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Lawsuit challenging Blue Wave Solar Project on Prime Farmland Gets Hearing in Greenfield MA
Farms for Food not Solar Panels
Say Opponents

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Franklin County Court House,
425 Main St.
Greenfield, MA

The Franklin County Superior Court heard arguments on an appeal of three special permits issued in May 2021 by the Town of Northfield (MA) Planning Board for solar developer Blue Wave Solar. The permits would allow 69 acres of prime Connecticut River agricultural land to be converted to an industrial scale solar project with 26,000 solar panels, batteries, transformers and inverters.

The appeal was brought by local resident and neighbor Chris Kalinowski and the non-profit organization Restore: The North Woods. The defendants are the town Planning Board, the land owners, and Blue Wave in the complaint.

There were four main legal arguments during the hearing:

- (1) Whether plaintiffs Chris Kalinowski and Restore: The North Woods have legal standing to appeal the permits;
- (2) Whether each member of the Planning Board was eligible to vote on Blue Wave’s permit applications;
- (3) Whether the Planning Board’s decisions are procedurally deficient for lack of required findings; and
- (4) Whether the proposed solar project satisfies the special permit criteria in the Town’s Zoning Bylaw— including whether the project would significantly alter the surrounding neighborhood.

The solar project would be subsidized under the Massachusetts Department of Energy Resources (DOER) SMART program that shifts electricity rate payer money to solar projects. Industrial solar projects on agricultural land, called “dual-use”, get added incentives. Some estimate one acre of solar on farmland generates \$1 million in profits over 20 years. The Northfield project could generate up to \$69 million in profits over 20 years.

The project is being pursued at a time when there is a state-wide backlash against industrial solar. On October 27, 2022, a grassroots coalition delivered a [petition](#) signed by 1.400 people to Governor Baker’s office. It called for a temporary limit on electricity subsidies for solar projects that clear-cut forests, use prime farmlands, and harm Indigenous cultural sites, among other things.

Attorney Meg Sheehan, co-counsel for the plaintiffs, referred to a “tidal wave” of opposition across Massachusetts. “Industrial solar on our food-producing agricultural lands is an unproven experiment,” said Sheehan. “Even the industry admits we don’t know if crops will grow, and if they do, yields are reduced according to studies so far. Northfield’s agricultural character and farms are at the core of its community identity. How can an industrial project in a farming community in a residential area be consistent with local zoning?”

Groups claim it’s the subsidies that are driving this development, and there is no DOER oversight for the solar on farmland, like in Southeastern Massachusetts where arsenic-laced wood solar panel poles have been installed in the sole source drinking water aquifer on cranberry bogs.

The solar industry got more tax breaks through a clause in the Massachusetts “DRIVE” climate bill this year that lets the land where these industrial projects are built be taxed as farmland. “This means drastically lower tax revenues for municipalities in cash-strapped times. This solar on farm land is a financial boondoggle for the corporate solar industry and a loss for municipalities and our food systems,” said Sheehan.

The project site in Northfield, in an area known as Northfield Farms, has significant archeological history as well as being prime farmland. It is one of over a dozen areas throughout the state where solar has destroyed or is threatening Indigenous cultural sites. “In [Southeastern Massachusetts](#) agriculture or “site preparation” for solar is removing 30,000 years of glacial deposits that hold the history of the Wampanoag people and the Massachusetts Historical Commission’s abysmal failure to protect Indigenous cultural sites is utterly shocking,” said Sheehan. “Massachusetts Historical Commission has also dropped the ball at the Blue Wave site in Northfield,” said Sheehan.

Harvard trained biologist and Wendell resident Bill Stubblefield questions the Massachusetts push for large scale solar in the face of climate change. “Our future is in grave jeopardy from the unprecedented threat of Runaway Climate Disruption, and solar power is important in meeting this challenge. But so are our forests and farms. Forests are uniquely important for biodiversity and natural carbon sinks that remove vast amounts of CO2 from the atmosphere. And farms are equally important as providers of wholesome local food from our precious soils, especially those along the Connecticut that have nourished humans for thousands of years. It is dangerously shortsighted to damage these invaluable resources without first utilizing the vast potential of roof tops, parking lots, and similar sites as well as brownfields and other degraded lands.”

Plainfield resident Ed Stockman is a biologist, consultant, researcher and fourth generation farmer who co-founded Regeneration Massachusetts. “Most food consumed in Massachusetts is grown out of state. If climate scientists are correct, growing conditions and thus crop yields in food producing regions of the US will be significantly negatively impacted by climate change. This will likely mean less food imported to Massachusetts, making locally grown food that much more important. I would say for most people, food will be paramount compared to electricity. Solar arrays on prime farmland, like Northfield Farms, is folly considering our future food needs.

Kiffer Sikes lives in Northfield. “ As a resident of Northfield, I am concerned that Northfield is on the verge of losing valuable farmland for the development of large solar arrays. These arrays threaten local food production, the agricultural economy, and the intrinsic and financial value that comes from Northfield’s rural character.”

“We need to shift subsidies toward solar done right and not kill the planet trying to save it” said Sheehan.



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