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Statewide Network of Grassroots Groups Deliver 1400 Signatures to Governor Baker Calling for Smart Solar Siting

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A coalition of Massachusetts grassroots and non-profit organizations delivered a petition signed by 1400 Massachusetts residents to Governor Charlie Baker on Thursday asking for a moratorium on subsidies for large industrial solar projects.

The goal of the petition is to limit new ground-mounted solar projects to five acres or less, and support rate payer subsidies going to solar projects sited on rooftops or existing infrastructure. Under the moratorium, projects that do not seek state subsidies are not impacted. The moratorium will allow municipalities time to consider local bylaws to best address their residents' concerns about solar, and allow the public and experts time to work with lawmakers and regulators to fix the problems with the state's solar subsidy program.

The petition is directed at the Massachusetts' SMART solar subsidy program, administered by the Department of Energy Resources (DOER), which they say leads to the destruction of forests, farmland, wetlands and Native American cultural sites, and threatens drinking water resources across the State. Calling the SMART subsidy program "Solar Gone Wrong," the coalition cites the loss of over 4,000 acres of open space and forests for industrial solar projects with over 100,000 more acres of open space targeted for clearance under the state's 2022 Clean Energy and Climate Plan (CECP).

"By putting solar on forested land, we are killing the planet in the name of trying to save it," said Meg Sheehan co-founder of the Plymouth-based [Save the Pine Barrens](#). "Saving forests is climate action, and destroying forests for ground-mounted solar panels is not. These subsidies make it quicker and cheaper to build solar in forests than to plan, permit, lease and site solar projects in our built environment. We need a moratorium so that our Commonwealth can pause and think about the consequences of these subsidies."

Janet Sinclair, co-founder of [Save Massachusetts Forests](#) and a resident of Shelburne Falls, joined Sheehan in 2021 to launch the moratorium campaign. "We were hearing about some large solar projects in and around Franklin County, the most rural county in Massachusetts. Some of the solar projects involve clear-cutting forests. One of the proposed solar projects is on prime farmland in Northfield on the Connecticut River. It can be very intimidating for both the residents and public officials when a well-funded developer comes into our town. We often feel at a disadvantage. Sadly, many of us pass better bylaws after the damage is done."

Save the Pine Barrens tracks proposed solar projects in the forests and wetlands of southeastern Massachusetts at the planning level, so that citizens can become involved in the permitting and planning process themselves. "We want to help people to feel empowered to protect resources in their towns. But we need our state agencies and our Governor to take a step back and let towns regain a sense of sovereignty and local control."

"Since 2015, we have seen the same story across the state. The lucrative Massachusetts solar subsidies are creating a gold-rush as solar developers like Borrego Solar, NextSun, and a slew of out-of-state limited liability corporations exploit our large open spaces and small town government. Some local officials call these developers "solar predators," because they threaten municipalities with lawsuits when local officials exert their local zoning powers to protect the quality of life in their towns from poorly sited industrial solar," said Sheehan.



Fred Beddell on his farm in Northampton, Massachusetts.

According to Fred Beddell, who has worked as a full-time farmer in Northampton for over 25 years, "Industrial solar is now the biggest threat to the future of farming in Massachusetts. Farmland is not "empty" – it is filled with potential to grow the food and fiber Massachusetts needs. Covering farmland with solar means more food insecurity, less opportunity for beginning farmers and higher land costs for all farmers. At this time of spiraling farm labor and energy costs, driving up land rental and purchase price for farmland will be the final nail in the coffin for farmers in Massachusetts."

In the towns of Carver, Wareham and Plymouth, hundreds of acres of rare Southeastern Massachusetts Coastal Pine Barrens forest have been destroyed for solar developments. In addition to the loss of biodiversity, rare and threatened species, and wildlife habitat, clear-cutting of the Pine Barrens forest directly threatens the water quality of the Plymouth-Carver sole-source aquifer, which lies beneath it. The Plymouth-Carver aquifer is one of the largest designated aquifers in New England, and supplies the drinking water to residents of seven southeastern Massachusetts towns.



Solar array in Carver which destroyed approximately 68 acres of Pine Barrens forest.

