



March 16, 2021

Re: ENGIE Testimony on LD 583, An Act To Repeal the Changes Made by Public Law 2019, Chapter 478, "An Act To Promote Solar Energy Projects and Distributed Generation Resources in Maine"

Thank you for the opportunity to speak before the Committee today in strong opposition of LD 249 and LD 583, both of which would eliminate the Net Energy Billing Program in Maine. My name is Hannah Bent and I am part of the Distributed Renewables team at ENGIE.

We are eager to participate in this discussion about the Net Energy Billing program and, by extension, the value of distributed energy resources (DERs) in Maine. DERs play an important role in creating resiliency, reliability and cost-savings to Mainers and will be essential for Maine to achieve its ambitious climate goals. I want to focus my testimony today on the what the “distributed” aspect of DERs really means by giving you some specific information on ENGIE’s portfolio in Maine.

The bulk of our Maine portfolio is located in Aroostook County, specifically in Madawaska, Grand Isle, Ashland, and Caribou. We partnered with a local Aroostook County developer in acquiring these sites, paying him a development fee based on the maturity of each project. We lease our sites from local landowners – each site ranges in size from 10-20 acres — committing to a contract period of up to 45 years. Not only does this mean that our landowners can expect 45 years of stable and predictable revenue, but that this rent payment is spread out across several different communities in which we operate. On top of rent, the projects provide additional tax dollars that can be directed towards education, infrastructure or other service priorities.

Job Creation, Economic Impact & Hiring Local

Solar projects provide benefits besides clean energy to the communities where they are located. The construction timeline of a 5 MW site typically takes between **6-9 months** and requires the work of approximately **100-250 electricians, engineers, and other trades**. These numbers fluctuate over the course of construction to match the demand of the activities being performed at any given time. We strive to fill these jobs by hiring locally. Locally sourcing labor provides direct and indirect economic benefits to communities both during construction and via ongoing-maintenance. This also includes contractors used for pre-construction work, including surveyors, logging companies and other vendors. Local labor is a benefit for the project, as it can cut costs of travel and other costs associated with hiring out of state workers. The construction of a project will also have indirect local impacts – driving more consumer spending at local restaurants, hotels and other local businesses. In addition to the construction jobs, we hire local firms to oversee the operations & maintenance of the asset over its lifetime.

Pollinator Habitat

ENGIE uses native vegetation plantings as a standard element in our ground mount designs, including seed mixes of up to 25 different grasses and flowering plants that naturally grow in the area.

Once established, these restored habitats:

- Provide havens for pollinators, birds and wildlife
- Improve the ecosystem by increasing biodiversity
- Protect downstream terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems from nitrate contamination
- Can create a cooler microclimate around the panels, which boosts efficiency.

These benefits can have cascading effects to nearby, non-solar farms.

Community Engagement

In addition to developing projects, ENGIE is a long-term owner/operator of our solar gardens, which means that we manage (rather than sell) the solar garden for the duration of its lifetime. And because we know that we are going to have a long-term presence in a community, we typically focus on investing in communities in ways beyond bringing renewable energy. For example, in California, we have partnered with local high schools to create summer STEM programs, which provided students with hands-on experiential learning on a solar project while under construction. This curriculum gave students a unique opportunity to learn more about the mechanics of renewable technology, hear directly from experts in the field, and gain insight into a new and fast-growing industry. In other settings ENGIE has created paid internship programs and structured community solar subscriptions to provide additional funds for local schools to purchase new playgrounds or other “wish list” items. ENGIE’s community engagement can take many forms and is tailored to fit the specific needs of each community – ENGIE is already exploring options with our local community partners in Aroostook County.

Conclusion

Without the Net Energy Billing program, none of our projects in Aroostook County will be viable because we will have no mechanism by which to connect our clean energy to interested customers. The downstream effects are obvious – without distributed projects, there will be fewer jobs created, less rent and taxes paid, deferred community investment. Rather than be singularly compared to large grid-scale installations on a price/kWh basis, DERs like the ones we are developing in Northern Maine should be viewed as a complement to other policies advancing clean energy.