

**Senate Energy and Public Utilities Committee
Proponent Testimony: Senate Bill 247 Community Solar**

*Rebecca Mellino, The Nature Conservancy in Ohio
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Good morning, Chair Reineke, Vice Chair McColley, Ranking Member Smith and members of the Senate Energy and Public Utilities Committee, I am Rebecca Mellino, Policy Associate for The Nature Conservancy in Ohio. Thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony as a proponent of Senate Bill 247.

The Nature Conservancy is a global organization with chapters in all 50 states and projects in over 70 countries. We are a non-partisan, science-based organization that seeks to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends. We work collaboratively with businesses, farmers, sportsmen groups, governments, and local communities to develop pragmatic solutions to conservation challenges, including land conservation, water quality, and climate change. More than 65,000 Ohioans are Nature Conservancy supporters, and we own and manage over 20,000 acres of nature preserves throughout the state.

The Nature Conservancy supports the passage of SB 247 as it would increase the opportunities for much needed renewable energy development in Ohio.

A survey from June 2023 shows that most voters in Ohio (68%) support developing more renewable energy sources, such as wind and solar near their communities. Ohioans want clean energy. Compared to our neighboring states, Ohio is well behind. In 2021, Ohio generated only about 4% of its electricity from renewable sources. States surrounding Ohio in 2021 generated more renewable energy than Ohio, even given their similar environments and conditions - West Virginia (5%), Kentucky (7.7%), Indiana (10%), Michigan (12%). Renewable energy generation is possible in Ohio, and the majority of Ohioans want it.

As a conservation organization protecting natural areas and habitats around the world, The Nature Conservancy also has a strong interest in renewable energy development. Climate change is impacting critical habitats and natural areas and transitioning to a lower-carbon future will benefit not just Ohioans, but our planet. Renewable energy development also provides jobs, tax revenues, private landowner financial stability and community energy security. The Nature Conservancy supports the development of renewable energy in communities that want it, and we do support community involvement in all energy source siting.

TNC has identified formerly mined and degraded lands that can be repurposed to better serve us as sources of renewable energy. Ohio has over 50,000 acres of brownfields over nearly 300 sites, as well as over 550,000 acres of mine land that is within a suitability buffer for solar development. This land is currently not productive, often an eyesore and a potential liability for the local community and/or the state of Ohio. Opportunities to develop solar energy on brownfields as contained in SB 247 would bring economic development, jobs, and return productivity to these otherwise blighted sites. This community solar bill serves as a pilot for Ohio's degraded lands which could help increase its renewable energy to meet our needs in the future and address the desire of Ohioans to use cleaner energy sources.

This community solar bill will provide an opportunity for Ohio communities who otherwise don't have access to solar energy to choose this option. Many Ohioans cannot access solar because their roof is shaded, they rent their home, or they can't afford the up-front cost on their own. By coming together with their community members, solar energy becomes more affordable and accessible to Ohioans who might otherwise not be able to afford it.

By distributing smaller community solar projects throughout the state of Ohio, energy does not have to travel as far to reach its customers. This not only makes energy more efficient because it has to use fewer lines to get to customers, it also makes that energy more resilient to storms that could damage lines and prevent the energy getting to its customers. Each type of energy generation from natural gas to coal to nuclear or renewables has its own strengths and weaknesses. By increasing the types of generation sources, we are more resilient to outages and community solar would make our energy grid stronger.

There is a need for renewable energy in our electric grid, and this legislation provides more options. This bipartisan bill will allow communities who want solar energy to come together to site it where they want it, including brownfields that are already degraded and unproductive. Keeping energy local has numerous benefits and can make us less susceptible to rising energy costs due to foreign political and economic changes. The Nature Conservancy supports SB 247 because it gives additional choices to Ohioans, allows for renewable energy to be more accessible and affordable while bringing jobs and clean energy to regions of the state that desire it.

Thank you for your time and I am glad to answer any questions you may have.

Respectfully Submitted,

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Sources for state electricity generation from U.S. Energy Information Administration:

<https://www.eia.gov/beta/states/states/oh/analysis>