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Pennsylvania lost a quarter of its clean energy jobs in 2020. Here's a proposal to bring them back

Two new Pennsylvania bills designed to support solar jobs and the renewable energy industry could help the state's economic recovery after the pandemic, advocates say.



Pennsylvania lost a quarter of its clean energy jobs in 2020. Here's a proposal to bring them back



By [Michael Butler](#) / staff

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Solar panels soaking up the sun.

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As of Friday, April 9, two bills had been referred to the **Senate Consumer Protection Committee** and **House Environmental Resource Committee** that could increase the number of solar jobs in Pennsylvania.

[Senate Bill 501](#) and [House Bill 1080](#) would amend Pennsylvania's 2004 [Alternative Energy Portfolio Standard \(AEPS\) Act](#) designed to increase the state's renewable energy goal to 18% in 2026 from 8%, where it currently stands. Of that 18%, 5.5% would come from solar energy, a 5% increase in the 0.5% goal that will be exceeded in May 2021. Focusing more on solar jobs could help remedy the negative impact the pandemic has had on Pennsylvania's economy.

After the passing of the AEPS in 2004, nearly 5,200 jobs in the Pennsylvania supply chain were created to work on renewable energy projects, according to a coalition of sustainability advocates in the state. These jobs range from technicians and engineers to construction workers and manufacturers. By increasing the solar component of the state's total electricity from 0.5% [to 10%](#) by 2030, the advocates say, more than 100,000 jobs and nearly \$1.6 billion in economic growth could be created — and these two bills could help put Pennsylvania on track to reach that 10%.

The renewable energy industry is growing at a fast pace worldwide, with [91% of new renewable energy](#) projects being solar. [Sustainable Business Network of Greater Philadelphia](#) Executive Director **Anna Shipp** told **Technical.ly** that while the pandemic's total impact on the clean energy economy remains to be seen, those sectors in the region have faced major setbacks compared to the growth they made before the pandemic.



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"Small businesses were hardest hit," she said. "Clean energy unemployment job losses in the Philadelphia metropolitan area totaled 13,235" — more than 26% of their pre-pandemic total, per [this E2 report](#). "We also know that two-thirds of the jobs in clean energy are with businesses with fewer than 20 employees. However, the evidence indicates that our region has the growth potential to sustain real economic gains and job creation as part of our economic recovery. This is why it remains critical to invest in these sectors."

Supply and demand is what **David Masur**, executive director of [PennEnvironment](#), used to explain how the proposed legislation can support job growth in the commonwealth.

“The law will require more solar for utility companies supplying money in the state which is coordinated through a [solar energy credit program](#) (we call them SRECs in Pennsylvania),” he said. “The increased requirement will increase the value of the credits, which will make solar projects more affordable.”

As solar projects become more affordable to Pennsylvania residents and businesses, Masur said that more residents and businesses will want solar projects and more workers will be needed to work on them.

Rob Altenburg, senior director for energy and climate of [PennFuture](#), agreed with Shipp about the need for more solar jobs in Pennsylvania. There has been some growth in the number of solar jobs in the state, but Pennsylvania is still behind neighboring states like New Jersey in its growth, he said. New legislation like an updated AEPS can help change that.

“In Pennsylvania we’ve seen some growth, but nearby states like New York, New Jersey, and even Massachusetts are ahead of Pennsylvania,” he said. “To bring jobs here, we are going to need policies like an updated AEPS that encourage the development of new in-state generation.”

Altenburg has heard discussions of project delays in supporting solar jobs and attributes them to people deciding to delay their investments during the pandemic, which has been a particularly volatile time. He experienced his own challenges with trying to get solar work done during the pandemic: “My own solar installer completed their work on schedule, but I had to delay their start because I wanted to replace the roof first and they had staffing issues during the pandemic.”

Michael Butler is a 2020-2021 corps member for Report for America, an initiative of The Groundtruth Project that pairs young journalists with local newsrooms. This position is supported by the Lenfest Institute for Journalism.

Companies: [PennEnvironment](#), [Sustainable Business Network of Greater Philadelphia](#), [PennFuture](#), [State of Pennsylvania](#), [Sustainable Business Network](#)

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