

To the Economic Matters Committee:

My name is Mark Sultenfuss, and I am from Centreville, MD. We own and operate a third-generation grain and cattle farm. I am writing to express my strong opposition to SB0931 and HB1036. This bill raises significant concerns, particularly regarding its impact on agriculture.

As a lifelong farmer in Queen Anne's County, I predict the detrimental effects that large-scale solar farms will have on our productive farmland. Some may view crops as an alternative use for open farmland, which can be repurposed for industrial or commercial use when the need arises. However, my fellow farmers and I see this differently. Converting some of the nation's most fertile farmland into power generation and battery storage for suburban and urban areas threatens the livelihood of our region.

While agricultural productivity per acre has increased over time, efficiency begins with the soil's natural potential. The soils of Delmarva are among the most productive in the country, comparable to those in Illinois and Iowa. These unique soils—composed of sand, silt, clay, and organic matter—have taken thousands of years to develop. Unlike other early colonial settlements, Delmarva's farming practices preserved these soils, maintaining their productivity to this day.

This productivity is essential to the poultry industry, which thrives on Delmarva due to its proximity to over 20 million consumers along the I-95 corridor. A broiler chicken raised here can be harvested, processed, transported to grocery stores as far as Boston, and served for dinner within 48 hours. The poultry industry is the backbone of our farm economy here, supporting both agriculture and affiliated businesses. Despite increasing urbanization, agriculture remains the largest contributor to Maryland's economy.

The unchecked expansion of solar farms would significantly reduce the land available for growing corn and soybeans—essential feed ingredients for poultry growers. While importing feed from the Midwest is an option, it would increase costs for consumers and result in a larger carbon footprint. Losing a critical mass of productive farmland would fundamentally alter the profitability and infrastructure of the poultry industry, jeopardizing the economic stability of our region.

The loss of regional farmland will have significant consequences, even for non-farmers. As locally grown food becomes scarcer, prices will rise, and the once-tranquil views of open farmland will disappear. The rural character that attracted many residents to the area will be lost. Additionally, farming supports a “pass-through” economy, where farmers' expenditures circulate within the local community. As agriculture declines, many related businesses—such as farm equipment dealers, steel fabricators, automobile retailers, farm supply stores, and insurance agencies—will also suffer.

From a conservation standpoint, vast solar panel fields provide little to no suitable habitat for wildlife, particularly once enclosed by fencing. Delmarva's iconic migratory waterfowl will lose essential overwintering grounds, along with other species that rely on these open fields during migration. Deer and wild turkeys will be displaced as fields and wooded edges disappear, while predatory birds like Bald Eagles and raptors will struggle to adapt, leading to population declines. If large expanses of farmland and woodlands are converted into solar fields, many of the region's once-thriving wildlife species could become nothing more than a distant memory.

For these reasons, I strongly oppose SB 0931 and HB 1036 and urge decision-makers to consider the long-term consequences of sacrificing agricultural land for solar development.