

Sen. Ingwerson and distinguished committee members of the Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry Committee, thank you for the chance to present to you LD 1227, “An Act to Balance Renewable Energy Development with Natural and Working Lands Conservation.” I am Bill Pluecker. I represent House District 44 which are the towns of Warren, Union, and Hope.

This is a bill that this committee developed in the 130th legislature from a concept draft that was introduced by Rep. Seth Berry. At that time, we looked into the report from the “Agricultural Solar Stakeholder Group” that was issued in January of 2022, and developed a bill that received a 12-1 “Ought to Pass” report from this committee last year. Unfortunately, it died on the table at the end of the session. Some of the recommendations from this committee and that report have been moved forward without legislative action in the past year, but there are two provisions of that bill that still require legislative support to get done.

The first of these two recommendations and the easier of the two to accomplish is to create a centralized database. I will quote here from the report recommending the creation of this database:

“The Stakeholder Group recommends the creation of a publicly-accessible database of key characteristics, including spatial data, related to approved and constructed renewable energy projects, including solar projects. The data should be submitted in a format and on a schedule determined by Governor’s Energy Office (GEO) by all interconnecting solar projects upon final site decision-making following approval of state and local permitting agencies. Where applicable, this information should be made publicly available in an appropriate format by GEO. This information can be used by DACF, other natural resource agencies, and the public, as needed, to identify potential trends. GEO may need additional resources or staff support to implement this recommendation.”

This would be an invaluable resource for the public to know where solar development is occurring, to potentially do grid planning, and to identify trends in solar development. Of crucial significance to me is that we are able to see the impacts of solar development on agricultural land so that we might take steps to conserve it.

The other piece of this bill is the creation of a dual purpose pilot project. In this case, the dual purposes of the land would be food production as well as energy production. The possibility of having an economically sustainable farming operation operating in conjunction with energy production could be crucial for the agricultural sector in Maine. As we on this committee know, the financial pressures on farmers in the current economic environment are intense. To have the opportunity to earn a passive income from energy production while maintaining food production could potentially ease some of these pressures, while also working toward meeting our goal of reduced dependence on imported food.

There are many examples of dual purpose solar installations that are potentially replicable in Maine. There are solar installations in Massachusetts under which farmers grow crops as well as others where they graze animals. In other countries, such as the Netherlands,

Germany and China, farmers are running combines under solar panels. They have found that the partial shade provided under the panels can hold off the worst heat of summer and help conserve moisture in the ground on the hottest summer days. Some crops, such as corn that need lots of sun, do not produce as well, but others, such as soybeans, can do better with partial protection from hot sun. In Rockport, Maine, a 10 acre, 4.2 megawatt array, has been built over blueberries. The blueberries are still going to produce, but we are all wondering how the berry production under the panels will compare to the rest of the field in the long term.

There are real opportunities here for research and study that could help move our agricultural industry forward without losing our heritage or food production economy. In my district, we are losing more blueberry ground to housing lots every year, partly due to the heavy economic pressure on blueberry farmers right now. If the farmers were making money from the solar panels as well as the berry crop, perhaps we would not see the permanent loss of these lands or our way of life.

After the bill came out of the revisors, we have continued to work with stakeholders to make sure that this bill really meets the needs of answering the questions about what a dual use solar project could look like in Maine. You will see further amendments to the bill that I am offering to the committee today. The first change is to make it is clear that we want this dual use project to be focussed on agricultural dual use. There is an opportunity to install solar on parking garages or on aquaculture projects, but this bill is about agricultural land. We also wanted to make sure that if we did not get this funded off the Appropriations table, that DACF may accept funds from other sources to get the project off the ground, particularly if federal funds became available. We created a range for the size of projects that this bill can look at, instead of a hard limit on the projects. We also made it clear that developers as well as landowners could apply to the program. Finally, we wanted to make it clear that this was not just a study, but if the funds and the resources became available, DACF and GEO could move forward with an implementation of the project.

Maine has so many natural resources vital to our economy, from our water, to our land, plants, and animals, and now sunlight is counted amongst those. There was a time that, as farmers, we could make money solely from the sweat of our labor and the marketing of our produce. As our local market is increasingly controlled and affected by happenings far from our state, farmers find it increasingly difficult to make a living as we once did. Leveraging income from multiple sources may very well be necessary for creating the buffer from the impact of those distant forces so that we can stay in the food production business. This bill is a first step towards understanding as a state how this could work, where we have advantages that might work to our benefit, and where we might need to pivot away from the way others have done things.

I hope that you will continue to support this concept as we have in the past, to see how we can conserve our land from overdevelopment and keep our farmers in business.

I would be happy to answer any questions.

