ADVANCING INCLUSIVE INNOVATION IN EUROPE: INTEGRATING GENDER EQUALITY INTO THE EUROPEAN INNOVATION ACT

Introduction:

We welcome the European Commission's initiative to create a European Innovation Act and appreciate the focus on making Europe a better place to start and grow innovative businesses. As stakeholders committed to gender equality in research and innovation, we believe that inclusive innovation must be at the heart of this Act. We urge the Commission to seize this opportunity to embed gender equality and inclusiveness considerations across all pillars of the Innovation Act.

The Innovation Act's aims – improving access to finance, creating innovation-friendly regulations, boosting the commercialisation of research results, attracting and retaining talent, and coordinating policies across Member States[1] – **cannot be fully met without addressing gender and inclusion**. Doing so will ensure fairness and equal opportunities while enhancing Europe's innovation performance, as **evidence shows that countries with greater gender equality tend to be stronger innovators**[2]. Persisting gender gaps in the innovation ecosystem – from who gets funding to whose needs are served by new technology – will hinder the EU's goals of competitiveness and technological sovereignty. Women are underrepresented in key areas of innovation, particularly deep tech entrepreneurship and venture capital, leaving a substantial portion of Europe's human capital untapped. Integrating a gender lens is also essential in transformative fields such as clean energy, digitalisation, and AI, to ensure technologies are unbiased, widely adopted, and developed to reflect diverse needs. As Europe faces an ageing population and the need to equip youth for future jobs, ensuring young women have equal opportunities in STEM and innovation is critical. By mobilising *all* talent and incorporating a wider range of perspectives, Europe can develop more creative, effective solutions to today's challenges.

[1] European Commission. (2025). *Commission seeks feedback on the future European Innovation Act*.
[2] ERA Forum Subgroup on Gender Equality. (2024). *Position Paper on Framework Programme 10: Inclusive Gender Equality in the ERA*.

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We therefore recommend that the European Innovation Act include the following measures:

Mainstream gender equality in innovation funding and governance

To truly transform Europe's innovation environment, gender equality should be embedded as a cross-cutting principle in all innovation policies and funding mechanisms. Horizon Europe has shown the value of requiring Gender Equality Plans (GEPs), prompting hundreds of institutions to improve practices[3]. A similar systemic approach is needed on the innovation side, as women-led projects and companies often struggle to access mainstream innovation funds and support[4]. By integrating gender criteria and targets into funding programs, the EU can drive change at scale. The European Innovation Council (EIC) Board has called for "embedding gender equality across the entire innovation chain" and integrating gender metrics into strategy to build a more equitable and competitive landscape[5]. The Innovation Act should codify this commitment.

Recommendations:

1. **Extend Horizon Europe's gender equality requirements to innovation-focused programmes**. The Act should ensure that all applicants for EU innovation funds adopt the same standards applied across Horizon Europe. Gender equality requirements must therefore extend to innovation-focused programmes. In particular, the Horizon Europe GEP eligibility criterion, which currently applies to higher education institutions and public research organisations, should also cover large business enterprise sector (BES) companies applying for EU innovation funding. Applicants should also address the gender dimension in their project or business plan where relevant, explaining how gender aspects are considered in product design or user needs, or justifying why it is not applicable. This aligns research and innovation funding, creating coherent R&I practices.

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[3] European Commission: Directorate-General for Research and Innovation. (2024). *Impact of gender equality plans across the European Research Area*. Publications Office of the European Union.
[4] Gallagher Small Business. (2025). *The big impact of female-owned small businesses*.
[5] European Innovation Council. (2025a). *EIC Board strengthens commitment to gender equality in innovation*. EIC News Article.

