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Maine's State Policy For Solar Farms on Agricultural Land.

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Maine's State Policy For Solar Farms on Agricultural Land.

Background:

A change is coming to the Northeast, and Maine is not prepared to handle it. Across the Northeast, agricultural land is being converted to solar farms, with no policy in place to handle it. Opening Maine up to numerous problems with, permitting, regulations, taxes, best management practices, size of these farms, and lack of infrastructure to name a few. All of which need to be addressed, while dealing with the general instability of policies surrounding green energy and green technology like solar panels. This change is coming quickly, and although we need this policy soon, it cannot be rushed, or we risk negative externalities. To begin, we will look at solidifying the ever-changing policies in Maine around green technologies. Next, look at if this is best handled on the state or local level. Before lastly looking at how taxes and best management practices should be implemented for these farms. With this, the general information of this topic will be laid out, and allow for a more open dialogue between citizens, entrepreneurs, farmers, and policymakers.

Maine's Current Uncertainty Around Solar Energy:

Before we can talk about agricultural land being used as a solar farm, we need to get our policies around green energy solidified. Town Manager, Dana K. Lee from the town of Eliot Maine has some concerns around green technology he would like to see hammered out before we look at other policies involving green technology. Dana said, " We need a stable, predictable energy policy, and right now it is subject to if we have a Republican in the office or a Democrat. That should not be the case; it should be a simple case of economics." (personal interview, March 1, 2018). Currently, when we look at Energy.gov's website, under Residential Renewable Energy Tax Credit, it says "A taxpayer may claim a credit of 30% of qualified expenditures for a system that serves a dwelling unit located in the United States that is owned and used as a residence by the taxpayer" (energy.gov). The percentage of qualified expences goes down yearly, so people only have a short window to get these instlations in place. We really need to lock this policy in at 30% or higher for Maine, allowing for growth in the Green Technology

field. We must also implement our own state incentive for green, and solar energy. When we look at efficiencymaine.com, under Solar Electric, Mainers only receive a "30% Federal tax credit" (efficiencymaine, 2018). We must add to this a state tax credit that can be locked in place for years.

State or Local Control of Regulation:

Once we have our energy policy hammered out, we need to decide who will regulate these solar farms. It is clear that the ones who are best suited to determine if these solar farms are done on the local level. In the article *Simsbury Debates Trade Off Between Green Farmland and Green Energy*, by Patrick Skahill, he quoted Lisa Heavner, Simsbury First Selectman. She said, "I think our local boards would have a better understanding of what's important to our community and be better positioned to evaluate it." (Skahill, 2017). Which is a powerful sentiment, shared by most Mainers. The state needs to be involved, but this is with creating a stable energy policy, that will allow small towns and businesses to plan for twenty-five years in the future.

Taxes and Best Management Practices:

Around the Northeast, there is a severe issue brewing around using solar panels on land that could be used for farming, and how those

farms are being taxed. In the article "Solar panels on farmland spur debate about development, taxes," by Elizabeth Hewitt of vtdigger.org talked about this very problem in Vermont. In essence, Vermont took away a farmers agricultural tax reduction because they were using solar panels instead of growing crops. (Hewitt, 2016). Now, under current Vermont state law solar panels can be used, but 50% of the energy created must be used on the farm, making impossible to sell the electricity (Hewitt, 2016). Local areas could even have cheaper subsidized energy costs as a benefit from these farms. There needs to be a debate about whether or not to include solar arrays under the definition of the current use program. To help that debate, there also needs to be a conversation about Best Management Practices. Everyone understands that if land can no longer be used for farming, due to a lack of nutrients, drought, or location. Then we should convert that land to a solar farm, which would give the production that a farmer would never get. This problem becomes a little murkier when the ground can be used for farming still, and a farmer wants to put in a solar farm. I believe this is best left up to local communities and not done at a state level. Allowing farmers and communities to decide how to manage the land best they know best.

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