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By E-mail: DEEP.OPPD@ct.gov

Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection
10 Franklin Square
New Britain, CT 06051

Subject: Comments on STEPs for Solar Development

RENEW Northeast, Inc. (RENEW)¹ submits this letter in response to the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection's (DEEP or Department) June 7, 2021, Notice of Proceeding, Scoping Meeting and Opportunity for Public Comment on the proposed scope of the STEPs process, including the objectives, types of facilities, and topics that will be considered as well as the proposed process and schedule for the stakeholder proceeding.

RENEW appreciates the opportunity to explore best practices for the siting of solar projects. As DEEP is aware, solar development opportunities are constrained by the location and capacity of the existing transmission and distribution electricity grid. Establishing additional layers of zero-sum restrictions without nuance or flexibility can work at cross purposes with the achievement of several policy aims, including cost-effective renewable energy deployment that displaces the need for emitting sources. DEEP must consider these factors as it develops any additional requirements or restrictions on agriculture and forest lands.

For example, DEEP should avoid blanket restrictions for site development, including on farmland. Maintaining viable farms and healthy soils can align with goals for renewable energy development. In many cases, solar projects can help preserve farmland and promote a robust agriculture sector. Unlike industrial, commercial, or residential development on farmland, solar is a temporary use of land. Once solar projects are decommissioned after their useful life, the property can be restored to previously existing conditions and agricultural activities may resume. The income from solar land leases can also supplement the income of farmers, helping them to

¹ The comments expressed herein represent the views of RENEW and not necessarily those of any particular member of RENEW. RENEW is a non-profit association uniting environmental advocates and the renewable energy industry whose mission involves coordinating the ideas and resources of its members with the goal of increasing environmentally sustainable energy generation in the Northeast from the region's abundant, indigenous renewable resources. RENEW members own and/or are developing large-scale renewable energy projects, energy storage resources and high-voltage transmission facilities across the Northeast. They are supported by members providing engineering, procurement and construction services in the development of these projects and members that supply them with multi-megawatt class wind turbines. RENEW seeks to promote policies that will increase energy diversity, promote economic development, and achieve the state's policy goals including those found in the Renewable Portfolio Standard (RPS) and the Global Warming Solutions Act (GWSA).

continue farming on other parts of their property. Thus, solar helps preserve farmland for future generations, whereas other types of development are irreversible.

Connecticut's farmers face many challenges, foremost of which is economic viability. Many types of farming are no longer competitive in Connecticut with those farmers looking to sell their lands for permanent development. RENEW continues to be concerned that solar development, which does not necessitate permanent site redevelopment, is being held to a higher standard than other forms of development on farmland that have more lasting impacts. Should DEEP ultimately seek to impose limitations on solar development on farmland, RENEW recommends implementation of a threshold that allows for solar development on farmland up until a specified statewide threshold has been hit. This approach would balance the renewable energy and carbon reduction goals of the state with appropriate consideration for landowner rights and preservation of working land.

Similarly, Connecticut currently allows forested land to be cleared for residential, commercial and industrial development but has discouraged solar development – which does not have a permanent impact – on forested land. While RENEW acknowledges the need for a tool like the ARCGIS Forestland Habitat Impact Map, DEEP's current map is inaccurate and must better account for local zoning requirements and private property owners' rights.

Public Act 17-218 singled out large-scale solar development by imposing a permitting process on large-scale solar intended for large-scale fossil fueled power plants. The added costs and risks could needlessly increase Connecticut's electric rates; jeopardize stable and predictable increases in municipal tax revenue; weaken alternative revenue streams and property rights for farmers; and negatively affect the state's ability to meet renewable energy goals. It may have already caused solar energy developers to look outside of Connecticut to states not subjecting large-solar projects to these risks. This proceeding should examine repeal of Public Act 17-218.

RENEW also finds DEEP's issuance of proposed revisions to the Stormwater General Permit requirements has also created significant regulatory uncertainty for solar development that will hinder the state's ability to reach its renewable energy deployment and greenhouse gas reduction requirements. The Stormwater General Permit has been effective in regulating stormwater management from solar projects of all sizes. The Department has successfully permitted many solar projects through to construction. While there have been instances of non-compliance, RENEW respectfully submits that the compliance issues highlighted by the Department in presentations last year occurred in limited circumstances where the terms of the Stormwater General Permit were disregarded. While RENEW generally supports the Department's efforts to increase stormwater reporting and monitoring requirements, this does not mean that the terms of the current Stormwater General Permit are ineffective, or that an entire Appendix should be devoted solely to solar development.

To achieve Connecticut's environmental, energy, and economic development goals, a solar energy project should not face a riskier and costlier permitting process compared to a project to be fueled by natural gas or oil let alone a permanent housing or commercial development. RENEW submits that Connecticut's Siting Council as the impartial and technical expert panel responsible for balancing the need for adequate and reliable public utility services

with the need to protect the environment and ecology of the state has and can continue to balance the need for clean and reliable electricity and the need to protect the environment of the state without the adoption of further restrictions on solar energy development.

Thank you for the opportunity to offer these comments on solar energy development in Connecticut.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Francis E. Pullaro". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized "F" and "P".

Francis Pullaro
Executive Director