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by Lori Sallet

American Farmland Trust Releases Smart SolarSM Guiding Principles to Save the Land that Sustains Us

Growing Renewable Energy While Strengthening Farm Viability and Safeguarding Healthy Soil

Washington, D.C. – American Farmland Trust released [Smart SolarSM](#) principles for solar development that will ensure we maintain our ability to produce food, fuel and fiber to sustain our nation for generations to come. Projects that conform to AFT’s *Smart Solar* principles meet three important goals — to accelerate solar energy development, strengthen farm viability and safeguard land well-suited for farming and ranching.

“AFT’s principles aim to accelerate the generation of solar energy but offer a blueprint for solar development that maximizes climate mitigation while minimizing impact on productive farmland and strengthening opportunities for farmers,” said John Piotti, AFT president and CEO. “If done well, *Smart Solar* projects can provide income for farmers and landowners and protect land well-suited for agriculture. America needs both—much more solar energy AND productive, resilient farms and ranches.”

Smart Solar Principles

AFT has developed *Smart Solar* principles to help shape solar development across America. These principles can be applied broadly recognizing that Smart Solar will look different across the country due to differences in landscapes, agricultural production systems and other characteristics.

Principle 1: Prioritize Solar Siting on Buildings and Land Not Well Suited for Farming (Unless Agrivoltaics)

Emphasize solar energy development on rooftops, carports, irrigation ditches, brownfields or other land not well suited for agriculture to help minimize the impacts of solar energy on our nation’s best agricultural land and farm businesses.

Principle 2: Safeguard Soil and the Ability for Land to Be Used for Agriculture

If solar energy is developed on farmland or rangeland, policies and practices should protect soil health, especially during construction and decommissioning, to ensure opportunities for farming in the future.

Principle 3: Grow Agrivoltaics for Agricultural Production & Solar Energy

Agriculture and solar energy can coexist if appropriate planning is undertaken. Agrivoltaic projects sustain agricultural production underneath solar panels and/or between rows of solar panels throughout the life of the project.

Principle 4: Promote Equity and Farm Viability

Farmers and underserved communities should benefit from solar energy development. There must be inclusive stakeholder engagement to ensure projects strengthen farm viability and reflect farmer interests, including underserved producers that face barriers to accessing land and other resources.

Without appropriate planning, solar development also threatens to convert millions of acres of farm and rangeland out of agricultural production. Significantly more renewable energy, including solar, is needed to reduce U.S. greenhouse gas emissions and combat the climate crisis. The Department of Energy's September 2021 Solar Futures Study estimates we will potentially need 10.3 million acres of land to achieve the Biden's administration's goal to scale up solar energy development from 4% to 45% of energy production by 2050 — with 90% of solar installation expected to be located in rural areas. According to [Princeton's Zero Lab](#), the Inflation Reduction Act, could more than quintuple the amount of solar installed annually by 2025. The growth of solar development will reshape rural landscapes and farm economies. It

has the potential to cause conflicts between the use of agricultural land to grow food and its use to produce renewable energy, while generating public backlash against renewable energy deployment overall.

Farmers and ranchers need this transition to combat climate change and minimize future impacts from droughts, floods, extreme heat and beyond. *Smart Solar* guides solar development to where it has the least negative impact on land well suited for farming, ensures that agricultural land where projects are sited can be farmed in the future and promotes “agrivoltaics” (or “dual use”) solar projects that sustain agricultural production underneath and/or between rows of solar panels throughout the life of the project.

Solar energy development can create opportunities for farmers and landowners by generating new sources of income. But it also threatens farmer-renters who could be displaced and will have lasting impacts on local economies dependent on agricultural production. Farmland is already under threat from residential and commercial development, poorly planned housing development, strip malls and parking lots, which consume 2000 acres of agricultural lands daily. American Farmland Trust's most recent study [Farms Under Threat 2040: Choosing an Abundant Future](#) shows if we continue this *business-as-usual* development 18 million acres will no longer be producing food, fuel and fiber by 2040. In the *runaway sprawl* scenario outlined in the report, 1 million acres per year may be paved over or fragmented, or otherwise converted to uses that jeopardize agriculture, taking 24 million acres out of production by 2040.

Using farmland to generate energy must be done with care. Farmland is needed for food security but also to sequester carbon, filter air and water and for wildlife habitat. As we work to decarbonize our energy grid, AFT believes we must also *save the land that sustains us* by adhering to *Smart Solar* principles. “Projects that align with AFT’s *Smart Solar* principles can also accelerate renewable energy development by enhancing community support for solar projects.”

In sharing these principles with policy makers, land trusts, agricultural organizations, farmers, the solar industry, conservationists and citizens, AFT seeks to stay true to its mission to protect farmland, implement environmentally sound farming practices and keep farmers on the land, while heeding the call to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and increase renewable energy production to mitigate climate change.

