Testimony of Scott Elias, Senior Manager of Mid-Atlantic State Affairs, Solar Energy Industries Association (SEIA)

To the

Senate Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee Hearing
Utility-Scale Solar Development and Agricultural Land
September 21, 2021

The Solar Energy Industries Association (SEIA) is the national trade group for America's solar energy industry. SEIA works with its 1,000 member companies and other strategic partners to fight for policies that create jobs in every community and shape fair market rules that promote competition and the growth of reliable, low-cost solar power. SEIA has more than 30 member companies located in Pennsylvania with many more national firms also conducting business in the state.

The solar industry is strongly committed to responsible land use, community partnership, and being good stewards of the sites our systems occupy. As solar continues to expand into new markets, including agricultural communities in Pennsylvania, the solar industry is actively working to minimize any impacts to agricultural activity, while advancing dual-use options where appropriate and providing benefits back to farming communities. Indeed, the basic premise that farmland preservation and large-scale solar are competing is incorrect since solar development in rural areas can act as a powerful tool for farmland preservation.

Solar Helps American Farmers

As family farms are increasingly squeezed to make ends meet, farmers all over the country have found that solar projects offer a new revenue stream that helps support their bottom line. Increasingly, farmers can rely on solar lease payments as a steady revenue stream to help mitigate market volatility, droughts and other threats to their livelihoods. This can help family farms stay in the family and counteract the ongoing trend of farms being lost due to economic hardships.

Solar and Agricultural Land Use

Solar can help regenerate farmland, improving its use for agriculture in the future. Solar development does not involve large-scale removal of topsoil, allowing the land to return to agricultural production at the end of a project's life. This is not the case with other forms of development such as residential and commercial construction that permanently remove topsoil.

Solar and agriculture not only exist side-by-side, but increasingly are found together. Indeed, that's one of the key reasons the Department of Energy has put together a *Farmer's Guide to Going Solar* resource that demonstrates that responsible solar development can improve soil health, reduce erosion, sequester

emissions, and provide even lower-cost energy to local communities. Sheep farmers have opportunities to contract for vegetation management of solar sites and thus increase farm viability. Indeed, the National Renewable Energy Lab notes successful examples where solar facilities have been co-located with agricultural operations or have native vegetation growing beneath the panels, which demonstrates the growing potential of promoting continued agricultural production under and around solar installations.[1]

Solar and Property Values

It is a common misconception that ground-mounted solar farms decrease nearby property values. Examining property values across the U.S. shows that large-scale solar arrays usually have no measurable impact on the value of adjacent properties, and in some cases may even increase their value. Furthermore, proximity to solar farms does not deter sale or lease of agricultural or residential land. Large solar projects have similar characteristics to a greenhouses or single-story residence. Usually no more than ten feet high, solar farms are often enclosed by fencing and/or landscaping to minimize visual impacts.

Solar & End-of-Life Management

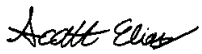
End-of-life management is important for all photovoltaic ("PV") technologies to ensure clean energy solutions are a sustainable component of the energy economy for future generations. Industry best practices direct the inclusion of decommissioning provisions within solar lease agreements to ensure that solar systems will be decommissioned safely and responsibly and won't place an undue burden on landowners or the community. This involves removing solar equipment and restoring the land to its original condition or adapting it to a new use, based on the preference of the landowner. As a result, once the pilings and equipment are easily removed, the land a solar system occupies can be reverted back to agricultural uses. Additionally, because the operational life for solar installations is 25 or more years, a site can return to stand-alone agricultural use and benefit from more fertile soils.

Conclusion

The solar industry shares an interest in building and preserving strong agricultural communities in Pennsylvania. We look forward to partnering with you to help customers take control of their energy futures and create jobs and economic development in rural areas across the Commonwealth.

Thank you for your time and attention. Should you have any questions regarding these matters, you can reach me at the contact information below

Sincerely,



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[1] NREL: Overview of Opportunities for Co-Location of Solar Energy Technologies and Vegetation