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Education, Energy, and
Environment Committee

Chair, Joint Committee on
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THE SENATE OF MARYLAND
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

Testimony in Support of SB1082: Solar Energy and Energy Storage: Development and State Procurement

March 6, 2024

Chair Feldman, Vice-Chair Kagan, and members of the Education, Energy, and Environment Committee:

Thank you for your consideration of Senate Bill 1082, Solar Energy and Storage: Development and State Procurement.

My goal in bringing this bill is twofold: First, I want to meet our renewable energy goals. Maryland is moving quickly to expand solar power across the state to ensure that 100% of the electricity consumed in the state is clean energy by 2035. Thus, we must address solar siting issues as soon as possible. Our state is falling behind, not only on our own RPS goals but also compared to other states. To meet these goals, we must think holistically and strategically about how we prioritize adopting renewable energy while also considering competing interests in the State, such as protecting our natural resources and prime land. As we look for suitable land for renewables, the future of solar energy and land use policy have become intertwined. MEA estimates it will take 30,000 acres of land currently in agricultural production, or 1.7% of agricultural land in MD, to meet our state's renewable energy goals with solar.

Second, recognizing the outsized role agricultural land could have in our state's renewable energy transition, our farmers must end up with a fair outcome. Farming already carries financial risks that can be straining. Solar offers a unique opportunity. A farmer could lease a fraction of their acreage to a solar company that can operate the entire array. This provides a stable revenue source, while income from crops can vary from year to year. This bill addresses the need to open up economic opportunity for those farmers who want to put solar on their farms while providing protections to ensure they get their land back in good shape at the end of the lease.

Outside of agricultural land, we need to recognize the opportunity within the state on the land we own. Over the interim, I worked with our partners at the PPRP to uncover potential State-owned land we may have for solar. The PPRP introduced me to their platform, SmartDG+, an interactive map-based screening tool designed to help developers and officials identify promising areas for solar and wind development.

After obtaining maps from DNR and MDOT, we were able to input state lands into the tool and identify which may be suitable for solar. For the record, I have submitted a spreadsheet with a rough estimate of available state land and a photo of the state lands mapped in the SmartDG+ tool. However, this was just the beginning of uncovering the land we can cultivate to meet our goals, and a more comprehensive analysis is necessary to understand where the opportunities are.

As amended, this bill does four key things:

- 1) Create a cross-agency workgroup in the Power Plant Research Program (PPRP) in DNR that brings together key departments to study solar siting in a manner that balances competing goals in consultation with relevant stakeholders.
 - The workgroup will explore the appropriate approach for solar development on prime soils, a model policy for solar siting between 2-5 MW, decommissioning standards, setback ranges and screening requirements, how best to preserve our natural resources, and more.
 - Also, part of this inter-agency work is an analysis of state land suitable for solar energy development, including brownfields, landfills, parking lots, and garages
- 2) Require each electric company to submit data from utilities regarding transmission capacity to the Solar Technical Assistance Program.
- 3) Allow counties to create a conservation and restoration fund that land developers pay into if their development project is going on land that is in agricultural production.
- 4) Offer several key protections for farmers, including:
 - Requiring the developer to maintain a cover crop that contributes to soil regeneration and carbon sequestration.
 - Establishing requirements for decommissioning, including bonding
 - Requiring MDA to develop a list of considerations and best practices to help farmers negotiate a lease in their best interest.

I fully recognize the importance of balancing our many competing land use goals. If we can get that balance right, SOME solar energy on farmland can be a win for everyone. For these reasons, I respectfully request a favorable report on SB 1082.

Sincerely,



Senator Katie Fry Hester
Howard and Montgomery Counties