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2. **Incorporate gender balance and diversity targets in program KPIs and strengthen funding for inclusive innovation.** Establish key performance indicators for EU innovation programs, such as the percentage of women-led startups supported or share of female investors in networks. The EIC Accelerator showed progress, increasing women-led companies from 8% to 30% of its portfolio between 2020 and 2024[6]. Building on this, the Act could set long-term targets to further increase women's participation among EIC-supported firms. Regular monitoring should be mandatory, and results made public in annual reports.
   To reinforce progress, portions of EIC budgets should be ring-fenced for women-led projects to directly address funding gaps. The EIC has invested €363 million in women-led deep tech companies over four years[7]; the Act could formalise or expand such investments. Other EU funds (e.g. InvestEU, structural funds for regional innovation) should be encouraged to support incubators, accelerators, or research commercialisation projects that focus on women innovators and diverse teams. In parallel, the Act should expand and secure long-term funding for initiatives specifically aimed at female entrepreneurs. For example, scale up Women TechEU, which provides grants and mentoring to women-led startups, and consider creating a larger "Women in Innovation Fund" at EU or EIB level to co-invest in women-led ventures. Such dedicated funds can help overcome initial barriers, demonstrate women-led companies' viability, and attract private investors over time.
3. **Promote gender-aware governance in innovation agencies.** Ensure bodies such as the EIC Board, program committees, and innovation advisory groups include gender equality and inclusiveness expertise and competences. The renewed EIC Board in 2023 was selected with attention to gender balance[8]; this practice should continue and extend across all governance levels to ensure policy decisions reflect gender equality and inclusiveness considerations.

By mainstreaming gender equality in this way, the Innovation Act can institutionalise a "gender lens" in innovation policy. This will help ensure that as we simplify

[6] European Innovation Council, 2025a.
[7] European Innovation Council, 2025a.
[8] European Innovation Council, 2025a.

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regulations and boost investments, we do so in a way that proactively benefits all groups of society, thereby maximising talent utilisation and innovation outcomes[9].

Improve Access to Finance for Women Entrepreneurs and Innovators

Access to finance remains one of the biggest barriers for women entrepreneurs in Europe's innovation ecosystem. The venture capital landscape is heavily skewed: in recent years, all-women founding teams received well below 5% – in some cases as low as ~1% – of total VC funding in Europe, while the vast majority went to all-male teams[10]. Mixed-gender teams fare somewhat better but still face gaps. This imbalance is not due to a lack of capable women-led startups; rather, it reflects systemic biases and a venture network dominated by men. Women are also underrepresented among the decision-makers in investment funds – only ~15–20% of partners in European VC firms are women[11]. Research suggests that this can influence funding outcomes, since female investors are statistically more likely to invest in female founders[12]. The result is that innovative ideas by women often struggle to get off the ground, and Europe misses out on potential high-growth companies that could create jobs and value. Moreover, a lack of funding for women's innovation can skew the focus of tech development. Solutions addressing issues important to women (for example, femtech or care-economy innovations) may be overlooked. Closing this gap is not just about fairness; it's about unlocking economic opportunity. According to the Financial Times, increasing women's participation in VC and startups would diversify portfolios and likely lead to new products and markets, ultimately benefiting Europe's economy[13].

Recommendations:

1. **Address bias in venture funding through monitoring and transparency.** The Innovation Act should establish a framework for tracking the gender breakdown of recipients of EU-supported innovation finance. For instance, for

[9] ERA Forum Subgroup on Gender Equality. (2024). *Position Paper on Framework Programme 10: Inclusive Gender Equality in the ERA*.
[10] Financial Times. (2025). *Wanted: more female voices in venture finance*
[11] Pitchbook (2025). *Venture capital exits increased for female funded companies in 2024, New PitchBook Report Shows*, Pitchbook press release.
[12] Financial Times, 2025.
[13] Financial Times, 2025.

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programs like InvestEU, EIC Fund, or national innovation banks that leverage EU funds, require annual reporting on what percentage of funding goes to women-led companies. Publicly available gender dashboards (similar to the European VC female founders dashboard[14]) could be created to shine a light on progress[15]. This transparency creates pressure for improvement and allows targeted actions (such as capacity-building where needed).

