

## **Maine Agricultural Solar Stakeholder Group Meeting #1 Summary - June 3, 2021**

**Stakeholder Member Attendance:** Nick Armentrout (Spring Creek Farm), Emily Cole (American Farmland Trust), Heather Donahue (Balfour Farm), Ellen Griswold (Maine Farmland Trust), Sarah Haggerty (Maine Audubon), Kaitlin Hollinger (BlueWave), Matt Kearns (Longroad Energy), Fortunat Mueller (ReVision Energy), George O'Keefe (Town of Rumford), Andy Smith (The Milkhouse), Julie Ann Smith (Maine Farm Bureau), Patrick Wynne (City of Hallowell), Celina Cunningham (Governor's Energy Office); Nancy McBrady (Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry)

On June 3, 2021 the Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry (DACF) and the Governor's Energy Office (GEO) virtually hosted the first meeting of the Agricultural Solar Stakeholder Group meeting. Through these meetings the group will assess the potential impact of solar development on Maine's prime farmland and soils of statewide importance and develop a set of recommendations to balance the need to protect Maine's current and future farmland against the need to develop sources of renewable solar energy.

### **Introduction**

After a brief welcome from the Facilitator, Jo D. Saffeir, the meeting was kicked off by DACF Commissioner Amanda Beal. DACF acknowledged that agricultural land is an important tool in our response to climate change. While expressing support for renewable energy development in Maine and recognizing the financial opportunity solar brings to farmers, it was cautioned that farmland could be negatively impacted without guardrails. DACF and GEO expressed resolve in the expertise of the stakeholders to develop recommendations to support solar development and protect agricultural land.

### **Current Scope of Solar Development and Drivers in Maine**

GEO provided an overview of recent laws, policies, and procurements associated with the advancement of renewable energy, including specific solar programs. The full presentation can be viewed [here](#). Following the presentation, there was a discussion about potential changes to the Net Energy Billing and distributed generation programs, both of which are still under review by the current legislature. Stakeholders were also interested in learning more about the locations of the [17 renewable energy projects](#), which were recently approved by the Public Utilities Commission; at this time there is limited details on the specific location/land type for individual projects.

### **Maine Audubon's Solar Siting Mapping Tool**

Maine Audubon presented the Maine Renewable Energy Siting Tool, which is an updated version of their original GIS-tool that now includes wind siting and is to be launched in June. The GIS-tool aggregates Maine's mapped natural resources, developed/previously impacted land (such as landfills and Brownfields), as well as solar siting constraints (such as proximity to transmission lines) to aid in identifying areas with lower wildlife and habitat impacts.

Using this tool Maine Audubon has mapped all 180 solar projects submitted to DEP for review, noting that there are many smaller projects not triggering a DEP review and that not all projects reviewed will be built. Of the 180 projects: 43% intersect high value plant and animal habitat and 49% intersect with large forest blocks. 58% intersect with large agricultural land (5 acres of continuous crop land or 10 acres of pasture) and 89% intersect with high value agricultural blocks. More information was requested about the intersection of prime ag land vs ag land of statewide significance. Only 6% of the projects intersect with gravel pits and 3% with capped landfills. The utilization of these sites tend to be limited by the lack of transmission lines nearby.

### **Articulation of Problem Statement and Shared Principles**

In advance of the meeting, DACF/GEO provided Stakeholder Members a draft problem statement and shared principles. Reviewing these, the group:

- Identified a need to better understand the different types of land available for development and whether it was possible to identify a hierarchy of importance;
- Discussed the role of forested land, including its role in carbon sequestration and protecting water resources;
- Discussed other stressors on farmland, including housing development and whether solar could help preserve agricultural soils for the future; and
- Discussed the life of solar projects and whether they can be reverted to agriculture; members articulated that demand for land for solar projects would continue beyond the life of the first projects.

The group did not propose any additions or changes to the problem statement/principles. See [recording](#) for full discussion.

### **Identification of Solar Siting Levers for Group's Future Consideration**

After a discussion of the problem statement, the group discussed various avenues to explore potential tools to promote balance between the two sectors. Generally, the group was in support of considering levers/buckets in the categories of regulatory, guidance, and incentives.

Statutory/Regulatory – Various regulatory considerations were discussed including a DEP Permit By Rule (PBR) application for solar development of Brownfields, PFAS contaminated sites, and dual-use projects. DEP is undertaking a rulemaking process for PBRs and a presentation from DEP on its role and rulemaking was requested. Another tool could be including additional siting considerations to future PUC procurement processes to influence development. There was caution against further narrowing the opportunities for farmers and complicating existing municipal regulatory processes. More information was requested about municipal ordinance processes and current use taxation impacts. Outside the scope of this group's work, there is interest in integrated resource planning for the transmission and distribution planning to make Brownfields more viable for solar development.

Incentives – The group was interested in exploring opportunities for incentives. The example of adders used in Massachusetts' SMART program should be reviewed with a caveat that the solar markets between the states are very different. The group requested information on the financials of dual use.

Best Management Practices/Voluntary Guidance – They are considered helpful and there is a significant amount of existing BMPs available from state agencies and NGOs that could be utilized in the state in combination with the other buckets, but these alone are likely insufficient.