

Connecting Conservation and Business Strategy: Lessons from the BNEAT Conference

Can ignoring nature cost a company millions of dollars in lost time and revenue?

In August 2025, the Biodiversity + Nature in Energy and Transportation (BNEAT) conference, hosted by the University of Illinois Chicago, Utility Arborist Association, Electric Power Research Institute, and NiSource, took place in Chesterton, Indiana, near Lake Michigan. At this conference, participants explored how nature-related risks impact their operations and how to scale conservation and sustainability efforts to proactively address it. The message throughout the conference that was consistently echoed was: “What happens in nature affects business and operations”.

Working at the intersection of infrastructure and conservation, participants left BNEAT with a renewed sense of urgency and opportunity. This event highlighted how the energy and transportation sectors are taking action for conservation and climate resilience. But nature is complex. It takes time and effort to comprehend the ways it can affect a business or infrastructure. Its impacts are often contextual to a location or region.

The presentations and conversations at BNEAT highlighted several lessons:

- **Acting on nature and climate presents a strategic business opportunity.** Like car makers faced with safety concerns in the 1970s, some companies waited for regulations, while others strategically pursued advances in technology and market demands. Adopting conservation actions and sustainability goals as part of a business strategy can help avoid risks while also creating value-adding opportunities for infrastructure land managers. [ComEd's approach to nature](#) as a strategic asset, highlights an example of this in practice.
- **Nature's influence extends beyond physical risks.** While physical impacts of erosion, sedimentation, flooding, and fire can result in more costly and persistent challenges. Workshop input provided by energy and transportation companies at BNEAT identified reputational risks, regulatory changes, and stakeholder pushback as common transitional risks. These can pose billions of dollars in lost revenue from project delays, legal fines, and changes in practices or technology resulting from nature-related concerns.
- **Don't let perfect be the enemy of good.** This phrase, reiterated throughout the conference, highlighted the importance of acting and adapting. Companies are at [different levels of engagement with nature-related risks](#). For companies beginning to incorporate nature strategies, start small and scale up while learning along the way. For companies already implementing nature-based strategies, it's important to deepen integration and adaptation efforts while maintaining transparency about any data gaps or areas of uncertainty.
- **Set clear targets connected to your company's nature-related risks and dependencies.** Doing so will clearly connect a company's business and nature goals to material concerns. Grounding targets in this way can strengthen support for nature strategies and invest in supporting practices. Setting targets unrelated to company goals or financial interests risks being irrelevant or worse, greenwashing.

- **Strengthen champions by bridging connections.** Conservation and sustainability actions are often driven by passionate individuals. Making connections between these champions and other motivated team members is critical to building lasting programs. External partners can also play a role in building lasting and resilient change within organizations.
- **Doing nothing is a risky decision.** Doing nothing is also a decision. Inaction can leave a company vulnerable or in a position of following the lead of others. [According to one analysis](#), extreme weather alone costs over \$2 trillion globally between 2014 – 2023. By addressing nature-related risks, companies can avoid financial losses and put themselves in a strategic position against future threats.

BNEAT fostered new ideas like these and other cross-industry collaborations. More resources and insights from the event will be shared soon. In the meantime, connect with UIC's Sustainable Landscapes team if you have questions or would like to learn more. Read more about BNEAT and the Rights-of-Way as Habitat Working Group at <https://rightofway.erc.uic.edu/>