2. **Incentivise private investors to support diverse startups**. In addition to meeting Horizon Europe's gender equality standards outlined above, venture funds and other private investors receiving EU public money should be encouraged to take further action to promote gender equality and inclusiveness. The Act could introduce targeted incentives such as co-investment guarantees or bonuses for funds that achieve gender-diverse portfolios. Venture funds should also demonstrate concrete efforts to improve gender balance in sourcing, investment decisions, and hiring.
3. **Support women entrepreneurs beyond funding through networks and training.** Financial support alone is insufficient; it must be complemented by mentorship, business development training, and peer networks for women innovators. The Act should acknowledge the importance of programs like the EIC's Women Leadership Programme and encourage their expansion[16]. In addition, venture accelerators, incubators, and selection panels should implement bias training and strive for gender-balanced teams among evaluators and decision-makers, reducing unconscious bias in funding and support decisions. Connecting women entrepreneurs to public procurement opportunities and corporate supply chains can further open revenue streams beyond venture capital.

By making access to finance more equitable, Europe can expect a higher number of women-founded startups to emerge and grow. This will diversify the innovation ecosystem and likely lead to more inclusive products and services. It will also send a strong message that Europe's Single Market is open to *all* innovators, regardless of gender.

[14] Pitchbook (2025b). *European VC Female Founders Dashboard.*
[15] Pitchbook, 2025b.
[16] European Innovation Council, 2025a.

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Foster inclusive work environments and retain female talent

Achieving an innovative Europe requires not just new startups, but also a strong human capital base in R&D and tech. Women currently face a range of obstacles in research and innovation careers – often described as a "leaky pipeline" or "glass ceiling" problem. Although women are 42% of STEM graduates in the EU, their numbers steadily decrease at each successive career stage[17]. They make up only about one-quarter of senior researchers or tech leaders and an even smaller fraction of top executives in innovative companies. Furthermore, the innovation sector has traditionally been male dominated, which can create unwelcoming climates. There are frequent reports of harassment, unconscious bias in hiring and promotion, and inflexible work practices that particularly disadvantage women[18]. These challenges are compounded by the fact that women still bear a larger share of family caregiving in most societies. These factors contribute to high attrition. For example, more than 50% of women in technology leave by mid-career, a rate much higher than that of men[19]. Research shows that diverse teams solve problems and innovate more effectively because they bring a wider range of knowledge, skills, and perspectives to the table[20]. A diverse and inclusive work culture fosters a more creative and stimulating environment, increases employee satisfaction, and enhances retention[21]. In sum, Europe is not fully benefiting from the talented women it educates in STEM fields, and this shortfall undermines the goals of boosting innovation capacity and addressing skills shortages in areas like ICT.

Recommendations:

1. **Improve working conditions, security, and work-life balance in innovation roles**. The Innovation Act should align with efforts in the European Research Area to promote attractive research careers. Public funding should be conditional on companies implementing employment safeguards rooted in gender equality and inclusivity principles, such as fair pay, basic social

[17] European Innovation Council, 2025a.
[18] European Institute of Gender Equality. (2020). *Sexism at work: How can we stop it?*. EIGE News Article.
[19] IP Business Academy. (2024). *Leaky pipeline: The EU's missed potential in women-led innovation*.
[20] McKinsey & Company. (2020). *Diversity wins: How inclusion matters.*
[21] Pal, S., Harminder, D., & Gujral, H. (2024). *Role of workplace diversity in employee retention and organizational culture*. International Journal for Research in Engineering Application & Management. *10(02)*.

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protections, and measures accommodating parental or career breaks. These safeguards could be applied through the GEP eligibility criterion at the Member State level and extended to tech companies receiving public support, ensuring they are practical for SMEs and startups. To further support diverse talent retention, the Act could encourage schemes funding maternity or parental leave replacements, as well as re-entry fellowships for innovators returning after a career break. Initiatives promoting parental leave uptake by fathers can reduce the burden on women and help shift workplace norms, for example through awareness campaigns or recognition in award programs. Such measures collectively make innovation careers compatible with family life and job stability, supporting retention of all genders.

