

Solar Grids Built on NJ Farmland Get Senate Backing

TOM JOHNSON, ENERGY/ENVIRONMENT WRITER | AUGUST 25, 2020 | [ENERGY & ENVIRONMENT](#)

Large enough to feed utility companies, these solar farms could revert to agriculture



Large solar farms are part of the landscape elsewhere in the country like this one on the Standing Rock Indian Reservation, North Dakota.

New Jersey farmland could be opened up to huge utility-scale solar projects, a reversal of long-standing policy to preserve open spaces, under a bill that cleared its first legislative hurdle Monday.

The legislation ([S-2605](#)) won approval from the Senate Environment and Energy Committee, as proponents argued the state never would achieve the Murphy administration's goal to transition to a clean-energy economy without a robust solar energy program. And perhaps more importantly, they said, a green economy that promotes building larger solar fields that supply power to the grid.

If existing farmland is going to be converted to warehouses or to building McMansions, proponents suggested, why not allow the property to be used as solar farms, a proposition that would allow current agricultural land to return to its original use decades later.

Grid-scale projects — ones that produce at least 10 megawatts of electricity — are viewed as “absolutely essential” to reach the goal of having New Jersey residents get 34% of their power from solar by mid-century, according to Sen. Bob Smith (D-Middlesex), the chairman of the committee and primary bill sponsor.

“The bill, right now, is not a perfect bill,” said Smith, noting it has a long road before it wins final legislative approval. Indeed, the legislation couldn’t get approved by his committee only a week ago when other members of the panel questioned whether it had the support of the Murphy administration.

Pinelands, Highlands excluded

That issue was quashed Monday when a representative from the state Board of Public Utilities, the agency overseeing implementation of clean-energy policies, endorsed the bill. “We don’t have any time to waste,” said Chanced Lykins, director of governmental affairs for the BPU. “No doubt we’ve got a lot of work to get to 34 percent.”

New Jersey currently obtains about 5% of its electricity from solar panels, but at a cost that has been widely criticized as too expensive. So much so, a law was enacted two years ago ordering the BPU to scrap the current ratepayer-subsidized system of financing new projects. Many view utility-scale projects as a more cost-effective way to achieve the state’s renewable energy goals.

In releasing the bill, the committee amended it in numerous ways, perhaps most importantly excluding areas in the Pinelands, the New Jersey Highlands, preserved farmland, and freshwater wetlands.

Tom Gilbert of the New Jersey Conservation Foundation told the committee those exclusions do not go far enough, asking for more agricultural land to be excluded from development, as well as more protections for forests. Forests sequester and store about 8% of New Jersey’s greenhouse gas emissions, he said.

But Jeff Tittel, director of the New Jersey Sierra Club, disagreed. “The most important piece is we are expanding the pie. That’s critical because we need to be building a lot more than 200 megawatts a year,” Tittel said. “We are not getting there without farmland.”

Requiring developers to help butterflies, birds and bees

If it were to become law, the bill would ramp up solar expansion by requiring 375 MW of utility-scale solar, in the first four years. By 2026, the state would build 1,500 MW of such solar under an amendment to the bill.

Another amendment would require state environmental officials to establish new standards for requiring solar developers to plant native species on farmland converted to utility-scale projects, under the premise it would increase the number of pollinators in those areas. Butterflies, some birds, and most important, bees help produce flowering plants, many vegetables and other crops.

“This will create thousands of acres of grasslands for pollinators,” said Tim Daniels, a principal of Dakota Power, which is seeking to build a huge solar facility on 800 acres of farmland in Pilesgrove, South Jersey.

The two big remaining issues for legislators to resolve involve the financing of the utility-scale projects and whether additional lands, such as forests need to be protected, according to Smith. Under the current bill, long-term power purchase agreements between the solar projects and state utilities would provide the financing, with the cost being assumed by utility customers.

Critics fear that system would lock in long-term contracts at above market prices. They argue prices for solar and other renewable energy sources have dropped dramatically in recent years. Advocates say those concerns could be resolved by establishing caps on those contracts.

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