

Why should Kentucky embrace solar power?

By Hilda Legg In My View

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Agriculture and energy have historically shared a symbiotic relationship, especially since the Rural Electrification Administration (REA) was created 85 years ago — to bring electricity to rural America. This development, coupled with the ingenuity and hard work of U.S. farm families, enabled us to become the breadbasket of the world.

Good agriculture and reliable, affordable energy go hand in hand.

Here in the Bluegrass State, we were traditionally blessed to pay some of the nation’s lowest utility rates because of our abundance of coal. However, we have seen that shift in recent years, as energy costs have increased due to burdensome regulations on the coal industry. Because of this stark reality, states like Kentucky have had to adapt.

In my former role as U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Administrator for the Rural Utilities Service (formerly the REA), our office established a new dedicated funding stream for electric coops to diversify their portfolios. All forms of alternative energy were approved for this program, so that rural communities could avoid the rolling brownouts and excessive electric rates that plague many of our nation’s urban centers.

Alternative sources of energy like solar are vital to balancing our ever-expanding power demand; and moving forward, our state’s policymakers must ensure that Kentucky is never again so heavily dependent upon only one source of energy. A balanced approach that incorporates innovative sources like solar power has numerous benefits.

By utilizing a portion of their land for solar production, farmers can enjoy a steady, reliable revenue stream to offset fluctuations in the volatile crop and livestock markets — perhaps even providing stability enough to keep the farm in the family into the next generation.

Farmland also has a chance to recover from cultivation during its usage for solar. After the lifetime of a project is complete (usually approximately 30 years) and responsible decommissioning takes place, the land is better than ever — unlike residential subdivisions or commercial developments which forever alter the landscape.

One concern that I have heard voiced is in regard to the agricultural land mass utilized by solar farms. I genuinely cherish every acre of the Commonwealth's farmland and have served on the Kentucky Purchase of Agricultural Conservation Easement (PACE) Corporation board, working to protect and preserve that premium asset.

A glance at comprehensive agriculture data helps to put this issue in perspective. USDA categorizes 12.8 million acres of the Commonwealth as farmland. If you tally every current and proposed solar project statewide, that represents less than 28,000 total acres. In other words, solar projects across the state utilize only 0.002% of Kentucky farm acres.

A recent statistic from North Carolina, which has risen to become the No. 2 state in solar installations, is also telling. Over the past decade, that state lost one million acres of cropland to development and housing, yet only 1% of that total was utilized for solar development.

We can definitely strike a healthy balance between the need for farmland preservation and the importance of keeping the lights on across Kentucky at an affordable price. It is possible to be good stewards of all our natural resources (including farmland), while also ensuring that we make forward-thinking decisions that benefit all our citizens.

Harnessing the vast, untapped power of the sun offers a valuable new tool that is an all-around win for the Bluegrass State — helping family farmers to find economic stability, creating new tax revenue for local communities, and equipping energy providers to meet increasing electric generation needs.

The sun shines bright, indeed, here in the Bluegrass State. Let's seize this opportunity that will not only enhance the future of electric generation — but will improve the future for generations of Kentuckians.

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