2. **Embed zero-tolerance for gender-based violence and harassment in innovation ecosystems.** Every researcher and innovator should be able to work in a safe environment. We recommend that the Act require institutions participating in EU innovation programs to implement and enforce policies against sexual harassment and gender-based violence. This aligns with emerging standards in the research sector, such as the Commission's Zero tolerance code of conduct. Specifically, any innovative company or university spin-off receiving EU support should be required to certify that it provides training, clear reporting channels, and disciplinary procedures for harassment cases. Linking compliance to funding or program participation will encourage even small startups to take these issues seriously and foster an inclusive culture from the outset.
3. **Strengthen mentorship and role models.** The Act should highlight the importance of mentorship programs – both women-to-women and engaging men as allies – to support early-career women. EU funding could help scale existing mentorship networks, such as those through EIT Knowledge and Innovation Communities (KICs) or other EU projects and expand their reach. Celebrating successful women innovators through media coverage or awards, and showcasing diverse role models, can further inspire younger generations to persist in STEM and innovation careers.

A concerted effort to improve the innovation workplace culture and conditions will help Europe will retain more women and create a more vibrant environment for all researchers and entrepreneurs. Measures such as anti-harassment policies and better work-life balance benefit everyone, fostering more creative, motivated teams.

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This aligns with the vision of the Innovation Act to make Europe "the most attractive place" for innovators – a goal that inherently requires inclusivity.

Ensure innovation benefits all: Gender-responsive innovation & AI

Innovation is not just about how many start-ups we create or how much we invest – it's also about what kind of solutions we bring to market and who they serve. Incorporating a gender perspective in innovation content improves excellence. When innovators consider the differences in needs, behaviours, and biology among diverse user groups, they design more effective and safer products. For example, voice recognition initially struggled with women's voices because it was trained mostly on male data, and car safety tests long used only male crash test dummies, resulting in vehicles that were less safe for women. In health innovation, neglecting sex differences has led to drugs with disproportionately severe side effects for women. The EU has acknowledged these issues, with the Council of the EU in 2025 highlighting that gender bias in AI systems can lead to discriminatory outcomes and urging action to prevent it[22]. If such biases are not addressed, emerging technologies could inadvertently widen gender gaps. Conversely, integrating gender and intersectional analysis can open new avenues for innovation (e.g., novel products for women's health, more inclusive AI applications, etc.) and increase market acceptability of innovations by tailoring them to a broader customer base.

Recommendations:

1. **Make inclusivity a design requirement in innovation projects.** Just as environmental impact and data privacy are assessed in innovative solutions, gender impact should also be considered. The Innovation Act could require all projects receiving public innovation support to evaluate whether sex/gender differences or inequalities are relevant to their work, and to address them if so. This could be enforced through project evaluation criteria. For example, proposal templates could include a question such as: "Have you considered gender or inclusiveness aspects in the development of your product or service (e.g., inclusive user testing, bias mitigation)? Please explain." Projects that fail to address these aspects without justification could receive a lower evaluation

[22] Council of the EU. (2025). *Council calls for targeted efforts to advance gender equality in the AI-driven digital age.*

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score. Grant assessors should also be trained to spot missing gender equality and inclusivity considerations, ensuring accountability and fair evaluation.

2. **Invest in gender-responsive research and innovation.** The Act should allocate funding to developing methodologies, tools, and capacity for gender-responsive innovation. This includes funding interdisciplinary research on gender in technology (for example, on gender bias in machine-learning data sets) and supporting the development of tools like checklists for engineers or innovators.
3. **Leverage standards and certification.** Work with European Standards Organisations (e.g., CEN, CENELEC, ETSI) to integrate gender considerations into standards for new technologies. For example, the forthcoming EU AI Act could be complemented by technical standards guiding how to assess AI for gender bias. Similarly, voluntary and incentivised certification labels could recognise products that meet established inclusivity standards. These measures would encourage the wider industry to adopt best practices, extending beyond projects receiving public funding.
4. **Highlight gender in missions and challenges.** The EU is pursuing missions (e.g., Climate Adaptation and Cancer mission) and supporting innovation for the Green Deal and digital transition. We recommend explicitly including gender equality in the scope of these initiatives. For example, a mission on climate-resilient cities could measure whether and how its solutions protect all genders, considering their different vulnerabilities. Similarly, digital inclusion efforts under the Digital Decade could track women's participation in tech development. The Innovation Act can reiterate that major innovation challenges – such as climate change, AI, and health – have gendered dimensions that need to be addressed.

