USA TODAY WEEKEND EXTRA

FRIDAY, MARCH 13, 2026 | **SECTION D**

POWER, PROFIT AND PUSHBACK

Despite need for clean energy, more counties are making it harder to build such projects

Elizabeth Weise, Suhail Bhat and Sophie Hartley USA TODAY NETWORK

TOPEKA, KS – After wind turbines came to Ford County in 2006, the roads got fixed, schools were rebuilt and for the first time in decades, dozens of new houses were constructed. ● "We just added another crop," said Deloyce McKee, 76, whose family has farmed and ranched in Ford County, Kansas, since at least 1910. "We still grow wheat, we still have cattle. The wind towers do not take away the value of the ground."

The money from the county's more than 300 turbines has spurred new housing and helped fill seats at local eateries like the Windmill Restaurant and the Spearville Turbine Bar & Grill. The area's two Best Western hotels have seen a surge of stays, often from wind farm maintenance technicians.

"People say they're ugly – but when you drive down from Dodge City, it's just like watching tumbleweeds in the sky," McKee said of the wind farm, Spearville Wind, whose towers produce enough electricity to power as many as 200,000 homes.

Another, Pioneer Creek Wind, is under construction and anticipated to generate $36 million in landowner payments and $84 million in county tax revenue over its lifespan, said county commissioner Shawn Tasset.

Harvesting energy has long been an economic windfall for rural America, from the coal mines of Appalachia to the fracking sites of Pennsylvania and the oil derricks of Texas and New Mexico. In recent years, wind and solar farms joined the list, dotting farmland across the country and providing the nation's fastest-growing source of energy.

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"Our prosperity and national security depend on new electricity generation, and wind, solar, and battery storage remain the fastest, most scalable options we have."

Alan Anderson
Kansas City-based energy lawyer

Inside

ILLUSTRATION BY TRACIE KEETON/USA TODAY; AND GETTY IMAGES

Chris Retter drives his sprayer through an access road surrounded by cornfields in Randolph County, Indiana, in August. Retter has both wind and solar renewable energy on his farming property. "It's not real intrusive," he said of the wind turbine's footprint. PHOTOS BY MYKAL MCELDOWNEY/USA TODAY NETWORK

Wind and solar farms bring big money to rural counties

The financial windfall for the community as well as its individual farmers can be hard to resist

"It was kind of a no-brainer. The money was enticing."

Chris Retter
Fifth-generation farmer in Randolph County, Indiana, on leasing land for a wind farm

Sophie Hartley and Elizabeth Weise USA TODAY NETWORK

RANDOLPH COUNTY, IN – When more than 650 children descended on the local 4-H fair last summer to show livestock and exhibit projects, the grounds looked a little grander than in years past. ● Youngsters wearing cowboy boots and oversize belt buckles led heifers and steers around a shiny, new show area. Families scooched past neighbors, friends and cows to find accessible, air-conditioned bathrooms. Teens dished out nachos and sugary elephant ears to hungry fairgoers in a new kitchen, even as the 65-year-old milkshake machine still rumbled against a far wall.

Residents of this county on Indiana's eastern border have been showing swine, sheep and cattle on this site since the 1950s. But the fairgrounds had wilted under the weight of so many feet and hooves.

Now, it has a new life, thanks to a $2.8 million renovation largely funded by a renewable energy company that operates wind and solar farms here and across the country.

Renewable energy money has changed more than just the fairgrounds; it has transformed this economically stalled county from corner to corner.

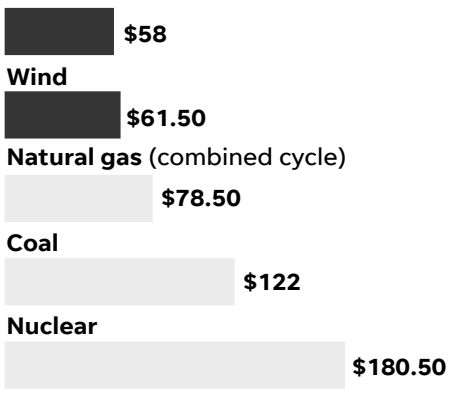
This same story of economic reinvigoration is playing out across the nation in dozens of rural counties that have embraced renewable energy projects, delighting taxpayers, enriching county coffers and making previously unaffordable public works projects possible.

Despite deep-red voting records and conservative dispositions, many of these counties have few regrets about allowing towering wind turbines and lines of solar panels to dot bits of their countryside.

Some fear rural places like Randolph County in western Indiana may be among the last to see a financial revitalization from renewables, as developers engulfed in regulatory confusion pause projects they worked – sometimes for years – to bring to fruition.

Share of energy sources

Average levelized cost per megawatt-hour for major U.S. energy sources



NOTE: Wind cost includes onshore turbines only, and solar includes utility-scale solar
SOURCE: Lazard Levelized cost of energy report, June 2025
GRAPHIC: Ramon Padilla, Ignacio Calderon/ USA TODAY

The renewable energy equivalent of striking black gold

Like many rural counties across the United States, Randolph had been in a slow-moving decline since the 1970s. Agriculture required fewer workers, and small-scale manufacturing moved away. Good jobs were scarce, young people left, and the population fell by 18%.

Green energy has been an economic windfall in many places that welcome it.

Much as Alaska, North Dakota and Texas grew rich when drilling companies struck oil and natural gas, solar and wind power can bring counties both construction work and cash, in the form of leases and tax revenue from the power plants.

In Randolph County, energy giant EDP Renewables North America (EDPR NA) won residents over. The company's first wind farm in Randolph went online in 2014 with 100 turbines.

The wind and solar projects, which have since expanded, sit on an amalgam of leases from 227 landowners and have a combined capacity of 698 megawatts, which is enough to power 164,600 homes, according to EDPR NA.

