

Senate Agriculture & Rural Affairs Committee
Utility Scale Solar and Agriculture Hearing
PA Department of Agriculture
September 21, 2021

The Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture appreciates this opportunity to speak to the committee on utility scale solar and farmland.

In discussions with our colleagues in government and our stakeholders, it is clear that solar energy production can and does play a positive role in production agriculture. While sometimes in conflict, often there is land use compatibility between solar energy production and production agriculture. As with other industries, solar seems to favor flat land due to the low cost of development. Unfortunately, these lands often have the best soils for producing food. Competing land uses are not new to the agricultural landscape.

We take seriously the ways in which our land is used. We are also grateful for the legislative support that has allowed us to continue the important work of preserving farmland. Pennsylvania leads the United States in farmland preservation with 5,928 farms and 601,647 acres permanently protected through permanent agricultural conservation easements. This land serves to increase food security, protect our agricultural heritage, and support adjacent natural resources. As in the past, there continue to be competing land uses that threaten future and existing farmland. The most recent "Farms Under Threat: State of the State's" report from the American Farmland Trust notes there continue to be major risks to farmland across the commonwealth, particularly low-density residential development, generational transitions, and climate change. Fortunately, compared to all other states, the American Farmland Trust ranks Pennsylvania ranks 4th in policy response to farmland protection.

Over 1,000 of Pennsylvania's 1,400 townships have created Agricultural Security Areas, or ASAs under Act 43 of 1988, expressing a desire to retain land use for primarily agricultural purposes. Being in an ASA is a condition to participating in the Farmland Preservation program. Despite being a leader in farmland protection, we must continue to reevaluate new land uses as they come about. Utility scale solar is one such land use type. Solar differs from other land use types in that it has no emissions, produces no sound, and is not intended to be a permanent structure. The Department does not have a mechanism in statute through which to dictate where utility scale solar can be deployed. The only measures currently in place under the Department are the restriction of utility scale solar on land enrolled in farmland preservation and the Clean and Green preferential tax assessment program. All other considerations and limitations would fall to the local zoning codes.

The Department recommends that careful consideration take place when siting a utility scale solar installation on or near agricultural lands. Specifically, we recommend that prime farmland soil remains available for agricultural production and that placement of solar installations instead take place on rooftops, impervious surfaces or on less productive soils.

That said, there are many examples of solar and agriculture taking place simultaneously. In the cases of pastured livestock, apiaries, some specialty crops, and floriculture; solar can provide a multitude of benefits for the farmer. Just as many Pennsylvania farms have diversified their agriculture production to become more resilient, properly cited solar installations can serve as a further economic support. The fact that solar can be removed enables a farm to return to full agricultural production, something that may not be possible under other land use types, such as residential development, warehousing, and or other energy development.

In closing, farmland has always been and continues to be a critical part of Pennsylvania's economy and heritage. The commonwealth's agricultural communities face pressures from other land uses and will require careful attention now and into the future. Fortunately, we are one of just a few states that have tools to address these concerns. Utility scale solar presents us with something new to consider in our conversations on farmland protection. There are practical ways for utility scale solar to be responsibly deployed. Utility scale solar is not absent of risk, but provides an opportunity for farmers to diversify their portfolios while also ensuring more permanent forms of development do not compromise our agricultural land. In addition, the deployment of solar aids in the commonwealth's mission to address climate change, which has serious implications for the agricultural community as our state becomes warmer and wetter. The Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture will continue to support the agricultural community and work closely with our legislature to ensure that farms are conserved and sustainable.

We would be happy to address any questions members of the committee might have at this time.

Thank you.