In sum, we urge that the European Innovation Act promotes an innovation model where "inclusive by design" is the norm. By doing so, Europe's innovations will better serve its citizens, avoid unintentional harms, and open new markets, as technology that works well for underrepresented groups often sparks wider adoption. This approach will future-proof Europe's innovation against social blind spots and ensure technology is a force for equality rather than exacerbating divides.

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Boost the commercialisation of public research with gender-inclusive strategies

One of the Act's aims is to improve the conversion of publicly funded R&D into market innovations. In this regard, it's vital to recognise and address the gender gap in research commercialisation and intellectual property (IP). Studies by the European Patent Office and others show that women are named as inventors in only about 18% of patent applications in Europe[23]. Similarly, women researchers are less likely to start spin-off companies[24] or license their inventions, due in part to fewer networks and mentors in the commercialisation space, and sometimes a lack of confidence or encouragement to pursue entrepreneurship[25]. There is also evidence of unconscious bias. For example, technology transfer offices and investors may undervalue or under-recognise the relevance of inventions when a woman is the lead inventor (related to the "Matilda effect" where women's scientific contributions are less recognised[26]). If half the talent pool (women) generates far fewer commercial outputs, we are missing many opportunities to solve problems and create jobs. Additionally, women may bring different priorities – for instance, women entrepreneurs often focus on products with social or environmental impact[27]. Empowering them in commercialisation could align innovation with societal needs, such as sustainable development, health, and education tools.

Recommendations:

1. **Strengthen gender-inclusive support in knowledge valorisation.** Ensure that universities, research institutes, and technology transfer offices (TTOs) supported by EU programs adopt measures to support women inventors. The Commission's recent Knowledge Valorisation policy guidelines[28] could be augmented to include a gender perspective. Examples include training TTO staff on gender bias and conducting outreach to female researchers on IP and

[23] World Intellectual Property Organization. *Intellectual property, gender, and diversity*.
[24] Rosa, P., & Dawson, A. (2006). *Gender and the commercialization of university science: Academic founders of spinout companies*. Entrepreneurship and Regional Development, *18(4)*, 341–366.
[25] Burk, D. L. (2018). *Bridging the gender gap in intellectual property*. WIPO Magazine.
[26] IP Business Academy, 2024.
[27] Gallagher Small Business, 2025.
[28] European Commission (2022). *New guidelines for knowledge valorisation in research and innovation*.

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startup opportunities. The Innovation Act can endorse such practices and perhaps tie future research commercialisation funding to actions on this front.

2. **Encourage women's entrepreneurship in academia.** Initiatives such as the ERC's entrepreneurial training or national "professor to innovator" programs could be expanded with a particular focus on women. A Europe-wide program could be established to identify high-potential women researchers and provide dedicated support – such as mini-MBAs, industry matchmaking, or seed funding – to help commercialise their results. While some Horizon Europe projects, for example under WomenTechEU, are beginning to address this, a significant scale-up is needed to fully unlock women's entrepreneurial potential in research.
3. **Gender criteria in IP management and funding.** The Act could propose that public R&I funding include criteria to ensure equal opportunities in patenting and spinoffs. For example, a grant for collaborative R&D could require the consortium to explain how they will encourage both women and men researchers to partake in any ensuing patenting or startup efforts. This could be done through fair team arrangements, recognition of contributions, and more. It's also worth exploring incentives for women to file patents – such as reduced fees for first-time women inventors (via the patent offices) or prize competitions for female inventors in key fields.
4. **Celebrate and network female inventors and innovators.** Support the creation of a European network or platform for women in innovation and IP, if one does not already exist. Regular events or awards, building on the EU Prize for Women Innovators, can raise the profile of female inventors, change stereotypes, and strengthen peer support. Success stories of women who have translated research into successful products should be featured in Commission innovation days and communications.