The company has poured millions into Randolph County, paying tens of thousands of dollars for tornado repairs last year, for instance. EDPR NA redid over 60 miles of roads after construction and also funded the county courthouse's HVAC system upgrade, a $1.5 million project.

The company is on track to pay the county more than $65 million by 2038. Randolph's total annual budget runs about $20 million.

Farming the sky with wind turbines

One of EDPR NA's leases belongs to Chris Retter, a fifth-generation Randolph County farmer.

The Retter family has grown corn, soy and a little bit of wheat for decades. But

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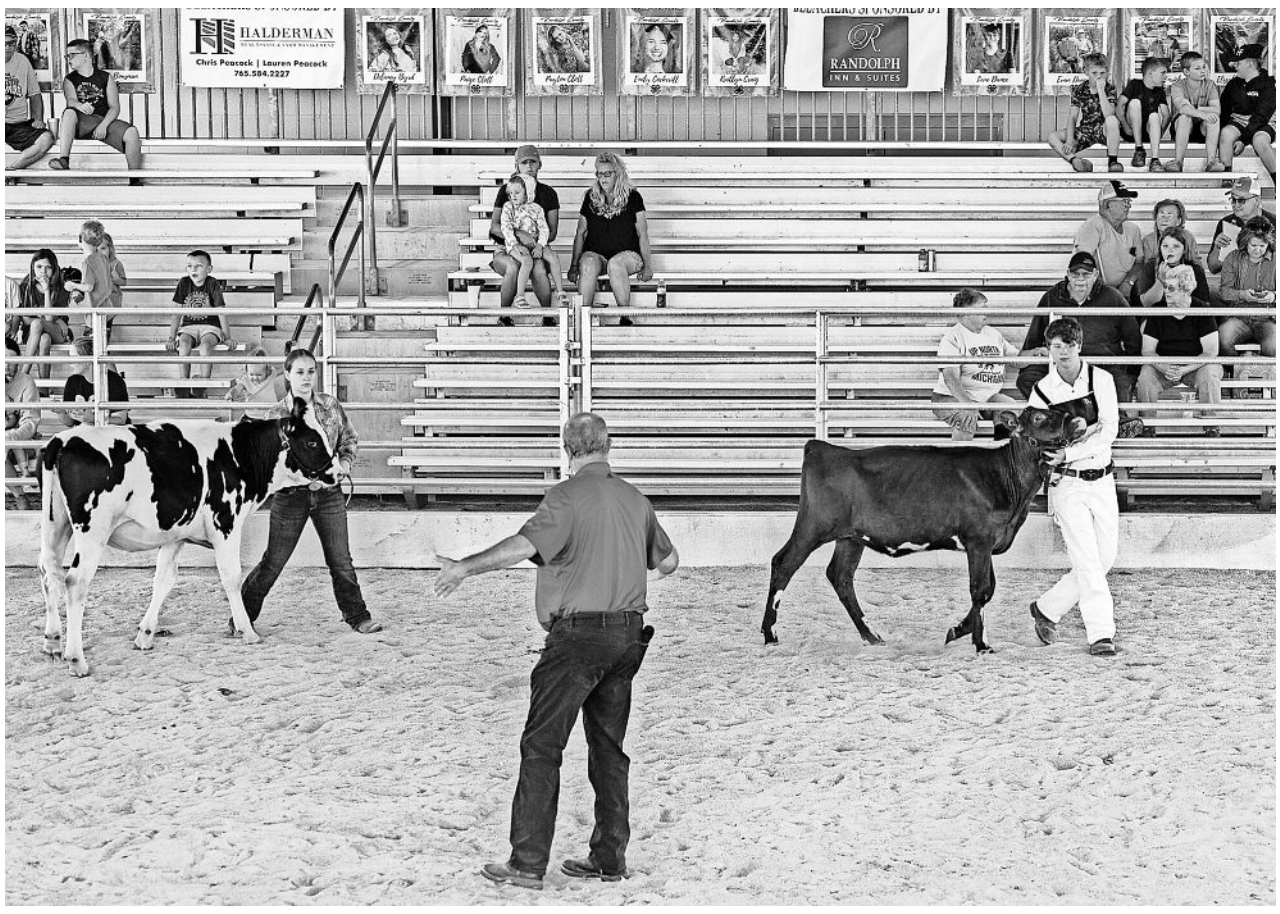

Two 4-H members show their dairy cows during the Randolph County 4-H Fair in Indiana in July. The county fairgrounds recently underwent a $2.8 million renovation funded largely by a renewable energy company.

State and county tactics get creative

Analysis finds that governments use a variety of ways to limit or stop wind and solar projects

Elizabeth Weise and Suhail Bhat USA TODAY

Efforts to block wind and solar energy have grown along with advances in the technology, especially since 2021. ● USA TODAY's analysis found by the end of 2025, 24% of counties nationwide had some impediment to new utility-scale wind and solar energy – up from as few as 15% two years earlier. ● That calculation of local rules included outright bans, zoning restrictions, land-use rules or political stonewalls. It also required USA TODAY to set a standard about which regulations were restrictive enough to count as an impediment. ● Here's what we found, and how we measured it:

Counties with outright bans

In some cases, counties simply ban large renewable energy projects, as part of a backlash to their growing presence. Any county with a ban was counted in our data.

Pulaski County, Indiana, is one example. In 2021, the Pulaski County Board of Commissioners banned all commercial wind turbines from the county, citing the need to protect and promote the "health, safety and general welfare of the residents."

This kind of ban has proliferated.

Counties with moratoriums

Counties use moratoriums to buy time to write new zoning and regulation for wind and solar farms, sometimes to craft reasonable laws and sometimes to craft bans.