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*American Farmland Trust is the only national organization that takes a holistic approach to agriculture, focusing on the land itself, the agricultural practices used on that land, and the farmers and ranchers who do the work. AFT launched the conservation agriculture movement and continues to raise public awareness through our **No Farms, No Food** message. Since our founding in 1980, AFT has helped permanently protect over 6.8 million acres of agricultural lands, advanced environmentally-sound farming practices on millions of additional acres and supported thousands of farm families.*

September 27, 2022

by Lori Sallet

FARMERS POWERING COMMUNITIES: American Farmland Trust, Edelen Renewables and Arcadia Announce Partnership to Combat Climate Change by Advancing Smart SolarSM

Safeguarding America's Most Productive Farmland and Ranchland from Development While Expanding Equitable Access to Renewable Energy

WASHINGTON – SEPT 27, 2022 – American Farmland Trust, [Edelen Renewables](#) and [Arcadia](#) today announced a partnership, **Farmers Powering Communities**, to combat climate change through solar energy development while protecting America's farmland and ranchland for growing food, fuel and fiber. The partnership provides more farmers with the opportunity for a new revenue stream and brings renewable energy to communities where it has not yet been available.

Farmers Powering Communities will advance community solar projects of 25 to 50 acres to provide green energy to those who do not have access to rooftop solar – connecting them with local solar farms and bringing resiliency to more Americans. Increasing numbers of U.S. residents have installed rooftop solar on their property, but two-thirds of Americans cannot do so, either because they live in multi-family dwellings or because they rent their homes or because they cannot afford it. Community solar projects bridge the gap, connecting people to shared solar facilities. The partnership will identify the best land for new solar farms, establish installations and link them to local energy providers who will provide the power to residents at costs lower than the market average. Together, the partners will work to create 500 megawatts of community solar capacity in five years.

AFT's [Smart SolarSM](#) principles will guide the location of development to ensure that it prioritizes solar siting within the built environment (rooftops, carports, irrigation ditches), on disturbed and contaminated lands (brownfields, landfills, reclaimed mining lands), and lastly, on marginal agricultural land instead of prime farmland. Where solar development occurs on good farmland, the installation should be agrivoltaic—or dual-use — allowing farming or ranching to continue in concert with solar energy production. As we build new solar, it's critical not to harm agricultural systems which themselves help combat climate change by sequestering carbon.

“Farmers are on the frontlines of climate change, experiencing extreme weather events that impact their crops, livestock and livelihoods,” said John Piotti, AFT president and CEO. “We also know that farms can be part of the solution to the climate crisis. Farmland can draw carbon

from the air to rebuild soil when farmed using climate-smart practices like cover crops and reduced tillage. We need to dramatically ramp up solar energy production while retaining our farms and ranches. That's what this partnership is all about. Doing solar the right way and putting it in the right place is what we call Smart Solar."

"For too long, agricultural land preservationists and green energy advocates have been at cross purposes," said Adam Edelen, founder and CEO of Kentucky-based Edelen Renewables. "Bringing together those working to feed the planet with those working to power America offers an inspiring and workable path forward. This historic partnership will keep family farmers on their land, open a new front in battling climate change and benefit the checkbooks of lower-income ratepayers. This is a partnership in which everybody wins and is proof positive that Americans can bridge divides to make our communities, country and the world more sustainable, prosperous and resilient."

"Arcadia was founded on the simple idea that everyone deserves access to clean energy, and our technology platform already manages over one gigawatt of cheaper, cleaner community solar for communities across the U.S.," said Kiran Bhatraju, founder and CEO of Arcadia. "The nation's farmland communities have long been on the front lines of climate change, and this partnership will give them a powerful new weapon in that fight, all while providing steady new revenues."

"The partnership between Edelen Renewables, American Farmland Trust and Arcadia is representative of solar energy's new frontier, said Abigail Ross Hopper, president and CEO for the Solar Energy Industries Association. "Community solar projects are key to making clean and reliable solar power more accessible to families that have been left out of the renewable revolution. Together, these organizations will work to ensure that all parties involved, including landowners, rural communities, and developers, benefit from these sustainable energy developments."

Development will begin in 2023 across a number of states that have active community solar programs, including [ME, MA, RI, NY, NJ, DE, MD, DC, VA, IL, MN, CO, NM, and OR](#). The partnership will also accelerate community solar access across the country through state and federal policy advocacy.

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[Edelen Renewables](#) is a Kentucky-based solar development firm with a founding mission of bringing the promise of renewable energy to the forgotten places of America. Actively advancing 20 renewable energy projects in 11 states, the firm specializes in “social impact solar,” a development approach that maximizes the local social and economic benefits to the communities in which they develop.

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[Arcadia](#) is the climate technology company enabling the zero-carbon economy. Founded in 2014 on the belief that everyone deserves access to clean energy, Arcadia manages the nation’s leading [community solar program](#), helping to tackle energy injustice while spurring economic growth with more than 1 GW of solar under management.

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