By integrating gender equality and inclusiveness into commercialisation efforts, we ensure that the excellent research done by women in Europe has an equal chance of translating into products, services, and businesses. This not only contributes to economic growth but also maximises the return on investment of public science funding, as we're more fully utilising the innovations arising from *all* researchers.

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Coordinate Member State efforts and share best practices on inclusive Innovation

Innovation is a shared competency across EU, national, and regional levels, so achieving systemic change will require coordination. Some Member States have already introduced policies to support women in innovation, such as national grants for female founders, or local tech hubs for women. Others have not yet addressed this issue. The Innovation Act provides a framework for aligning and elevating these efforts. This is particularly important because countries leading in innovation tend to also be leaders in gender equality, whereas many lower-tier innovators have significant gender gaps[29]. This suggests that helping those countries improve on gender inclusion could simultaneously boost their innovation capacity. Additionally, EU-wide challenges like AI ethics or STEM skill shortages benefit from a unified approach. For instance, if a country develops an effective program to increase girls' participation in AI, it should be shared and implemented in other Member States. Coordination also means avoiding fragmented regulatory approaches that might inadvertently ignore gender. The Act's proposal to establish a framework for coordination should explicitly include the goal of inclusive innovation as a topic.

Recommendations:

1. **Set up an EU coordination group or task force on Gender & Innovation.** This could be a subgroup under the European Innovation Council Forum or a component of the ERA Forum, involving Member State representatives and experts. They would be tasked with monitoring gender equality progress in innovation and advising on further actions, mirroring how the ERA Forum Sub-group on inclusive gender equality has driven gender equality in research policy. Such a body can ensure continuous attention and exchange on this issue beyond the initial Act.
2. **Require Member States to report on gender measures in innovation policy.** Through the Innovation Scoreboard or another mechanism, have countries include information on how they support women innovators (e.g., existence of a national strategy or targets, number of female startup support programs, etc.). This reporting could be lightweight but would instil a sense of

[29] Wroblewski, A. (2023). *Deliverable 5.2 Second report on monitoring ERA Action 5 implementation at national level*. GENDERACTIONplus, p. 22.

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accountability and allow identification of gaps where EU support might be needed. It aligns with the Better Regulation principle of monitoring outcomes[30].

3. **Encourage use of EU funds for inclusive innovation at national level.** Many Member States use EU Structural Funds for innovation and SME support. The Commission can issue guidance or incentives for them to allocate a portion of these funds to gender-focused initiatives like accelerator programs for women or digital skills training for girls. As structural funds already must mainstream gender, this leverages existing budgets to further the Act's goals without introducing additional burden.
4. **Benchmark and publicise progress.** The Act could introduce a periodic "Inclusive Innovation Index" or expand the European Innovation Scoreboard to include gender indicators. Publicising improvements in female participation across countries or regions can create healthy competition and spur further action. For example, if a country increases women startup founders from 5% in 2025 to 15% in 2027 through deliberate policies, highlighting this success can motivate others to follow suit.

By strengthening coordination in these areas, the EU can ensure that all innovation ecosystems advance, supporting less developed regions while sustaining progress in more advanced ones. This creates a coherent European approach where excellence and inclusiveness advance together, ensuring that no one is left behind in innovation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we strongly support the European Innovation Act's ambition to supercharge Europe's innovation ecosystem. We also firmly believe that integrating gender equality and inclusion is essential to the Act's success. By implementing the recommendations above, the Innovation Act can unlock a wealth of talent and ideas that are currently underutilised, creating a fairer, more dynamic, and more competitive system. Europe is facing immense transitions: the green transition, the digital/AI revolution, and shifts in the global economy. We cannot afford to waste the skills or innovative potential of half our population in meeting these challenges. Empowering women and diverse under-represented groups to fully participate in innovation will enhance Europe's capacity to develop solutions – from clean energy technologies to inclusive AI and healthcare innovations. The European Innovation

[30] European Commission. (2021). *Better regulation guidelines* (SWD(2021)305 final).

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Act can set a new standard by making inclusive innovation a cornerstone of Europe's future.

We appreciate the opportunity to provide input into this consultation and are ready to support the Commission in implementing these suggestions.

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