> **"They'll carefully craft the ordinance so it doesn't look ridiculously restrictive, but they know it will stop it."**
>
> **Ed Rivet**
> Executive director of the Michigan Conservative Energy Forum

In most cases, a county realizes it doesn't have adequate zoning regulations in place to properly evaluate a solar or wind project, so officials place a moratorium on any new renewable projects while its zoning board writes one. Once the new rule is adopted, the moratorium is lifted.

That's what happened in Linn County, Iowa. Two solar projects were approved in 2022 amid a fair amount of dissent.

"So the supervisors pressed the pause button," said Steve Guyer with the Iowa Environmental Council.

During a year's moratorium, the county revised rules to ones considered fairly reasonable by everyone. As county supervisor Louis Zumback told a local television station, "There's really nothing in it that is a poison pill."

But in other cases, a moratorium is closer to a stand-in for a ban.

"They'll carefully craft the ordinance so it doesn't look ridiculously restrictive, but they know it will stop it," said Ed Rivet, executive director of the Michigan Conservative Energy Forum, which supports the rights of landowners and all forms of energy, whether renewable or fossil fuels.

Impediments: Heights, setbacks

If you're allowed to build a wind turbine, but it has to be so short that it can't catch the wind, you can't run a successful power plant. If your county allows turbines but requires they be at least a mile from anyone else's property line, chances are, there are almost no places they can actually be built.

That's the scenario in counties across the country.

Green energy might technically be allowed, but building restrictions, especially those focused on wind power, make it so difficult that experts and industry representatives agree that there's no practical, cost-effective way to build.

USA TODAY's analysis considers a turbine height limit of 500 feet or less to be a significant impediment, based on the consensus of experts including energy attorneys and university academics who study renewable energy.

Model zoning ordinances in multiple states require a turbine to be set back from the property line, typically measured according to the height of the turbine, so a setback of 1.1 to 1.5 times its height would require the structure to be built 550 to 750 feet from the property line. That way even if a turbine should fall over (an exceedingly rare occurrence), it would not touch neighbors' property.

In 2014, Connecticut passed a law that required setbacks of at least 2.5 times a turbine's height, or about 1,250 feet.

No new wind projects have been built in the state since.

Impediments: Noise limits

In the 2010s, a common concern about wind turbines was that the swishing noise was annoying or even dangerous to residents' health.

The health effects have been discounted, and today's turbines are quiet enough with reasonable setbacks that sound is not considered a major issue.

When Indiana enacted voluntary

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Jaden Retter, right, examines a bean plant leaf as his cousins Parker Retter, middle, and Clayton Retter check plants for signs of disease on Aug. 6, in Randolph County, Indiana. PHOTOS BY MYKAL MCELDOWNEY/USA TODAY NETWORK

> **"I think we can be smarter about where we put solar panels. I think we can put some thought or some discussion into how much is enough."**
>
> **Jon Peacock**
> Farmer in Randolph County, Indiana

Rural

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around 2011, Retter's father got a letter from a developer, looking to lease land for a wind farm.

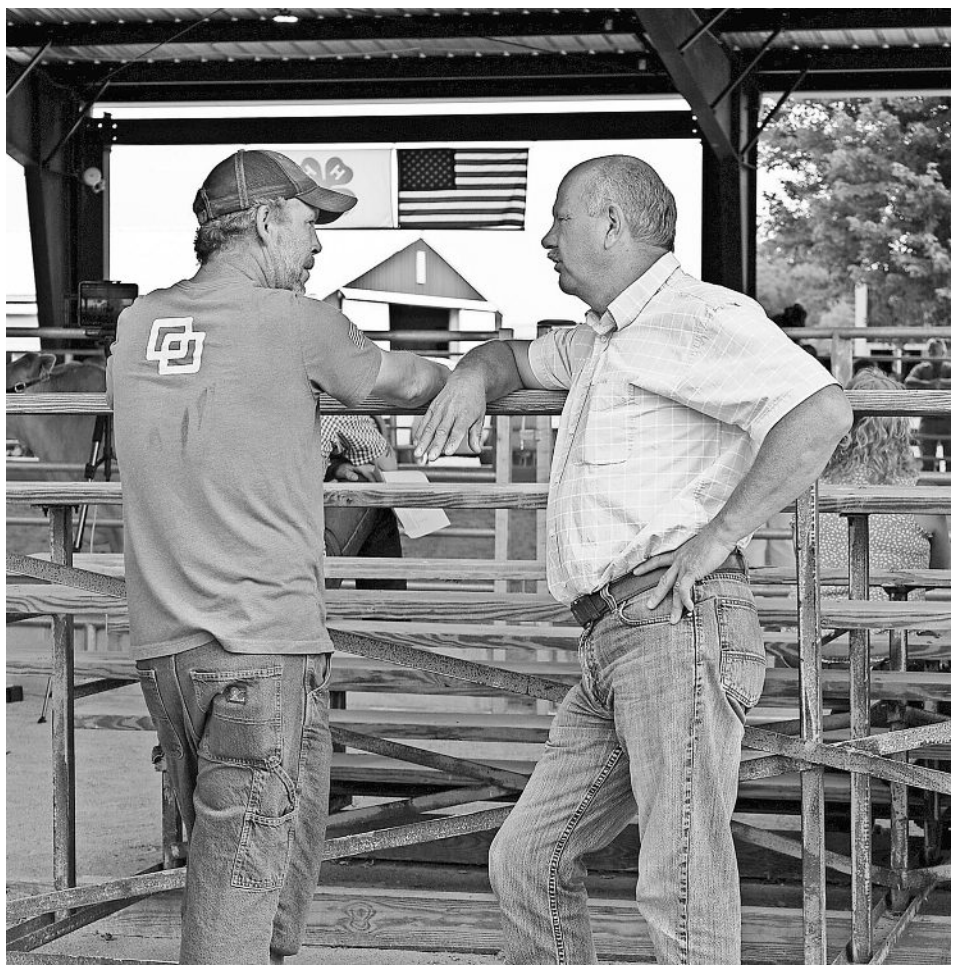
The economy was looking bleak, Retter said. So while the offer to rent out acreage for wind turbines was unfamiliar, it landed at a time when the family had a hard time saying no to stable income.

