

The True Cost of Renewables

Are Utility-Scale Energy Projects Really Worth It?

WRITTEN BY
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Imagine this: you're standing on your family's land—acreage your grandparents fought tooth and nail to clear, till, and nurture. It's the land that's put food on your table, paid for your kids' braces, and kept your boots muddy and your soul clean. Now picture trading that land for rows of solar panels or wind turbines because someone far away thinks they're saving the planet. Sounds noble, right?

Not so fast. At first glance, renewable energy developers seem to offer a golden ticket, but when you dig deeper, the deal might stink worse than a week-old manure pile. Let's break it down: how do utility-scale renewable energy projects really affect landowners, neighbors, and communities?

1. For Landowners: A Payday with Strings Attached

- a. Developers will come knocking with promises of cash so good it'll make your head spin faster than one of their turbines. Here's the pitch:
 - i. The Lease Payment Windfall: They'll likely offer \$1,500 to \$2,000 per acre per year. For a 100 MW solar farm, needing up to 700 acres, that's \$1.05 to \$1.4 million annually. Compare that to farming profits, which average \$50 to \$150 per acre per year (USDA Economic Research Service, 2023). Sounds like a jackpot, right?

But don't grab your pen just yet. Developers don't include a footnote for the long-term costs. And many times, they'll sweeten the pot with a "sign now" bonus—offering to slide across the kitchen table a check for \$10,000, \$20,000, \$50,000, or more if you agree immediately. It's designed to dazzle you into making a split-second decision without fully understanding the ramifications.

1. Locked-In Land Use: Once the panels go up, your land is out of commission for 20 to 30 years. No grazing, no planting, no pivoting when crop prices spike. It's like locking your barn door and handing someone else the key.

But here's the kicker: a land lease for renewable energy developments essentially eliminates all your rights to the land for generations. You no longer get to decide how it's used, what's grown, or whether it can return to its original purpose. Even if you want to pass the land down to your children, they'll be inheriting a contract they had no say in signing. It's no longer your farm—it's a utility company's industrial site with your name on the tax bill.

And it gets worse. Many renewable energy leases include first-right-of-refusal clauses, giving the developer the option to buy the land before anyone else if you decide—or are forced—to sell. Upon your death, your family may not even have the chance to keep the land. The legacy you've worked so hard to build could end up in the hands of a corporation instead of being passed down to your children, as most farmers dream of doing.

Leasing your land for renewables is like renting your prized tractor to a neighbor who promises to return it someday—but doesn't mention it'll come back with flat tires, a busted engine, and no guarantee it'll ever run the same again. Worse, when it breaks, your kids might not even be able to reclaim it.

2. Reclamation Risks: When the lease ends, guess who's stuck cleaning up? Unless the developer offers a reclamation bond, you could be paying for panel and turbine removal, soil restoration, and



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infrastructure teardown. You might as well toss that lease money straight into a silo fire.

Now, here's the twist: although many developments require decommissioning bonds, these bonds are only as "strong" as the company issuing them. If the bond is too small, poorly structured, or outright inaccessible when the time comes, who pays for decommissioning?

Maybe the owner of the facility will handle it—until they declare bankruptcy, that is. At that point, the responsibility shifts to the landowner. And when the costs prove insurmountable (think hundreds of thousands or even millions of dollars), the landowner might face bankruptcy too. Then, who's left holding the bag? The community, through taxes or other public funding, gets stuck footing the bill for cleanup.

A decommissioning bond from a shaky developer is like handing your neighbor a piece of baling twine and asking them to tow your broken tractor—it's not going to hold when the pressure's on.

2. For Developers: Big Money, Small Rules

If you think these developers are just altruistic tree-huggers, think again. They're in it for the money—and the perks that come with being "green."

- a. Engineering and Predevelopment Costs: Developers hire engineering, procurement, and construction (EPC) contractors to handle everything from design to materials to installation. Their costs make up 10-20% of the project (National Renewable Energy Laboratory, 2023). For a \$10 million project, that's \$1-2 million. And who foots part of that bill? You do, via generous tax subsidies.
- b. Construction and Equipment: They'll spend \$1-2 million per MW on construction (Energy Information Administration, 2021), but don't expect local job creation. Most workers come from specialized out-of-town crews, like the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW). And while IBEW recently signed a national agreement with renewable developers, the boots on the ground often aren't from your neck of the woods. See the agreement at https://www.ibeaw.org/media-center/Articles/23Daily/2310/231014_three.
- c. Special Privileges: This part will really grind your gears: developers frequently get zoning exemptions. If you wanted to build a shop or housing development, you'd be mired in red tape. But call it a "solar farm," and the rules magically vanish. Local input? Often ignored.

Worse, some organizations, like the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), actively advocate for the use of eminent domain to force renewable energy projects onto landowners who refuse to participate. For an example of this advocacy, visit <https://www.ibeaw.org/articles/11ElectricalWorker/EW1107/03.0711.html>.

Granting eminent domain powers to renewable energy developers is like giving a neighbor the right to bulldoze your barn because they believe their new driveway is more important than your livelihood.

3. For Neighbors: The Hidden Costs of Living Nearby

Even if you don't lease your land, these projects can still hit you like a runaway combine.

- a. Higher Taxes: Renewable projects often get tax abatements, meaning they're removed from the tax rolls. The bond or levy your community passed to fund schools or fire departments? It still needs the same revenue. Guess who makes up the difference? You and your neighbors, through higher property taxes.
- b. Decreased Property Values: Your view of rolling hills and grazing cattle might be replaced by rows of industrial panels or turbines. Developers claim their projects don't hurt property values, but most studies they cite focus on much smaller installations—or are conducted by consultants with ties to the renewable industry. And when independent studies say otherwise? Developers muddy the waters with half-truths, counting on people not to dig deeper.
- c. Community Division: Fracturing Relationships: Here's the gut punch: these projects don't just strain wallets—they strain relationships.

When developers roll into town, some landowners see dollar signs, while others see a threat to their way of life. Families split over decisions. Lifelong friends argue. Developers, with their hedgy answers and misinformation, only add fuel to the fire. Instead of being transparent, they dodge tough questions, leaving communities divided and distrustful.

It's like inviting a fox into your henhouse, only to have it slink away while you and your neighbor argue over whose chickens are missing.

Think Twice Before You Lease

Before signing anything, ask yourself:

- What's the long-term impact? Will your land still be farmable or usable for grazing after the lease ends?



- Who benefits the most? Is it your family or the shareholders sipping champagne in some distant city?
- Will this hurt your community? Could your lease lead to lawsuits, higher taxes, or broken relationships in your town?

Leasing your land for renewables might feel like hitting the jackpot today, but what about tomorrow? Don't let someone else's short-term profit leave you with a long-term mess.

Final Thoughts: Progress or a Raw Deal?

Renewable energy projects might sound like a step forward, but for rural communities, they're often two steps back. When fertile farmland becomes an industrial energy zone, the cost is paid in lost legacies, higher taxes, and fractured relationships.

Think carefully, ask hard questions, and don't sign anything until you've turned over every stone. After all, it's not just your land at stake—it's your family's future.

JW Thompson is a stubbornly determined amateur who helped lead a grassroots movement to stop a utility-scale solar project in northwest

Ohio—the first ever denied by the state's regulatory board. Armed with 30+ years in civil engineering and surveying, an insatiable curiosity, and a knack for irritating his wife, JW spent countless hours researching renewable energy to support his cause. His efforts have since inspired and supported similar opposition groups across Ohio. Although confident in everything he writes, he readily admits he is human and prone to error, strongly encouraging everyone to perform their own due diligence and validate anything in his writing.

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