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Morgantown-based firm goes to bat for solar energy on abandoned coal lands in new report

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By Alex Wiederspiel in News | March 22, 2017 at 6:30AM

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MORGANTOWN, W.Va. — A recent report from Downstream Strategies suggests the state of West Virginia could benefit from investments in solar energy on thousands of acres of degraded land.

“We have all of this land available that has been grated out,” Downstream Strategies Project Scientist Joey James said on Monday’s “The Gary Bowden Show” on the AJR News Network. “It’s flat. People for a long time have talked about putting solar panels up there, but no one has really looked into the true viability of these sites for that type of development.”

Citing exponential growth in the solar industry, a job market that already supports 260,000 people nationwide, and more than 200 square miles of degraded land in West Virginia that could be suitable for solar development, the study suggests that West Virginia has enough viable land for solar photovoltaic (PV) projects to create thousands of temporary and permanent jobs in the state through both power plant construction and operation.

“The entire state of West Virginia is better situated for solar resources than the country of Germany, which is often revered as the number one champion of solar and other types of renewable energy in the world,” James said.



The study estimates that one permanent post-construction job is created for every five megawatts of solar power installed in the state.

“In the state of Virginia alone right now, we have nearly 5000 megawatts of large-scale solar under study, which is really amazing when you compare that to West Virginia,” James said. “We have less than five megawatts under study right now.”

The report outlines, if West Virginia were to strive to offset 10 percent of the state’s power plant emissions with solar, an estimated 70,000 temporary construction jobs and 2,000 permanent jobs could be supported.

“It creates a modest amount of permanent jobs, which can be worked by unemployed in rural communities. All they had was an empty field,” he said. “Now they can make a job out of it.”

The study is also fueled by concerns over man-made climate change—particularly noting that 2016 was the hottest year on record. Additionally, 2014-2016 were considered by NASA to be the three hottest years on record.

While coal mining employment was down 43 percent between 2012-2016 and coal’s share of the national electric power sector declined, the solar industry added 35,000 jobs nationwide last year. James said that should provide lawmakers with some sense of resolution to current economic urgency.

“The strategic development of large-scale solar facilities on degraded lands that have already been disturbed can be one part of that solution,” James said. “We’re not going and mowing down more trees and mountains to coat the state in solar panels. We’re really just taking advantage of what’s already been done.”

According to an earlier study in 2013 from Downstream Strategies, increasing the “carve-out” for solar energy produced by investor-owned utilities with more than 30,000 residential customers would help spur solar growth in the state on a significant level. Designing a pure solar carve-out in West Virginia of 0.75 percent would be less than neighboring Maryland (2 percent) and regional solar leader New Jersey (3.38 percent) but still offer similar benefits in job growth. James said it would take action at the legislative level or private initiative by utilities to accomplish such a carve-out.

“People are definitely looking to West Virginia and just kind of waiting for that kind of signal from the state that it’s a safe place,” he said.

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The study concludes that the process would be environmentally friendly in a number of different ways while also helping West Virginia diversify its energy portfolio. Perhaps most notably, the study reads:

“Many skilled laborers once employed by the mining industry have compatible skill sets and experience to compete for these jobs.”

The full study can be read [here](#).

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Alex Wiederspiel



Alex.Wiederspiel@wvradio.com

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