"It was kind of a no-brainer," Retter said. "The money was enticing."

Then came a messy construction process. Retter said the sheer amount of people and equipment felt like an urban invasion into the family's rural slice of Indiana.

Farm roads were squashed under the weight of cranes and large trucks. When EDPR NA installed transmission lines to send power away from the turbines, the process ruptured sections of his drainage tile, the critical but expensive underground plastic tubing that lowers the water table and keeps crops from getting waterlogged.

But EDPR NA paid to fix everything, building new tile and new roads. Between land farmed by Retter, his mother, his brother and their sons, the family saw four turbines installed. And they could still plant rows of soybeans right up to the access paths around each turbine.



Andy Fahl, right, talks with a friend near the county fairgrounds' new show arena. Fahl, who is a community liaison for EDPR NA, says the renewable energy company's investment in the area is building generational wealth.

In 2017, EDPR NA approached the Retters again. The company wanted to know if they were interested in leasing out more land, this time for solar panels.

This was a tougher decision, Retter said. Solar panels take farmland out of production for between 20 and 50 years.

"You feel like you're doing something you're not sure your ancestors would have approved," he said. "That weighs on you."

In the end, the decision came down to the money. For many farmers, deciding to lease land to solar panels might be the difference between one day saving or selling their farms, Retter said.

Today, more than 100 acres of Retter land, much of which used to grow corn for ethanol, now hosts solar panels for the Riverstart solar park – a shift from one form of energy production to another.

Jon Peacock, a Randolph farmer, has not leased to wind or solar. He just doesn't trust it. And he's worried the county is too enamored by the promise of more cash from new solar projects to fully consider what they're giving up.

"I think we can be smarter about where we put solar panels. I think we can put some thought or some discussion into how much is enough," he said.

Peacock and some other residents have expressed concern about how renewable projects change the landscape and tie up farmland for decades.

Still, some are convinced the projects were a boon.

"I'm a firm believer that that's where your firetrucks come from, your hospitals, your libraries, your auditoriums. That's what I see down the road," said Andy Fahl, a lifelong resident who now mows solar fields for EDPR NA and works as one of the company's liaisons to the community. "I'll be dead and gone, but it will be generational wealth."

Sophie Hartley is an environment reporter with the Indianapolis Star. Elizabeth Weise reported for USA TODAY. This story was produced with support from the McGraw Center for Business Journalism at the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism at the City University of New York. IndyStar's environmental reporting is made possible through the support of the nonprofit Nina Mason Pulliam Charitable Trust.

Clearing the air about wind, solar misconceptions

Low clouds obscure wind turbines in Whitewater, California. JAY CALDERON/ USA TODAY NETWORK

Elizabeth Weise and Sophie Hartley USA TODAY NETWORK

When wind or solar energy projects apply for permits at county councils and zoning commissions across the United States, supporters and foes often pack the rooms to testify for or against.

These meetings can go on for hours, and sometimes days, with dozens and even hundreds of people making impassioned pleas for leaving "rural vistas" as they are or equally impassioned arguments for cheap power that will bring economic salvation.

Some of the common objections are a matter of opinion – are wind turbines ugly or beautiful? Does a field of solar panels ruin a rural setting or help preserve it?

But other arguments are based on false information. Here's a breakdown of some of the biggest misconceptions.

Do wind turbines kill birds and bats?

The short answer: Yes, wind turbines can kill both birds and bats. But the more important question is how many do they kill compared with other sources?

A 2023 study found that wind farms had no statistically significant effect on bird counts. But another kind of energy did: Fracking reduced the total number of birds counted near shale and oil production sites by 15%.

The National Audubon Society has estimated that as many as two-thirds of North American bird species – 398 – are at risk of extinction due to changes in habitat caused by global warming, which clean energy helps limit.

Are solar farms dangerous for birds?

The answer: The common myth that birds fly into solar panels by mistake, perhaps believing them to be water, is wrong.

Argonne National Laboratory researchers recorded more than 17,000 hours of videos of birds interacting with solar facilities. Their system did not record a single collision between a bird and a solar panel.

The birds did perch on the panels, and they used the undersides for foraging, nesting and roosting.

Wind and solar power is exported to people in other areas. Why produce it here?

The answer: Agricultural communities have always exported what they produce, whether it's crops or livestock.

Will worn-out solar panels overwhelm dumps with waste?

The answer: Today's solar panels typically last 30 to 35 years and turbines have a lifespan of about 30 years. At the end of that lifespan, it's true: They must be decommissioned and disposed of.

Most solar zoning codes require energy companies to post bonds for decommissioning panels at the end of their lifespans so counties don't have to pay for disposal.

Will chemicals in solar panels leach into the soil when it rains?

The answer: No. Research published in the Journal of Hazardous Materials in 2017 found that the only way these chemicals could release trace amounts of cadmium into the soil is if the panel were crushed into a powder and then placed in an acidic environment for several weeks.

Will wind turbines hurt nearby property values?

The answer: Wind and solar projects can lower property values but not by large amounts, and they appear to have a long-term beneficial effect on nearby homes.

A study by Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory published in 2023 found that, on average, homes located within one mile of a commercial wind turbine experience about an 11% decline in value following the announcement of a new commercial wind energy project. Homes between a mile and two miles were slightly affected, and any house more than two miles away wasn't affected at all.

However, the effect was short-lived. Prices returned to pre-announcement levels within three to five years after the power project opened.

Research in the journal Energy Policy in 2022 showed that nearby home values increased after wind projects began operating, though that is probably because taxes from the projects provided economic benefits to the area including better schools and infrastructure, making the community more enticing.

