to the health impacts of climate change.
- **Bedford 2030, by Lilian Von Althann** (New York): A grassroots effort in New York dedicated to achieving aggressive, local climate action goals defined by the Bedford Climate Action Plan.
- **CU Diploma in Climate Medicine, by Dr. Bhargavi Chekuri** (Colorado): Launched the Diploma in Climate Medicine, a first-of-its-kind, scalable education program preparing health professionals to lead on climate and health.
- **Lutherans Restoring Creation, by Phoebe Morad** (National): A national, grassroots movement promoting care for creation within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.
- **Piedmont Environmental Alliance, by Richard Sebastian** (North Carolina): The Green Business Network helps businesses and nonprofits in North Carolina's Piedmont Triad achieve their sustainability and climate goals.
- **Run on Climate Education Fund, by Jack Hanson** (National): Empowers leaders in cities across the U.S. to eliminate fossil fuel use and pollution.
- **U.S. Farmers and Ranchers in Action, by Kevin Burkum** (USFRA) (National): A farmer-led coalition representing 700,000 farmers and leading companies, advancing practical solutions for food security, rural vitality, and climate progress.
- **Vermont Public Interest Research Group, by Jordan Heiden** (VPIRG) (Vermont): A statewide advocacy group focusing on climate and energy initiatives, including holding large polluters accountable.
- **Youth Climate Institute, by Kirsten Barbera** (a program of the Howard County Conservancy) (Maryland): Builds the next generation of climate leaders through educating and certifying high school students.

2026 Youth Category Finalists:

- **Arizona Youth Climate Coalition, by Ojas Sanghi**: Mobilizes youth leaders to advance bold, student-driven climate solutions, including pushing the Tucson Unified School District toward net-zero emissions by 2040.
- **Black Girl Environmentalist, by Wawa Gatheru**: Advances climate leadership equity through their Hazel M. Johnson Fellowship, a climate internship program creating paid, high touch pathways for Black women, girls, and gender-expansive people to enter and thrive in environmental careers.
- **Good Energy Collaborative's Bi-City Youth Council, by Ariza Nanji**: A youth-led environmental justice initiative that empowers young people in Chester and Philadelphia to lead climate education, renewable energy projects, and community organizing rooted in their own neighborhoods.

- **JustME for JustUS, by Laura Bither:** Empowers rural Maine’s frontline climate justice communities by hiring and supporting youth organizers (ages 15–30) to lead local climate action and civic engagement projects that directly reflect their communities’ needs and priorities.
- **Madhvi4EcoEthics, by Madhvi Chittoor:** Through the youth-led EcoSTEAMNinjas program, empowers young people worldwide with free, hands-on climate education to become informed and action-driven environmental leaders.
- **Monarchs Matter, by Cynthia Zhang:** A youth-led nonprofit based in Long Island, NY, that empowers communities to address biodiversity loss and climate change through hands-on education and conservation initiatives centered on protecting monarch butterflies.
- **The Sustainability Lens, by Pareena Gupta:** Translates complex climate science into accessible media and community-driven education initiatives that empower young people and local communities to move from climate anxiety to constructive action.
- **Youth Eco Sports Scorecard (YESS), by Rishin Tandon:** A patent-pending digital tool that measures and gamifies the environmental footprint and climate readiness of youth sports teams, empowering athletes, families, and leagues to embed practical climate action into everyday sports culture.
- **Zero Hour Arkansas, by Amelia Southern-Urbe:** A youth-led climate justice initiative that builds grassroots organizing, creative civic engagement, and narrative power to develop Southern youth as local-to-national climate leaders in an under-resourced, fossil-fuel-dependent state.

General Category Selection Committee

An independent, nationally recognized selection committee will determine the General Category runner-up and winner. The 2026 committee includes:

Lauren Belmonte, Founder, Change is Simple

Regina Benjamin, MD, 18th U.S. Surgeon General

Jerome Foster II, American Environmental Activist

Graham Hill, Founder, The Carbonauts

Alexia Leclercq, cofounder of Start: Empowerment

Bishop Vashti Murphy McKenzie, President of the National Council of Churches

Nathaniel Stinnett, Executive Director, Environmental Voter Project

Kate Wright, Executive Director of Climate Mayors

Media Availability

Interviews are available with the finalists, the selection committee, and ecoAmerica leadership. **Media Contact:** Press@ecoAmerica.org

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About ecoAmerica

ecoAmerica is a nonprofit organization that moves society toward climate solutions by engaging and supporting trusted national institutions to inspire and empower their millions of members in local communities across America to visibly act and advocate for ambitious, just, climate mitigation, resilience, and restoration.

About the American Climate Leadership Awards

Since 2019, ecoAmerica's American Climate Leadership Awards (ACLA) has recognized 200 climate leaders and awarded \$1.2 million to individuals and organizations that are activating broader participation in climate solutions. ACLA advances successful climate action and advocacy with financial awards, public recognition, and guides for others to replicate the finalists' winning work.