



## Opinion: Solar farms shouldn't sprawl all over agricultural land

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By **Times of Trenton guest opinion column**

By **Barry Chalofsky**

I have been an environmentalist since the early 1970s, when, along with thousands of other baby boomer college students, I discovered the environmental problems associated with our post-World War II economic success. I have spent most of my life in the service of the environment during my 35 years at the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection.

However, I recently found myself in a situation that I found difficult to reconcile.



Michael Mancuso/The Times

The Lawrenceville School solar farm off Route 206 (Main Street) in Lawrence.

For years, the nation has talked about reducing our dependence on oil as the major source of energy. We have touted "clean forms of energy" such as wind, hydroelectricity and solar energy. It seems easy to push for these clean sources, since they do not pollute the environment and they use free sources of energy — the wind, water and the sun.

Along with being an environmentalist, I am also a licensed professional planner in New Jersey, which gives me the credentials to testify as an expert before planning and zoning boards. Recently, a local company asked me to testify on its behalf before a local zoning board regarding the development of a "solar farm" to be built on an existing farm. The idea is that a farm field is already cleared and the size of the clearing would allow a large number of solar panels to be built with minimal cost and greater economies of scale.

Solar energy is good, and I would get paid well for a few hours of work. So where was my dilemma?

Since 2011, PSE&G has built approximately 46 megawatts of solar energy projects in New Jersey (PSE&G is not the company that approached me) and spent millions of dollars installing "solar farms." It even placed solar panels on thousands of telephone poles throughout the state. Other companies have also rushed into the business of solar energy.

New Jersey is recognized as a leader in solar installations. PSE&G and Jersey Central Power and Light rank third and ninth in solar generation in the country, according to the Solar Energy Industries Association 2011 Report. Even though the market for solar energy is facing some difficult times, the development of solar continues and is likely to provide more energy in the future.

The real dilemma lies not in whether to go solar, but rather where. The use of the term "farm" is misleading. It simply refers to a collection of solar panels.

Real farming — the production of food — is what the Garden State has been about for hundreds of years. Granted, we don't have the large factory farms or dairy farms of other states, but we still have a thriving and productive agriculture. When they think of New Jersey, most Americans think of the Turnpike, industrial parks, suburban and urban housing or the shore. It is difficult for them to imagine that we have thousands of acres dedicated to farming.

Unfortunately, these acres have been reduced by 26 percent over the last 30 years. While the loss has been tempered in recent years due to the recession, it still continues.

Protecting the environment is not just about clean water and clean air; it is also about protecting our ability to live on the Earth.

What New Jersey farms offer is food that is fresher and of better quality than food shipped in from out of state. Building solar panels on farms only leads to increased loss of farmland.

In addition, adding new impervious surfaces to farmland will increase flooding and reduce ground water infiltration. More important, it destroys a way of life that keeps us in touch with nature.

Almost all of the recent solar farms are built in urban areas, where the need for energy is immediate. Typically, they are built either on vacant land, on rooftops, or on land that was previously contaminated. We need to encourage this type of development. Putting impervious solar panels on surfaces that are already impervious, such as rooftops, does not exacerbate our flooding and storm water problems, as it would if we installed them on farmland or in cleared woodlands.

We need to ensure that solar panels do not diminish the aesthetics of the urban environment and should regulate their placement through local zoning, as is being discussed by Hoboken and other municipalities. While we may not like the look of solar panels on telephone poles, at least they are not hurting the environment.

We need to work with the energy industry to use more of our rooftops, maybe by providing options such as leasing with payback through energy savings over time.

We also need to modify the existing energy credit system to minimize the impact of reduced market pricing and reduced subsidies.

Solar energy is clearly a major positive resource that helps reduce our need to import oil and our impact on the environment.

In the end, I couldn't support the concept of that solar farm, so I turned down the job. I hope the rest of the state can make the same decision.

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