What about the noise made by turbines?

The answer: Sound from wind turbines may be annoying, but it has no established adverse health effects, according to Peter Thorne, a professor and head of the University of Iowa's Department of Occupational and Environmental Health.

Will solar farms use up all our farmland?

The answer: No, solar will not use up all the farmland we need.

Farmland is a popular place to build solar because it's generally relatively flat and exposed to abundant sunshine.

The Department of Agriculture already pays farmers to take about 27 million acres of less productive and environmentally sensitive land out of production. That's 38,750 square miles – nearly four times more than the entire amount of land that would be needed for green energy.

Can't we put solar on top of existing buildings so we don't need big fields?

The answer: One version of this argument asserts that by placing solar panels on old industrial and commercial properties that have limited uses – such as shopping malls and distribution centers – no undisturbed land will be needed for solar power.

Such projects can and often are placed on old landfill properties, but these still cost more than farmland or scrubland.

Contributing: Ignacio Calderon

Elizabeth Weise reported for USA TODAY. Sophie Hartley is a reporter for the Indianapolis Star. This story was produced with support from the McGraw Center for Business Journalism at the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism at the City University of New York. IndyStar's environmental reporting is made possible through the support of the nonprofit Nina Mason Pulliam Charitable Trust.

Renewables

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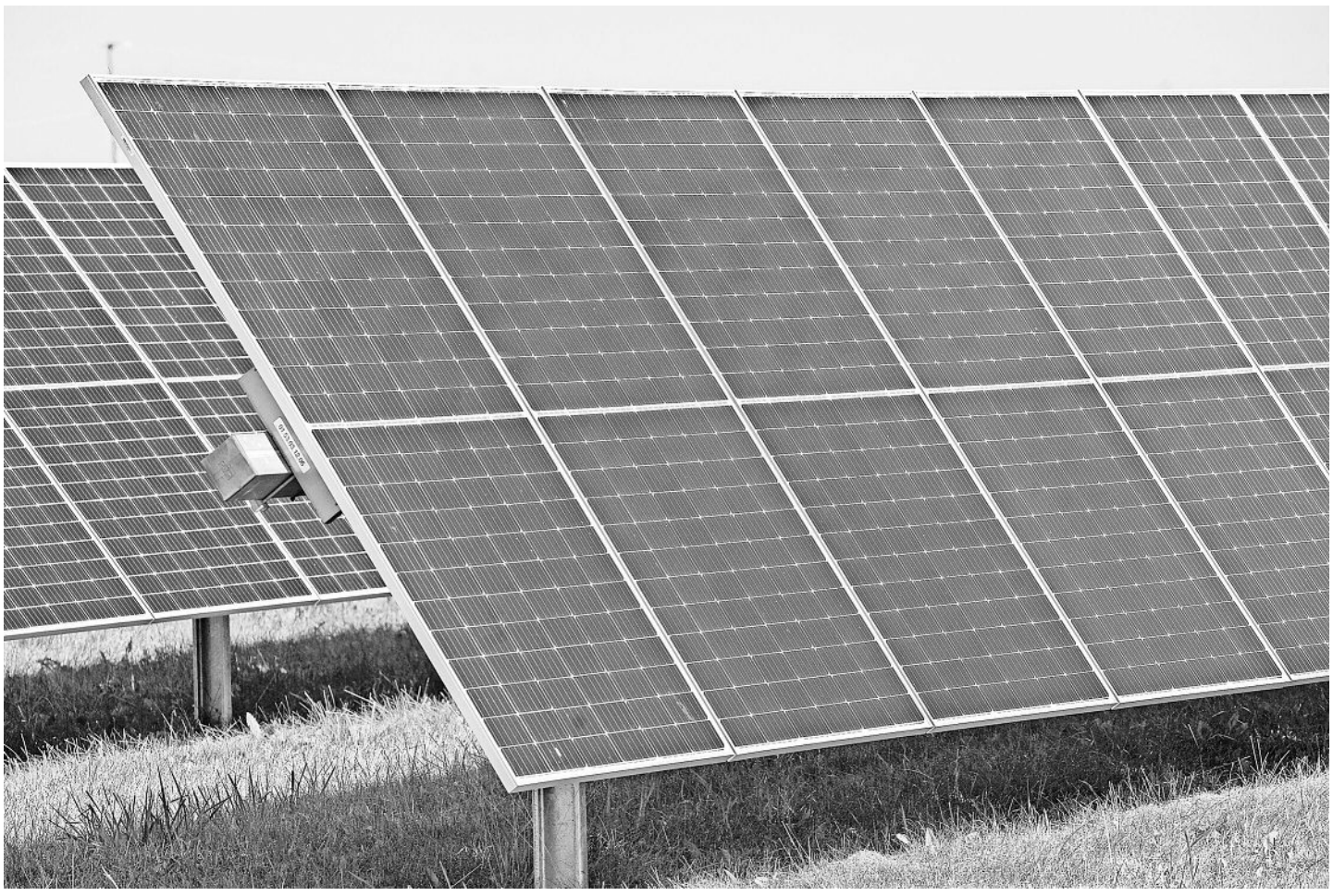

EDP Renewables North America, the energy giant that brought solar panels to Randolph County, Indiana, has invested millions of dollars in the area. Some farmers, however, say that sacrifices they've had to make for the "greater good" are unfair. MYKAL MCELDOWNEY/USA TODAY NETWORK

Sheep graze in the shade of the solar panels at the Clover Creek Solar Project in Juab County, Utah. The sheep keep down vegetation while allowing the site to remain as rangeland. ELIZABETH WEISE/USA TODAY

But now, more U.S. counties are making it difficult – or even impossible – to build large-scale wind or solar projects, according to a new USA TODAY investigation.

