

# EDITORIAL: NJ must heat up solar industry

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(Photo: ~File photo)

Even in the heart of winter we can appreciate the fundamental value of solar energy, a renewable, clean energy source with the potential to be far more abundant than anything generated by fossil fuels.

But the ability to successfully tap into that power on a vast scale remains a bit of a mystery. Is it environmentally beneficial to clear-cut forests in making way for massive solar farms, for instance, as Six Flags wants to do in Jackson? Even more complex are the cost-benefit scenarios involved in convincing homeowners and businesses to accommodate solar arrays on rooftops and other areas.

We do know something's not working quite right in New Jersey. According to the latest annual survey from the nonprofit Solar Foundation, New Jersey lost about a thousand solar industry jobs last year, a 14 percent drop that contrasts with 25 percent growth in solar jobs across the nation. New Jersey, once one of the shining lights of solar energy, was one of just four states to shed solar jobs during that period.

Yet at the same time solar installations reached the second-highest growth year ever in New Jersey and now top 2 gigawatts — fourth highest in the nation.

No one seems quite sure how to correlate all those figures, or even whether to entirely believe the numbers being put out there. But most observers do agree upon is that an alarming drop in solar credit prices — the money solar system owners receive for electricity they're generating — can and will diminish incentive for more installations. That would be bad news for jobs and for the environment.

Among the problems in New Jersey are diminishing requirements for solar energy reliance, courtesy in large part of the disinterested Gov. Chris Christie. A Senate bill designed to restore some of that reliance is seen as a short-term fix, similar to measures taken several years ago to buttress the industry. The need for repeated repairs, however, suggests a cyclical flaw in how New Jersey approaches solar energy.

Another portion of the bill would establish a special commission to examine and potentially overhaul New Jersey's solar model — a needed step at this stage. The state's method of subsidizing the industry through surcharges on monthly energy bills could be among the targets for change.

It isn't clear Christie would support such a measure; a longer-term alternative proposed by his administration would require the state receive 80 percent of its electricity from renewable sources by 2050, with a specific portion of that for solar. But ongoing confusion among consumers about the potential cost benefits of solar energy continue to be a sticking point. Is it better to buy panels, or lease them? Do leases present problems when selling a home? How much do panels cost, and how long do they last? When can they be expected to pay for themselves? How is excess energy sold?

New Jersey had been a leader in solar energy. It can't afford now to keep falling farther behind.

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