

Harvesting the Sun Creates Challenges for Solar Farms

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A mid-September community meeting in New York's Greene County drew a crowd of more than a hundred local citizens with opinions about a 50 megawatt (50MW) solar facility proposed on active farmland in the town of Coxsackie. Billed as a public forum, the meeting was, in fact, controlled by opponents of the project. Misinformation was rampant and those wishing to speak in support of the project were silenced or shouted down. At the center of this proposal is a 1,200-acre farm site, of which 933 acres have been leased by the developer.

The founder of the local opposition group Saving Greene is a local landowner whose large home overlooks the proposed site. She handed out a map with inked-out areas it claimed to be destined for darkness. The leased site is completely blacked out. Yet the developer plans to use less than 400 acres for the solar arrays. The other two-thirds will remain in active farming or conservation.



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Most important, in these difficult financial times for New York's farmers, the owner says the lease of this portion of his land will allow him to retain ownership of the farm. In addition, the developer offers attractive financial benefits not just to the landowner but to the community as a whole. Developers of the Greene County Solar Facility have offered a \$4-6 million payment package to the host community, local governments and school district, with the community to decide how best to use this economic benefit.

What the opponents of this project fail to realize is that their community is not really facing a choice between soybeans or solar panels: it is facing the likely outcome of a future featuring tract homes and strip malls, with farmland removed from the picture completely.

Change is always hard, and it invites controversy. It has been 20 years since the first wind turbines went up on farmland in central New York. Yet, despite the success of many small and large wind farms across the state, which have provided reliable and needed income to many farming families, renewable energy developers are still finding it hard to win communities over to support their projects. While farmers are often supportive, recognizing the value of lease fees and tax benefits, neighbors, especially second-home owners, are able to mount political opposition, adding to project costs, causing delays and even stopping permit approvals.

Ironically, solar facilities are among the least disruptive of any electricity-producing technologies. The land used by the solar facility can be returned to full agricultural production after the planned life of the project.

While most local opposition to large-scale renewable projects boils down to the issue of viewshed, farmers and supporters of agriculture increasingly see the connection between farming and the world's growing climate crisis. We watch the devastation in places like Puerto Rico and the Carolinas caused by the historic fury of catastrophic storms, coupled with a summer of record heat and western wildfires. Over time, farm families will be among those hardest hit. Climate change is undermining the ability to grow food in a productive and environmentally sustainable way. Simply reducing greenhouse gas emissions is not sufficient to reduce the damage human activity has already contributed to the environment. Efforts are needed to actually draw down carbon from the air, something farmers are uniquely suited to do. Practices such as cover crops, no-till, and rotational planting and grazing help sequester carbon in the soil.

It won't be long before harvesting the sun is a recognized mainstay of the farming community. As a state, New York actively encourages both the development of renewable energy and the preservation of active farmland. Those who invest in, and find the right balance between the two will define success in the coming years, saving the land from permanent suburbanization, protecting the planet and finding the resources to keep families on the land for generations to come.



Anne Reynolds is the Executive Director of the Alliance for Clean Energy New York (ACE NY), an Albany-based nonprofit organization formed in 2006 to promote clean and renewable energy and energy efficiency. Ms. Reynolds has over 20 years of experience in the energy and environmental arena. Most recently she served as a Deputy Commissioner at the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC). She holds a Master of Environmental Studies from Yale University and a BS in Biology and Environmental Studies from Tufts University.