USA TODAY reporting in 2023 found that at least 15% of U.S. counties had limited the construction of new wind or solar projects. Now, at least 24% of counties – nearly 1 in 4 – have restricted construction of these energy sources.

President Donald Trump has led the charge, calling wind farms "ugly" and moving the country away from renewable sources of energy and back toward coal and oil.

Since the start of Trump's second term in January 2025, his administration has gone on a regulatory and legislative blitz by slowing or blocking new wind and solar projects on federal lands and making the permitting process for projects on private and state lands substantially more difficult and time-consuming.

"If you don't get away from the green energy scam, your country is going to fail," Trump told a meeting of the United Nations General Assembly in September.

For more than a decade, county and state governments have been making it harder to produce renewable energy.

Efforts to block new power projects are happening even as the United States is expected to see burgeoning energy demands. Electricity demand is anticipated to increase by at least 35% and possibly as much as 50% by 2040, according to research by S&P Global.

Unsubsidized wind and solar power have been the cheapest forms of newly built energy for the past decade, according to the global financial services firm Lazard.

Building out power quickly will be difficult. Natural gas plants can take five to seven years to construct due to backlogs of the necessary turbines. Small modular nuclear reactors are being commissioned but won't go into commercial operation until at least 2030, according to the International Energy Agency.

By contrast, building a new wind or solar plant typically takes between a year and 18 months.

"We need more power, and we need it fast," said John Szoka, CEO of the Conservative Energy Network.

Szoka, who served in the North Carolina House of Representatives for 10 years and in the Army for 20, worries some places will have to conserve energy or cope with dimmed lights in the coming years if the United States doesn't make use of its plentiful and free sun and wind.

"I don't care where the electrons come from, I just like cheap energy," Szoka said.

Turning our backs on wind and solar also will put the United States behind the rest of the world, said Alan Anderson, a Kansas City-based energy lawyer.

"Our prosperity and national security depend on new electricity generation, and wind, solar and battery storage remain the fastest, most scalable options we have," Anderson said. "If we embrace renewables, we keep jobs, investment and security here at home; if we don't, we cede those opportunities – and our strategic advantage – to other countries."

Renewable energy projects become a rural pot of gold

For Dane Simpson, new wind farms brought work to his 10,000-member Laborers' Union in Illinois.

He noticed a pattern: Every time his members built a wind farm, they'd be back in the same community three to five years later to build a school.

He's now logged nearly $1 billion in school construction projects directly linked to wind energy.

In his hometown of El Paso, Illinois, which has two nearby wind farms, the tax revenue helped fund construction of a state-of-the-art grade school, a new junior high and a gymnasium and football field for the high school.

"Suddenly they were hosting volleyball tournaments, basketball tournaments and wrestling tournaments," said Simpson, who directs the Great Plains Laborers-Employers Cooperation and Education Trust.

Local shops have seen a visible boom in businesses, too.

"When there's a tournament, all those families stop at the local gas station and get gas and donuts and coffee," Simpson said. "The McDonald's usually has a line around the corner when those events are coming through."

Nationally, wind and solar projects generated $5.7 billion annually in state and local taxes and lease payments to mostly rural landowners, according to data from the American Clean Power Association.

"This may be the greatest economic opportunity they have seen in decades," said Sarah Mills, a professor of land use and energy policy at the University of Michigan.

It's also a boon for areas that once depended on agriculture but no longer can.

For more than 150 years, California's Fresno County has been a major producer of grapes, almonds, pistachios and tomatoes. But drought and overuse have raised water costs, causing farmers in the western part of the county to leave more than 200,000 acres of land fallow. Now 9,500 of those acres will become the world's largest solar and battery storage system.

Some other examples of economic growth driven by solar and wind projects:

- In Paulding County, Ohio, money from two wind projects let county staff return to a full five-day work week, funded libraries in every town and allowed the county to redo parks and reopen its jail.
- In Montana, Rosebud County is home to strip mines and the state's biggest wind project. The county has received $5.7 million in impact fees, which has, among other things, provided more than $10,000 extra per Rosebud student.
- Oregon's Sherman County, with a population of 2,000, went for the direct approach. It spends its renewables taxes on county projects while also putting a check in the mailbox of county residents each year.
- In Accomack County, Virginia, an 80-megawatt solar facility that came online in 2016 allowed the county to raise police salaries and hire six emergency medical technicians. The project also pays farmers $740,000 a year for land leases. But the county banned new solar projects on agricultural land in 2017.

USA TODAY reporting in 2023 found that at least 15% of U.S. counties had limited the construction of new wind or solar projects. Now, at least 24% of counties – nearly 1 in 4 – have restricted construction of these energy sources.

A popular energy source now gets a cold shoulder

Wind power plants and solar farms were initially very popular in rural areas, where they were built for simple reasons: There's open land, good sun and, in the Midwest, fantastic wind.

In especially sunny or windy places, just how much state power comes from renewable sources can be startling.

Iowa now gets 63% of its electricity from wind, Kansas 52% and Oklahoma 41%.

California gets 35% of its electricity from solar, Nevada 31%, Arizona 16% and Texas 8%.

Even so, especially as renewable energy has become more politicized, solar and wind projects often generate more public opposition than other energy sources.

In January, Trump called wind turbines "losers" and bragged that his administration had not approved one turbine since he returned to office.

He also added – falsely – that China has not built any wind turbines. In 2024, 18% of China's electricity came from solar and wind, according to the energy think tank Ember.

None of this bodes well for the future of the United States on the world stage, said Julio Friedmann, an expert on carbon, hydrogen and biofuels at Carbon Direct, a company that provides climate solutions.

"In all likelihood, the actions will strengthen China's position as a global leader," said Friedmann, who formerly taught at Columbia University. "At worst, the U.S. may surrender its many advantages."

