



Photo by J. Berk/NRCM

Community Solar Benefits Maine

Increasing the Benefits of Solar for All Mainers

Community solar farms are a promising and proven tool for increasing access to solar by households of all kinds. More solar on our electrical grid also lowers energy costs for everyone, boosts economic development, and provides environmental benefit, too.

Expanding community solar in Maine will:

- Expand access to local clean energy for renters or those lacking a suitable roof, and those who can't afford the upfront cost of solar;
- Give towns and other organizations an opportunity to build large, cost-effective solar farms that serve multiple homes, businesses, and other consumers;
- Lower energy costs for everybody who pays an electric bill by delivering electricity locally and reducing dependence on large, expensive power plants and costly transmission lines; and
- Contribute to cleaner air by reducing reliance on expensive, polluting fossil fuel energy sources.

What is a Community Solar Farm?

A community solar farm gives a group of people, businesses, or a town (or a mix of all three) greater access to the benefits of solar energy. Instead of installing solar panels individually, the developer builds a medium- to large-sized solar installation that can distribute the clean energy locally to separately metered buildings. Monthly electricity costs for participants are the same or lower than before they subscribed to the solar farm because they typically pay for the solar through a Power Purchase Agreement with no upfront cost. If you rent or move within the state, you can take your solar subscription with you—or even transfer it back to the community solar farm for someone else.

The use of community solar farms in the United States has more than quadrupled since 2016¹ because they expand access to solar for people of all incomes by lowering electricity costs and allowing people to overcome upfront installation costs.

In 2019, the governor and Legislature passed a new law that increases access to community solar, so that thousands of Maine households and businesses can access the economic benefits of community solar. Maine's Public Utilities Commission (PUC) has begun the process of procuring 250 MW of electricity from small-scale (i.e., less than 5 MW) community solar project developers in Maine. It anticipates approving competitive bids for 50 MW of community solar by the end of July 2020. Winning bidders will enter into long-term, 20-year contracts with the local electricity utility. Entities marketing community solar projects must be registered with the PUC and provide prospective subscriber customers with a disclosure form that includes information of the costs and benefits of the project to the customer. This and related initiatives are likely to add more than 500 MW of in-state solar generation by 2025. Maine's current installed solar capacity is roughly 86 MW.

¹ <https://e360.yale.edu/features/energy-equity-bringing-solar-power-to-low-income-communities>

Expanding Clean Energy Access for Low and Moderate Income Communities

Community solar farms present an exciting opportunity to bring clean energy to Mainers who rent or live in mobile homes, don't have financial resources to cover upfront installation costs, or don't have suitable roofs. For example, in Colorado, the nearly 400 households enrolled in the state's eight low-income solar projects save between 15 and 50 percent on their electricity bills.² In 2019, the governor and Legislature passed a new law to increase energy equity in Maine by requiring that 10% of the capacity of community solar projects be subscribed by low- or moderate-income households or by organizations serving low- or moderate-income families.

Case study: Downeast Community Partners (DCP) is a nonprofit group that has been serving more than 5,000 low-income Mainers in Washington and Hancock Counties since 1966.

DCP first looked into community solar to help lower energy costs for the households it serves. However, previously outdated energy policy limited DCP from being able to install a project that was large enough to take advantage of economies of scale and connect to the residents who need the benefits the most.

Instead, DCP built a community solar farm on an old, unused blueberry field in Franklin that serves 9 of its 14 organizational buildings. DCP paid no upfront costs and its electricity bills will stay steady even as electric rates rise. Once the pay-off period is over (DCP can buy the solar farm outright at a great price at the end of the payoff period), its electricity costs will drop. Now that Maine's Legislature and the governor have acted, more organizations and residents will be able to take part in Maine's critical transition to cleaner, more secure and affordable solar power.

"Any dollar that we don't have to spend on operating expenses is another dollar that we can spend on helping the people in our communities." –*Dale Basher, Operations Manager, Downeast Community Partners*



DALE BASHER

² <https://e360.yale.edu/features/energy-equity-bringing-solar-power-to-low-income-communities>

