



# When Batteries Took Center Stage: Reliving the Energy Storage Association 2018 Boston Conference

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## Why Boston Became Ground Zero for Energy Innovation

A crisp New England autumn. The smell of Dunkin' coffee mixing with tech jargon. Over 3,000 energy professionals packed into the Boston Convention Center like lithium ions in a Tesla battery. The Energy Storage Association 2018 Boston conference wasn't just another industry meetup - it was Woodstock for electrons.

## The Storage Revolution Hits Its Stride

2018 marked a tipping point where energy storage shifted from "promising technology" to grid necessity. Conference organizers reported a 40% attendance jump from 2017, with utilities finally outnumbering startups in the crowd. As AES Energy Storage CEO Chris Shelton quipped during his keynote: "Five years ago, we were selling science projects. Now we're moving shipping containers full of batteries."

## 3 Game-Changing Moments From ESA 2018

**The 100MW Club Welcome Party:** Six different companies announced utility-scale projects exceeding 100MW capacity - a threshold previously considered impossible without massive subsidies

**Software Takes the Driver's Seat:** Fluence's unveiling of their AI-driven bidding system made traders nervous and utilities giddy

**Safety Gets Sexy:** A fiery demo of new thermal runaway prevention tech (conducted safely outdoors!) became the talk of cocktail hours

## Storage Economics That Would Make Adam Smith Smile

Conference panels revealed staggering cost declines - \$209/kWh for grid-scale lithium systems, down 76% from 2010. But the real story emerged during coffee breaks. As one project developer whispered: "We're not just beating peaker plants anymore. Last month, we underbid a combined-cycle gas unit in the CAISO market."

## Policy Wars: The New England Edition

While technical sessions focused on battery chemistry, the real sparks flew in regulatory debates. Massachusetts' SMART program faced intense scrutiny, with developers arguing its solar+storage incentives acted like "training wheels that needed removal." Meanwhile, ISO-NE's admission that their markets weren't storage-ready caused audible groans from the audience.

## The Duck Curve Gets a Makeover

CAISO's famous solar duck diagram became conference meme material, with multiple presenters



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photoshopping battery icons onto duck illustrations. The best came from NEC Energy Solutions, showing their batteries as duck-shaped floaties keeping the grid head above water.

## Startup Alley: Where Dreams Met Reality Checks

The exhibit hall buzzed with 83 vendors showcasing everything from flow batteries to blockchain-based VPP platforms. But veteran attendees noticed a pattern - fewer flying-car concepts, more focus on practical BESS applications. As one investor told me: "In 2016, everyone promised to reinvent the electron. Now they just want to shift its bedtime."

Most Practical Innovation: Stem's "Storage-as-a-Service" model eliminating upfront costs

Best Swag: Tesla's solar-powered phone chargers (that actually worked)

Biggest Reality Check: Multiple vendors admitting their "revolutionary" AI was just Excel macros with a fresh coat of paint

## When Academia Met Industry

MIT researchers dropped a bombshell during their panel - their new solid-state electrolyte could potentially triple lithium battery density. The catch? "It works beautifully.. coin cells the size of a dime." When pressed on commercialization timelines, the lead professor smiled: "Ask me again at ESA 2028."

## Utility Speak Decoded: A Crash Course

For first-time attendees, utility jargon created a steep learning curve. Here's quick translator:

"Non-wires alternative" = "We'd rather buy batteries than fix old infrastructure"

"Value stacking" = "How many revenue streams can we cram into one battery?"

"Behind-the-meter opportunity" = "Your home battery will do our grid favors"

## The Ghost of Storage Past

An unexpected highlight came during the closing reception. ESA organizers screened archival footage from their 1991 conference - complete with floppy disk demonstrations and a keynote predicting "advanced lead-acid batteries will dominate the 21st century." The crowd's mixture of laughter and nostalgia said it all: energy storage had finally grown up.

## Boston's Lasting Legacy

As attendees scattered to Logan Airport, two numbers dominated post-conference chatter: 2025 (the year many predicted storage would become mandatory for new grid projects) and 2030 (when DOE targets suggest



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storage costs could hit \$75/kWh). But perhaps the real legacy of ESA 2018 was subtler - the moment storage stopped being special and started being normal.

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