Concerns about wind and solar – some true, some myth – remain

The initial objections to wind and solar projects were largely aesthetic. Some people simply didn't like to look at solar panels or giant turbines; others said they moved to rural and agricultural areas for the "viewscape" and considered the projects to be "visual pollution."

Nearby residents sometimes complained about noise made by the turbines as they turned. Others worried, without evidence, that the turbines would drip chemicals into the groundwater or harm birds.

These objections have become highly politicized, though in surprising ways. Following Trump's lead, Republicans at

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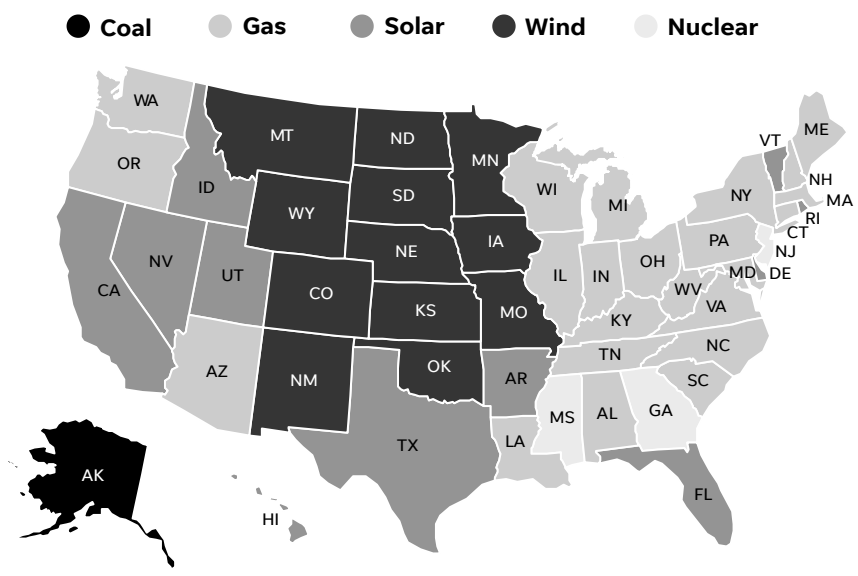
In 23 states, wind or solar are the fastest expanding energy sources

Chart shows the energy source with the largest gain in share of the energy mix between 2016 and 2025.



SOURCE: U.S. Energy Information Administration; GRAPHIC: Ignacio Calderon/USA TODAY; NOTE: 2025 figures are based on data through November, the most recent available.

Impediments

Continued from Page 3D

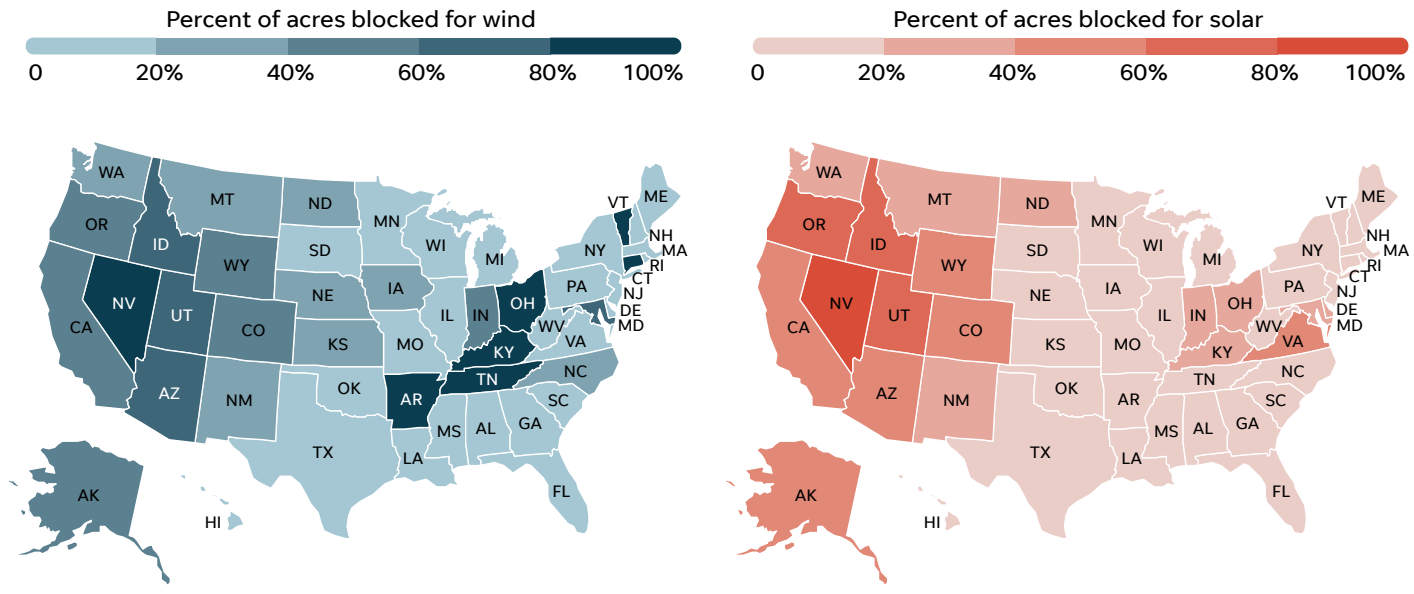
model renewable energy zoning regulations, it set a maximum allowable sound limit of 50 decibels, about the sound of a household refrigerator.

But other places set tougher noise limits. Vermont's 39-decibel limit is somewhere between the sound of a library and a quiet rural area, according to Purdue University.

USA TODAY's analysis considers sound limits below 50 decibels to be impediments to wind power.

"The decision-makers may say a 30-decibel sound limit sounds like a great thing, but that's quieter than the wind itself, so you're effectively placing a ban on this form of energy without having to set a ban," said Simon Mahan, executive director of the Southern Renewable Energy Association, based in Little Rock, Arkansas.

