

Study: Lack of local benefits fuels upstate New York opposition to solar farms

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While upstate New Yorkers are evenly split on utility-scale solar farms, naysayers object partly due to a perception that rural residents unfairly bear the burden of meeting downstate urban energy demands without

compensation, a survey has found.

At the same time, the fall 2020 survey of upstate New York residents found that the effects of socioeconomics, age, education, [political ideology](#) and beliefs about climate change were insignificant in explaining opposition to large solar facilities.

The study, "Reacting to Rural Burden: Understanding Opposition to Utility-Scale Solar Development in Upstate New York," published online March 16 in the journal *Rural Sociology*, surveyed 421 western and northern New Yorkers and revealed that 42% of residents oppose utility-scale solar facilities in or near their [local communities](#); 14% neither opposed or supported such projects; and 44% supported them.

"The strongest effect that we found in this paper was a sense that there was a greater burden on upstate New York to provide this power for downstate people, and that wasn't adequately compensated," said Roberta Nilson, Ph.D. '22, the paper's lead author. Co-author Richard Stedman, professor and chair of the Department of Natural Resources and the Environment in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, is principal investigator of the project.

While many are optimistic about renewable energy and transitioning away from [fossil fuels](#), and people like the idea of solar energy in general, often there is local opposition to actually hosting large-scale facilities, Stedman said.

"Opposition to views on renewable energy are not just about renewable energy, they're about a whole lot of other things, including the legacy of rural urban dynamics," said Stedman, who is a faculty fellow at the Cornell Atkinson Center for Sustainability. This paper attempts to understand the forces behind that opposition, he added.

Given these dynamics, it's important to avoid viewing rural objections as a problem to overcome, and understand them and include residents early on to help plan projects in ways that might be in tune with existing local plans, Nilson said.

Utility-scale solar facilities are designed to feed directly into a centralized grid, rather than being redistributed locally to lower local energy bills. While landowners benefit, it is still unclear how many new jobs solar projects might bring to areas where they are housed. Very few projects have actually broken ground, so comprehensive data doesn't exist yet, Stedman said.

When doing fieldwork, Nilson found that opponents to the projects also felt there wasn't adequate transparency about what the projects were worth, which could help determine how much of that money should remain in the local community, she said.

The survey also challenged assumptions that belief or lack of belief in climate change led to opposition to solar projects. "That's not what we found," Nilson said.

While it's true that people who are concerned about climate change are more likely to support [renewable energy](#), that support shifts when large-scale projects are near them, Stedman said. "It turns out that when it's a project that is near where someone lives, then their beliefs and concerns about [climate change](#) don't matter nearly so much," he said.

More information: Roberta S. Nilson et al, Reacting to the Rural Burden: Understanding Opposition to Utility-Scale Solar Development in Upstate New York, *Rural Sociology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1111/ruso.12486](https://doi.org/10.1111/ruso.12486)

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