

Senator Dill, Representative O'Neil, Members of the Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry,

My name is Roberta Manter and I live in Fayette, Maine. I am writing in support of LD 820. My husband and I live off grid, and use a solar array to supplement power from our generator. But we are also farmers at heart, AND, strange as it may seem, we also EAT! So while we appreciate the value of photovoltaic panels to boost our power on sunny days, we also appreciate the value of having food that we can store and eat year round.

Our daughter and her family also have an off grid homestead. They have worked hard for years to clear land and supplement the local clay with enough organic material so they can have a huge vegetable garden and start planting an orchard. (They have named their place "Ample Rocks Farm" in recognition of the type of soil they have.) They are working towards getting a solar array in place, but it will be on their roof, not over their precious soil.

Our main involvement with farming currently is in producing a hay crop. We mow a number of neighbors' fields, and have been sad to see some of those fields put to other uses over the years. One field where we had invested in fertilizer and hayseed just a few years ago was sold, and the new owner has bulldozed the hay crop and put up a riding arena. Another field that we hayed last year has been sold and two houses are being built on it. It's becoming harder and harder to find good hay fields, and the price of hay is going up. If our local crop land disappears under solar arrays, the price of our food will also go up.

We've seen orchards and prime crop land sold for housing developments. All that remains to hint at what was there is the occasional apple tree, left to decorate a yard with its spring blossoms. Fields that were cleared for crops make it simpler and cheaper for a developer to put in houses - or solar arrays. They don't have to clear the trees to get the sun exposure they need, because the trees were already cleared to allow sun to get to the crops. We have heard that a huge hayfield not far from us that once fed a herd of cattle may soon be home to a solar array.

I also work part time at a local produce farm. I've watched the farm family struggle to expand their fields. It's a real challenge to make crop land out of land that hasn't been farmed for years, if ever. Trees have to be cut down, stumps excavated, and then for several years, the best crop you can harvest is rocks. Rocks and more rocks. When you think you have cleared all the rocks from the field, the frost heaves up a new batch. So while one farmer is struggling to grow food in challenging conditions, some of the best farmland in our area has been converted to other uses.

We all need to eat. Local food is fresher, less expensive, and uses less fossil fuel for transport. We need to preserve the local crop land we have. Yes, it's cheaper in the short run to put a solar array in a field, but a solar array doesn't require prime soil. It CAN go in places where it's not practical to grow crops. I'd be willing to bet that converting rugged land to crop land is far more expensive than preparing it for solar. Solar arrays will supplement other sources of power, but will never entirely replace them, as they only produce when the sun is out. We will always need other sources of power. But there is no substitute for food. There is a place for expanding solar power, but that place is not on prime agricultural land. This study will be invaluable.