

ENERGY & ENVIRONMENT

IT WAS ONCE A SUPERFUND SITE, NOW IT'S A SOLAR FARM

TOM JOHNSON | JULY 18, 2018

Transformation of former landfill in South Brunswick emblematic of governor's plan to greatly increase renewable energy in NJ. But, can more developers be enticed to invest in solar?



Sixty-acre former Superfund site in South Brunswick is home to a new solar farm.

When Gov. Phil Murphy signed an ambitious law to ramp up the state's reliance on renewable energy this spring, he chose to do so at a former Superfund site that is being converted to a solar farm.

The 68-acre former South Brunswick Landfill project is now completed, the 34th commercial solar facility undertaken by NJR Clean Energy Ventures (CEV), an unregulated affiliate of New Jersey

Resources.

For CEV, the project is getting to be old hat, with the company investing nearly \$600 million in solar projects throughout New Jersey. It owns and operates 194 megawatts of capacity throughout the state, involving mostly commercial projects — although it has 61.5 MW in projects that cover 6,800 residential customers.

This administration has set lofty clean energy goals, aiming to having 100 percent of electricity produced by renewable energy by 2050, a target that will rely heavily on solar to achieve that level. And it will have to do so while figuring out a new way of incenting developers to invest in solar.

Current system to be scrapped

Because of worries about mounting costs to consumers, the legislation signed by Murphy will end up scrapping the current system of financing solar projects, which awards solar renewable energy credits to owners of the arrays for the electricity they produce.

The current financing system has been successful on one level – it has led to more than 90,000 solar installations statewide – but the expense has fallen on ratepayers to a large degree, costing more than \$500 million a year.

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Within three years, the New Jersey Board of Public Utilities must come up with a new, and presumably less costly, program to incent continued growth in the solar sector, which employs more than 7,000 people in the state. The agency is in the process of seeking input on how the new program should function.

“New Jersey has a thriving solar program and we fully expect that to continue,” BPU president Joseph Fiordaliso said recently. CEV executives are equally optimistic.

“We don’t know where it is going to shake out,” said Mark Valori, vice president of CEV, referring to the overhaul of the solar program, “but we want to be a player in the state.”

Murphy’s aggressive goals

To date, the company has invested more than \$800 million in renewable energy, including four wind projects in Kansas, Iowa and Pennsylvania totaling 116.9 mw.

Solar and offshore wind are projected to be the primary technologies that will help the state achieve the Murphy administration’s aggressive clean energy goals.

Larry Barth, director of corporate strategy for NJR, has few qualms about the solar sector. “It’s going to be a good opportunity given the Murphy administration’s commitment to clean energy. He wants to make New Jersey a national solar leader once again,” he said.

The state already is moving to promote solar through a number of initiatives, Barth said, including establishing a new community solar program that could help bring the technology to low-income communities, a priority of the governor.

Barth is optimistic about the process. “It’s got to work for the customer, the ratepayer and the business that wants to invest,” he said, referring to the transition to the new solar financing program.

Brownfields and abandoned landfills

In South Brunswick, the 13-megawatt solar project will end up providing enough energy to power 1,360 homes. It is the third brownfield project that CEV has built. The state has put a priority on building solar farms on brownfields and abandoned landfills, instead of using existing farmland or open spaces.

The facility is built on about 60 acres of the former Superfund site, which had been capped and taken off the National Priority List in 1998. It had operated as a garbage dump for 20 years until it was closed in 1978.

“By all outward purposes, the landfill is a liability until it was turned into an asset,” said South Brunswick Mayor Charlie Carley, referring to the conversion into a solar facility.

“This is one of the best things you can do with a closed landfill,” said Walter Mugdan, a deputy regional administrator for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s Region II office in New York.