



# **New Jersey Conservation**

F O U N D A T I O N

**Testimony of Thomas A. Gilbert**  
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*Pa Senate Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee*

Thank you for the opportunity to testify regarding utility-scale solar development on agricultural lands. Since 1960, the New Jersey Conservation Foundation has preserved over 125,000 acres of open space and farmland throughout the state. We continue to preserve significant amounts of farmland each year, and we lease land to farmers on several of our preserves that is in active agricultural production. We are deeply committed to farmland preservation and sustainable agriculture. We also fully support the need to develop clean, renewable sources of energy with sound siting.

While I work for the NJ Conservation Foundation, I live in Buckingham Township in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. I have served on the Township Agricultural Preservation Committee since 2008 and our community has a long, consistent history of farmland preservation. I am pleased to have the opportunity to share my views on this issue.

New Jersey Conservation Foundation believes that with thoughtful planning and policies, we can meet aggressive clean energy goals necessary to reduce harmful emissions, while maintaining protections for important agricultural and natural resources. These issues were debated in the New Jersey Legislature over the past several years, resulting in legislation enacted to create a new incentive program for utility-scale solar projects with strong siting provisions to protect high-value agricultural soils and lands prioritized for farmland preservation. We believe this can be a model for Pennsylvania and other states to consider.

The legislation directs the NJ Board of Public Utilities to work with the NJ Department of Environmental Protection and NJ State Agricultural Development Committee to develop siting criteria for utility-scale solar that safeguard critical resources and steer solar development to already disturbed or marginal lands. The legislation stipulates that solar incentives shall not be provided for projects located on either prime or statewide important soils within Agricultural Development Areas (ADAs). These ADAs have been designated by the State and counties under existing statute with a goal of keeping large blocks of contiguous farmland with the best soils in agriculture.

The State Agricultural Development Committee has identified the need to preserve over 500,000 acres of farmland to maintain the long-term viability of the agriculture industry in the state. The state is just over halfway toward meeting that goal, so hundreds of thousands of acres of farmland still need to be preserved. By steering solar development away from the best soils in

the ADAs that are priorities for farmland preservation, the legislation avoids a conflict between the state's farmland preservation and agricultural retention goals, and its ambitious goals to increase solar energy as part of an Energy Master Plan to achieve 100% clean energy by 2050. Solar development on marginal soils within the ADAs, or on farmland outside of the ADAs can receive state solar incentives under the new program. These lands, in combination with landfills, brownfields, parking lots and rooftops, the state's preferred locations for solar development, should provide sufficient space to meet the state's solar goals.

New Jersey has other solar incentive programs to support such development, including a Community Solar Pilot Program and newly created dual-use pilot program. The latter will help to advance our understanding of the potential for co-locating solar development with agricultural production, but also generally restricts such projects to marginal farmland outside of the best soils in the ADAs. This concept has potential, but more information is needed to understand what types of agriculture can co-exist with solar development, possible impacts to soil productivity from construction and operation of the solar project, and the cost-effectiveness of dual-use solar compared to other types of solar development.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify, we hope that our experience in New Jersey will be helpful to your efforts to meet the twin, important goals of developing clean, solar energy while preserving farmland and farming in Pennsylvania.