Here's a breakdown of the share of each state that blocks renewable energy projects



SOURCE: USA TODAY research; U.S. Geological Survey; GRAPHIC: Ignacio Calderon/USA TODAY

A block to solar: Agriculture rule

An increasingly common way to curtail solar projects is to set limits on the amount of agricultural land that can be used for them in a county.

Farmland is a popular place to build solar because it's generally flat and open. Not surprisingly, places where crops are grown tend to have good sunlight.

Opponents argue that too much farmland being turned into solar farms will affect the country's ability to feed itself at the national level and destroy the rural nature of life at the county level. Yet the United States currently pays farmers nationwide to keep millions of acres out of production.

USA TODAY's analysis found that in at least nine states, agricultural limits have been used to create impediments to solar power.

How we did this report

USA TODAY's analysis began in 2022 with data from the National Renewable Energy Laboratory – now renamed National Laboratory of the Rockies – and Columbia University's Sabin Center for Climate Change Law, which track laws governing solar and wind energy.

We built on that with more than three year's worth of research, tracking restrictions on wind and solar using federal data, local government filings and media reports from across the country.

We used this to create a database of rules and zoning restrictions for counties, plus some municipalities. We also indexed those by the date they began, stretching from the first we found, in 1996, through the end of 2025.

After interviews with more than 45 experts, we set standards for what kinds of rules and conditions constituted blocks to new, utility-scale (over 5 megawatts) wind and solar projects. These fell into four categories: outright bans, moratoriums, significant impediments and other conditions that made projects difficult to permit.

For each state, we created an overview of current and past state law on the placement and regulation of wind and solar power, and a list of counties that currently have blocks. We ran each state's overview by at least two experts familiar with the state to confirm our findings. These included regional and state academics, regulators, renewable energy developers and groups supporting wind and/or solar power.

The overall methodology and conclusions were vetted by a panel that included state and national experts from the industry and academia. They were:

- Alan Anderson, chair of the energy practice at Polsinelli law firm, Kansas City, Missouri.
- Matt Eisenson, at the time a senior fellow at the Renewable Energy Legal Defense Initiative at Columbia University's Sabin Center for Climate Change Law. He wrote their 2025 paper, "Opposition to Renewable Energy Facilities in the United States."
- Tamara Ogle, a member of the land use team at Purdue University Extension, who inventoried Indiana's renewable energy ordinances in 2022.

By the end of 2025, we had identified 755 counties in the United States in which it is now difficult or impossible to build a new, utility-scale wind or solar farm. This inventory, and the date each block began, allowed us to see the increases over time.

Contributing data analysis: Ignacio Calderon

This story was produced with support from the McGraw Center for Business Journalism at the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism at the City University of New York.

A coal train makes its way through Juab County in west-central Utah. The state embraces an "all of the above" energy strategy that includes coal, oil, natural gas, wind and solar. ELIZABETH WEISE/USA TODAY

Renewables

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the state and county levels typically are against renewable energy.

At the more liberal end of the Democratic Party, states such as California made it harder to build wind and solar because of concerns that they will harm wildlife, use up wilderness areas or diminish natural beauty.

In some counties, the views defy partisan politics.

In Juab County, Utah, almost 90% of voters opted for Trump in 2024. But folks in the county seat of Nephi and surrounding areas have come around to solar.

A 600-acre plot of land that was bringing in just $400 a year in taxes now provides more than $500,000 annually, roughly half of which goes to the school district. The project, which has been open since 2021, generates enough energy to power more than 25,000 households.

The property was "literally sagebrush and rattlesnakes. It wasn't being used for anything," said Kodey Hughes, superintendent of the county's Juab School District.

The project itself sits on a dry hillside just north of the town of Mona. During the growing season, the more than 240,000 panels of the Clover Creek Solar Project are kept free of sagebrush by sheep that happily graze between the lines, napping in the shade of the panels during the hottest parts of the day.

"They keep everything clean," said Seth McPherson, the electrician who tends to the array. "The sheep come in March and are taken out when the snow flies."

Some say they've ended up on the 'short end' of the greater good

Not everyone is thrilled when wind or solar comes to town. Jerry Warren is a sixth-generation farmer whose family has been working the land in Randolph County, Indiana, since 1849.

Warren says he's "kind of gun-shy" when it comes to wind or solar on his ground. He'd rather see farms than panels, in part because farms employ more people.

"When you start thinking about the person that sells the feed, the person that sells the fertilizer, the person that applies the fertilizer, the person that sells the herbicides, the person that applies the herbicides, the farmer that farms the ground ... then you have a local market like the feed mill or the ethanol plant or something like that who also get a piece of that income. All these people I mentioned are locals, and they buy locally, and they shop locally," Warren said.

Jon Peacock also farms in Randolph County. He wonders what the vast corn and soybean fields around him are going to look like when his grandsons want to farm.

"If 50 years from now they look at this county, and all they see is solar panels and if they want to farm – do you have to move somewhere to farm or to be able to buy ground?" he said.

Some of his friends who own land nearby are in favor of solar, he said, because the money being offered per acre "could change your way of life."

But just because something's good for some people, or even the whole county, doesn't make him like it.

"Our commissioners tell me and tell the committee and they tell the public that for the greater good sometimes, there have to be some people that are on the short end. I don't think we need to do that to our neighbors," he said. "There are golden rules written about things like this. You know, 'Do unto others.' "

Back in Kansas, McKee understands the emotion people can feel about the landscape. But in the end, she said, it comes down to the right of a community to thrive.

The Spearville Wind money "went to fix up the schools. No taxpayers had to pay for that, but all taxpayers benefited," she said.

And that's not even counting property rights, McKee added. "When people say they don't want to look at the turbines, well, [unless they own the land] it's not their ground, it's not their choice."

Contributing data analysis: Ignacio Calderon

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