

Tilting At Solar Panels

By Blanca Begert and Wes Venteicher 10/02/2023



A proposal that makes it easier to build microgrids shows how hard it is to bypass utilities in California. | Sean Gallup/Getty Images

A longshot ballot initiative shows how many hurdles remain to boosting clean energy in California.

UC Davis grad students got permission to begin gathering signatures last month on a proposed initiative to make it easier to install solar panels on agriculturally zoned land and connect them to neighbors within 2 miles, bypassing utilities.

The idea is to get around the bureaucratic morass that surrounds the process of connecting new power projects to the electric grid.

“It’s an innovative climate solution that leapfrogs over transmission gridlock, leapfrogs over legislative gridlock and becomes what we believe will be the most impactful climate legislation in U.S. history,” said Jonathan Greenberg, one of the initiative’s official proponents and founder of the nonprofit Informing to Empower.

Greenberg taught a UC Davis law class last year on “drafting a solar farm bill.” This initiative is an offshoot of that. He’s hoping a sympathetic billionaire will help him raise \$8 million to gather the required 546,651 signatures to qualify it for the November 2024 ballot.

He acknowledged the measure would almost certainly face opposition from utilities — none of which took us up on an opportunity to comment — because it would amend a state law that prevents anyone but utilities from selling electricity to more than two neighbors. The initiative would also require utilities to buy the power at pre-set prices.

And by reducing demand for grid-tied energy, the initiative would also chip away at the amount of money that utilities can make by investing in transmission and distribution capacity. That's why he wants to go to the people.

"The only thing standing in our way is not scientific, it's not financing, it's just this legacy utility law that you can't sell over the fence,"

Greenberg said. "You remove that and suddenly we have a solution."

Whatever its prospects, the initiative highlights growing pressures from those who say California can't rely on the lumbering mechanisms of its traditional power grid to meet its goal of decarbonizing the state's electric supply by 2045.

Advocates of a bottom-up approach are also looking to build solar on roadsides, parking lots, warehouse roofs and other marginal spots.

"Let's build distributed generation and not try to fight with these utility-scale projects and the concerns they raise about land use and habitat," said Lorenzo Kristov, a former California Independent System Operator and California Energy Commission staffer who works with the Santa Rosa-based nonprofit Climate Center and didn't have an opinion on the initiative specifically.

Microgrids are moving forward, but slowly, aside from some notable successes on tribal lands.

The state is also working on speeding up transmission, but until then, the initiative's supporters have an easy punching bag.

"There's this huge need for more transmission capacity, and you can't make it happen that much faster than it's happening," Greenberg said.