The success of the Obama Administration’s Clean Power Plan will depend largely on state-level engagement with rural communities who are most directly affected by shifts in energy production, finds a new report from the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP).

The report, “The Clean Power Plan: Opportunities for an Equitable Energy Transition in Rural America” by IATP’s Tara Ritter, concludes that states should actively integrate rural perspectives into their Clean Power Plan compliance plans. In February, the Supreme Court halted implementation of the Clean Power Plan until a federal appeals court rules on its legality. That ruling is expected sometime in June. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) remains confident that they have strong legal footing, and many states are moving forward to develop their compliance plans.

“The Clean Power Plan is a critical step in the fight against climate change, and it can also increase rural resilience if done right,” said Ritter, who works on rural responses to climate change for IATP. “The fossil fuel industry drives a boom-and-bust cycle that hurts rural communities. The Clean Power Plan is an opportunity to shift from the extractive energy model that removes financial and natural resources from rural communities towards an energy system that is both cleaner and more equitable.”

The Clean Power Plan, finalized in August 2015, is the first regulation to limit carbon emissions from existing power plants in the United States. It aims to reduce electricity sector emissions by 32 percent below 2005 levels by 2030. Each state has been assigned a unique emissions reduction goal, and must submit a State Implementation Plan (SIP) by 2018 that outlines how they will meet their goal. The flexibility afforded to states in creating their SIP will result in very different plans from state to state, each with its own implications for rural communities.

Policies like the Clean Power Plan are integral to addressing climate change, which disproportionately impacts rural communities, according to the report. Rural communities are more likely to have natural resource-based economies than urban communities, and those industries will become less stable as climate change worsens.
Poverty rates are higher, on average, in rural communities, which means that many rural residents spend a larger percentage of their income on energy. This will be exacerbated as heating and cooling needs increase with more extreme temperatures and weather events.

Rural communities produce most of the nation’s energy, and will be impacted as mines and coal-burning power plants close or reduce capacity. This report finds that states could use the Clean Power Plan to ensure that the transition to clean energy is fair and equitable. The Clean Power Plan can be a path to sustainable, well-paying jobs in rural America as well as an affordable renewable energy supply, but only if states build the proper assistance mechanisms into their Implementation Plans, the report concludes.

IATP is part of the Rural Climate Network, composed of rural-based organizations taking action on climate, and is the co-organizer of a series of Rural Climate Dialogues in Minnesota. The full report is available at: http://www.iatp.org/documents/the-clean-power-plan.