With one glance at the most recent U.S. rankings on solar energy, it becomes clear the Midwest has a long way to go if it wants to catch up to other regions on the use of this renewable source. Only Minnesota and Indiana placed in the top half of states as of 2017. But in a third Midwestern state, Illinois, big changes appear on the horizon, with landowners and county governments alike showing interest in making solar a new “cash crop” — whether it be on farmland, brownfields or even publicly owned property.

The Solar Energy Industries Association is projecting that Illinois’ solar capacity will increase by 1,501 megawatts over the next five years, one of the bigger jumps in the nation. If that happens, and the state begins to climb in the U.S. rankings, legislative passage of the Future Energy Jobs Act in 2016 will be cited as a major catalyst.

“It was a bipartisan effort to promote renewable energy across the state,” says Rep. Norine Hammond, who represents a part of rural western Illinois. “It resulted from years of negotiations between utilities, businesses, consumer and environmental groups.”

Under the law, Illinois’ three investor-owned utilities are required to meet a new renewable energy portfolio standard: 25 percent of retail electricity sales must come from renewable sources by 2025. But the law was crafted not only to boost Illinois’ use of renewable power, advocates say, but to spur new solar and wind projects, increase jobs in these sectors, and ensure that different types of projects receive support through the state’s renewable energy credits.

For example, cash payments — via these credits — will cover approximately 25 percent of installation costs, one of the best solar incentives in the country. Potential solar projects must compete for the credits through a bidding process overseen by the Illinois Power Agency.

In addition to utility-scale projects (more than 2 MW), the law ensures that these credits go toward smaller projects as well. One example is “community solar,” in which residents choose to invest in a local solar project, even if it is not on their actual property (on the rooftop of a school, for example, or a parking lot). These residents become “subscribers,” and the value of the energy produced by the community solar project is then distributed to these subscribers via a
credit on their utility bill.

A second unique feature of the law is Solar for All, a program that targets the development of projects for low-income households and areas (rural and urban), as well as related workforce training and job opportunities. “It is important that the gains and benefits from expanded solar power be available to everyone,” Hammond says, “regardless of where they live or their income level.”

As a result of this 2016 law, rural parts of Illinois are expected to be home to all types of new solar projects. The state’s largest solar farm will be located in Perry County (population 22,000) and is expected to double Illinois’ solar production when it goes on line in 2021. It will be owned by a nonprofit cooperative and supply electricity to 23 rural electric cooperatives in Illinois, Indiana and Missouri. This is but one of an estimated 57 solar development projects proposed in 64 counties. Some local governments, meanwhile, are seeking solar developers interested in using vacant public land or facilities.

These new solar projects require local approval, and some counties are having difficulty determining how to regulate or tax them. State legislation (HB 5284 [4]) has been introduced to create a formula for assessing solar property. A second bill (SB 2591 [5]) would continue to allow counties to establish their own siting regulations and standards, but it would require solar developers, when using farmland, to complete an agriculture-impact mitigation agreement in cooperation with the state Department of Agriculture. This agreement would specify the steps to be taken to make land usable for farming again if the solar equipment is decommissioned.

SB 2591 passed with unanimous support in the Illinois House and Senate; as of mid-June, it was awaiting the governor’s signature.

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