The coalition supports the deployment of new renewable energy sources as part of Massachusetts' plan to address the climate crisis, but not at the expense of natural resources. According to [Mass Audubon](#) "Careful site selection for renewable facilities of all types is critical to minimizing the loss and fragmentation of wildlife habitat and existing ecosystems that sequester carbon."

Massachusetts State Representative Jacob Oliveira has filed a bill that would give cities and towns in Massachusetts more power to decide where to put solar facilities. "Responsible solar is an important part of meeting the Commonwealth's climate goals, but clear cutting forests to build environmentally unfriendly solar farms does not help us meet those goals. There are plenty of rooftops & parking lots where solar should be placed. That is why I've filed H.4331 to give cities and towns the tools they need to prevent the clear cutting of land for solar farms."

In Shutesbury, where 30 acres of interior forest has already been clear-cut for one project, there is yet another proposal on the table. According to resident Sharon Weizenbaum, "Close to 400 acres of forest would be clear-cut in order to build what seems to me to be a massive large-scale solar. Solar panels, with flammable lithium ion batteries that are needed for electricity storage, do not belong in forests. Forested land and our drinking water supply should not be sacrificed. We need to protect these crucial resources."

Bill Stubblefield, a resident of Wendell who holds a Doctorate in Biology from Harvard University, spoke out against the destructive nature of the proposed solar and battery storage projects in his town. "It makes me a little nervous that our state agencies are prepared to tell us what land conversions are "okay" for renewable energy. What it means to me is more pressure on our natural resources at a time of climate crisis and biodiversity collapse. Until we exhaust all potential sites like rooftops, Brownfields, parking lots, and landfills, we should not be talking about destroying forests and farmland in the name of "green energy."

The Town of Warren is also a site for multiple large scale solar projects. Joyce Eichacker, Chair of the Warren Conservation Commission stated "There is no question that Massachusetts's goal for clean, renewable energy is necessary and urgent. We must reduce carbon emissions through renewables AND sequester carbon through the preservation of natural resources. We need to support local agriculture to reduce our carbon footprint. I support this moratorium and hope that Governor Baker does as well. "

Background

A [2017 study by Environment Watch of Southeastern Massachusetts](#) called for better oversight by DOER, citing examples of the destruction of carbon-sequestering forests, Native American sites and farmland for state-subsidized solar. In 2016, in the town of Plymouth, a solar project leveled 25 acres of globally rare Pine Barrens forest located in a historic area in the state-designated Herring River Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC). Sheehan also notes that the towns of Carver and Wareham alone have 38 ground-mounted solar projects combined, almost all of which involved clear-cutting the rare Southeastern Massachusetts Coastal Pine Barrens forests or were built on top of wetlands. There are over 100 other destructive existing and planned projects around the state, from Hopkinton and Shutesbury to Norton and Barnstable.



30 plus acres of interior forest in Shutesbury cut down for solar

The Moratorium Petition

We, the undersigned, demand an immediate moratorium on solar subsidies and approvals unless they meet these standards:

- On rooftops or existing infrastructure
- If ground-mounted: limited to 5 acres or less and land not cleared within the last five years, and no impacts on:
 - Biodiversity including plants and animals listed under the Massachusetts Endangered Species Act,
 - Forests, protected open space or agricultural land,
 - Native American areas as determined by Massachusetts' Indigenous people,
 - BioMap 2 Critical Natural Landscape Core Habitat, Important Habitat, or Priority Habitat, or
 - Outstanding Resource Waters, wetlands or rivers.

For More Information About Proper Solar Siting:

[Solar Moratorium Fact Sheet](#)

[Mass Audubon - Solar Siting Joint Statement](#)

[Environment Watch of Southeastern Mass - 2017 Solar Siting Case Study](#)

[Fact Sheet - Rooftop vs. Industrial Ground-Mounted Solar](#)

For More Information About Proper Solar Siting, Please Contact:

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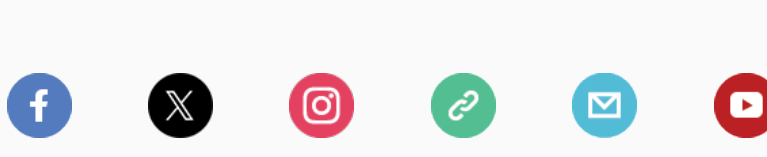
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