



# MASSACHUSETTS FARM BUREAU FEDERATION, INC.

*"The Voice of Agriculture"*

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Oct 21, 2016

To: MA Department of Energy Resources  
From: MA Farm Bureau Federation  
RE: Next Generation Solar Incentive Straw Proposal

I am writing on behalf of the Massachusetts Farm Bureau Federation (MFBBF) to provide comment on the framework presented for the Next Generation Solar Incentive Straw Proposal. MFBBF is a non-profit organization which represents the interests of farmers. We are the largest farming organization in Massachusetts representing more than 6,000 families.

We understand that DOER is developing regulations addressing placement of solar arrays on prime agricultural soils, with proposed restrictions that would limit placements in such areas. While well intentioned, we have serious concerns about the approaches proposed thus far. We also have suggestions on how DOER might address these concerns.

## Concerns

- For many farmers, solar installations are a good means of supplementing farm income in order to keep farms financially viable. Farming is a tenuous business subject to the influence by weather, pests and market fluctuation. Income is seasonal. Solar arrays offer a means by which farms can use a portion of their land to obtain a year-round and dependable income. In many cases, this predictable income allows them to farm the remainder of their land. Without this income, some would have no other choice but to sell or otherwise develop the land.

We understand the impetus to keep prime agricultural soils available for farming. However, this is a long-term, rather than a short-term endeavor. Unlike other alternative uses for agricultural land, solar arrays are easily removed. Soil is not covered extensively or removed from the site. Once arrays are removed, the land remains un-subdivided, un-paved, and suitable for farming. **Outside of a profitable agricultural use, solar arrays may be the best alternative to selling agricultural land for development.**

- DOER staff has suggested that part of the reason for considering restriction on arrays on agricultural land is due to concerns of the public about arrays being placed on open space. We would suggest that such issues are best addressed by local communities, where officials are more familiar with the factors involved. It is very difficult for a state agency to have enough knowledge of a local community to distinguish between NIMBYism and legitimate concerns. NIMBYism is a significant and ongoing issue with many agricultural activities, including siting of solar arrays.

- Potential impacts on agricultural land are limited. Analysis suggests that even if 100% of the next 1600 MW were built on farm/wood lands, only about 1% of farm/wood land in Massachusetts would be used for solar.
- The designations of Prime Farmland Soils and Prime Forestland cover most of the state's land area, including almost all of the western part of the state. Proposed restrictions would have the most impact in rural areas where there is already less development, less economic opportunity, and lower land values.
- Excluding land from solar incentives which is protected under MGL Chapters 61, 61a and 61b would create an incentive to remove land from Chapter 61 protection. This would reduce the economic incentive to keep the land from development. *Due to the higher tax rate, there would be an increase incentive to develop the land*
- We are concerned with the degree to which DOER proposes to rely on the Department of Agricultural Resources (DAR) for future guidance on these issues. While DAR is a stakeholder on these issues, and has a valid perspective – there are many other stakeholders who differing perspectives which need to be considered.

### Suggestions

- DOER needs to consider that differences between arrays intended for commercial energy production from those used for energy to be used on-farm. In no way, shape or form should DOER create barriers to farms installing solar arrays where the bulk of the energy produced is used to support the need of the farm and related activities. Such uses of prime soils are akin to the building of barns and greenhouses – it is a legitimate farm use.
- For commercial installations (non-farm energy use), DOER should allow any prime forestland or farmland that was enrolled in 61, 61A or 61B - and which was not purchased under the associated Right of First Refusal - to be eligible for installation of solar arrays. Additional considerations such as whether is wetland, priority habitat, etc. should be dealt with under those section of law and regulation.
- We would consider supporting restrictions on solar arrays on prime soils which ensure that construction practices utilized do not harm the long-term viability of the use of land for agriculture. More discussion of this topic is necessary.

As a final note, we encourage DOER to analyze how the proposed rules would impact rural communities. In our rural communities, open space is the predominant landscape. The risk to benefit ratio for land development in rural areas is different than it is inside of 495. Please do not enforce a “Boston perspective” on the rural areas of the Commonwealth. It will both limit economic development in these communities, and a move to renewable energy throughout the Commonwealth.

Thanks you for your consideration of our comments. We welcome the opportunity to sit down with DOER and discuss these concerns.

Should you have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Brad Mitchell  
Director of Government Affairs