

USDA Policy on Prime Agricultural Land and Solar Development

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's current position is explicitly opposed to converting prime agricultural land into large-scale solar fields, and USDA has already taken concrete policy actions to prevent federal programs from subsidizing that conversion.

What USDA Has Officially Stated

USDA leadership has made the agency's stance unambiguous:

- Prime farmland should not be displaced by large solar installations. Secretary of Agriculture Brooke Rollins stated that "our prime farmland should not be wasted and replaced with subsidized solar panels" and emphasized the long-term harm to food security and rural communities.
- Solar development is making farmland less available and more expensive, creating barriers for young and beginning farmers. USDA cites nationwide increases in farmland loss and rising land costs driven by subsidized solar leases.
- Farmland loss is accelerating, with Tennessee highlighted as an example: 1.2 million acres lost in 30 years, projected to reach 2 million by 2027. USDA notes a nearly 50% increase in farmland used for solar since 2012.

This framing aligns closely with your own testimony work: USDA is treating prime soils as a national-security asset, not a flexible development zone.

Policy Actions USDA Has Already Taken

USDA has moved beyond statements and implemented program restrictions:

- No USDA funding for large ground-mounted solar on productive farmland. USDA will no longer allow taxpayer dollars to support solar projects on prime farmland through its major loan and grant programs.
- Ground-mounted solar >50 kW is now ineligible under REAP guaranteed loans. Projects must be "right-sized" to on-farm energy needs, not commercial solar fields.
- Wind and solar projects are no longer eligible under the Business & Industry (B&I) Loan Program.
- No USDA-funded projects may use solar panels manufactured by foreign adversaries. This ties land-use protection to supply-chain security.

These actions effectively remove federal incentives for converting prime soils to industrial solar and reinforce the principle that agricultural land should remain in agricultural production.

How USDA Frames the Issue

USDA's rationale mirrors the arguments you've been advancing in Vermont:

- Food security: Prime soils are irreplaceable and essential to national resilience.

- Rural identity and heritage: Solar fields displace the landscapes and working lands that define rural communities.
- Farmer access to land: Solar leases distort land markets, making it harder for farmers to expand or enter agriculture.
- Long-term productivity: Once prime soils are compacted, graded, trenched, and covered with industrial infrastructure, their productive capacity is permanently compromised.

USDA's language is unusually strong for a federal agency, signaling a clear policy direction: protect prime farmland first; site solar elsewhere.

What This Means for Your Testimony

You now have federal alignment behind your position. USDA's stance provides:

- A national-level precedent supporting local and state restrictions.
- A clear statement that farmland conversion threatens food security and rural economies.
- Evidence that solar-driven land-market distortion is recognized at the highest levels.
- A policy basis for arguing that Vermont should not subsidize or permit projects the federal government has already deemed harmful.