BROWNFIELD SOLAR

Turning Contaminated Land Into Clean Energy

For municipalities, commercial property owners, and nonprofits sitting on underutilized land with a complicated environmental history, brownfield solar has gone from a niche concept to one of the most financially rewarding clean energy strategies available in New England today. With new incentive structures taking effect across the region and growing pressure to deploy solar without consuming open space, the timing has never been better to take a serious look at what your brownfield properties could produce.

What Is a Brownfield, and Why Does It Matter for Solar?

The EPA's RE Powering program targets sites including brownfields, Superfund sites, sites subject to corrective action under the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act, mining sites, and landfills, all of which can offer significant advantages over open space for renewable energy development. Put simply, a brownfield is any parcel of land where past industrial, commercial, or agricultural use left behind contamination that complicates reuse. These sites range from former gas stations and dry cleaners to shuttered factory yards and municipal Public Works depots.

“The future belongs to those who show up for it.”

NORTHEASTREC.ORG

The EPA estimates there are 450,000 brownfields in the United States covering 15 million acres. Nearly every city and town in New England has at least one. For decades these parcels sat idle, costing municipalities tax revenue and community goodwill while posing ongoing environmental liability. Solar development is changing that equation rapidly.

Brownfield sites are usually located in close proximity to power lines and public roads, which can save the construction costs of building access roads and reduce the expenses associated with a long interconnection route. Redeveloping a brownfield or landfill with a community scale solar project improves the local tax base, generates energy savings, creates jobs, and turns blight into an economic opportunity. The EPA also estimates that a brownfield site, once mitigated and developed, increases surrounding property values by five to fifteen percent.

Massachusetts: The SMART 3.0 Brownfield Adder

For anyone operating in Massachusetts, the most significant financial tool for brownfield solar right now is the Brownfield Adder within the state's SMART 3.0 program. The Brownfield Adder is a financial performance based incentive within the Massachusetts Solar Massachusetts Renewable Target program that provides an additional per kilowatt hour payment to solar projects built on land previously contaminated by hazardous substances or pollutants. In 2026, this incentive remains a cornerstone of the state's land use strategy, encouraging developers to repurpose underutilized industrial sites rather than clearing greenfield spaces or forests.

In 2026, the Brownfield Adder typically ranges between $0.03 and $0.06 per kilowatt hour, depending on the project's capacity and when it was enrolled in the program. That bonus stacks on top of a base compensation rate guaranteed for twenty years, creating a long term predictable revenue stream that makes brownfield solar financing attractive to lenders and investors alike.

To qualify for the Brownfield Adder, a site must have a completed Phase II Environmental Site Assessment and be listed in the MassDEP brownfield database or have an Activity and Use Limitation. A Licensed Site Professional must typically provide documentation that the land has been affected by hazardous materials. That documentation requirement does add upfront work, but for sites already known to be contaminated, much of this assessment may already exist.

One of the most valuable aspects of the Brownfield Adder is its stackability. The adder works well alongside the community solar adder and the public entity adder for ground mount projects. For a municipality building a community solar installation on a contaminated city owned parcel, that combination can dramatically compress payback timelines.

On March 13, 2026, the Massachusetts Department of Energy Resources filed a letter in the regulatory docket providing an overview of the annual SMART Program Assessment process, and the Electric Distribution Companies filed a revised version of the SMART 3.0 Tariff. Program Year 2026 carries 600 megawatts of available capacity for projects subject to the capacity cap, so interested applicants should move without delay.

SMART 3.0 has also introduced a new incentive to steer projects away from undeveloped land. The program now adds mitigation fees for ground mounted solar projects over 250 kilowatts when they are sited on undeveloped land without qualifying adders such as brownfield or dual use agricultural. In other words, the state is now financially penalizing projects that consume open space while simultaneously rewarding those that reclaim contaminated land. For brownfield owners, this structural shift is a meaningful advantage.

New York and the Broader Regional Picture

Massachusetts is not alone. New York's NYSERDA is advancing brownfield solar through multiple programs simultaneously. The NY Sun Program recently awarded over one million dollars to a 7.1 megawatt community solar project on brownfield land in Skaneateles Falls, New York. That project received its brownfield specific environmental approvals from the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation and is expected to deliver enough energy to power approximately 895 homes annually.

NYSERDA's Build Ready program helps communities create a customized benefits package alongside project development. Host community benefits can be tailored to local needs, including electric vehicle charging stations and payment in lieu of taxes agreements that direct annual payments to municipalities for reinvestment in the community. Priority under the program is given to previously developed sites, brownfields, landfills, former commercial and industrial sites, and other underutilized areas.

The National Momentum

The push toward brownfield solar is not a regional trend but a national one. Minnesota, Kentucky, West Virginia, Nevada, and Pennsylvania are already siting large scale solar on abandoned and existing mines instead of farmland. Increased research, funding, and community outreach made 2024 pivotal for brownfield solar development, and the industry is expected to carry that momentum forward aggressively.

Solar developers' business reality has changed in recent years, making brownfield investment more appealing. In 2024, 378 renewable energy projects across 47 states faced community opposition, according to Columbia University. As risks and costs of local permitting on farmland increase, developers are viewing brownfields as a challenging yet promising opportunity to secure local buy in. Communities that once pushed back on greenfield solar installations are often enthusiastic supporters of brownfield redevelopment, which transforms a local eyesore into a local asset.

What This Means for NREC Members

If your organization owns or manages land with a legacy contamination history, or if your municipality is sitting on a former DPW yard, a closed landfill, or an abandoned industrial site, the financial case for solar conversion is stronger today than it has ever been. The combination of SMART 3.0 brownfield adders, stackable incentives, federal investment tax credit eligibility for projects breaking ground before July 4, 2026, and growing investor appetite for these projects creates a compelling window right now.

NREC connects members across New England with the developers, financiers, legal professionals, and environmental consultants needed to move a brownfield solar project from feasibility to completion. If you want to explore whether your site qualifies or learn more about how to get started, reach out directly at kristin@northeastrec.org.

PARTNER SPOTLIGHT

Rhode Island Commerce Announces Launch of Grant Program to Help Reduce Small Business Energy Costs

By Rhode Island Commerce on Mar. 19, 2026

PROVIDENCE, R.I. – March 19, 2026 – Secretary of Commerce Stefan Pryor and Rhode Island Commerce today announced the launch of the Small Business Energy Efficiency Program – a statewide grant program to help small businesses reduce their energy costs. The program is a partnership between Rhode Island Commerce, Rhode Island Energy, RISE Engineering, and the RI Executive Climate Change Coordinating Council (EC4). It reimburses eligible small businesses up to $20,000 for energy efficiency measures implemented as the result of an energy assessment or audit.

“This program will help small businesses reduce their energy consumption and, as a result, lower their operating costs,” said Secretary of Commerce Stefan Pryor. “These modest investments by Commerce will deliver meaningful savings for our businesses. We thank our partners for their commitment and collaboration.”

Administered by Rhode Island Commerce, the program provides cost-sharing support for eligible small businesses. Businesses with less than $2 million in annual gross revenue may receive reimbursement for up to 80% of eligible project costs, and businesses with between $2 million and $5 million in annual gross revenue may receive up to 70%.

“This program strengthens Rhode Island’s small business community while advancing our state’s climate goals,” said RIEC4 Chair and DEM Director Terry Gray. “By empowering businesses to invest in energy efficiency improvements, we are not only reducing costs today but also building a more affordable, resilient, and sustainable future for all Rhode Islanders.”

“Rhode Island Energy is proud to again partner with Rhode Island Commerce to help Rhode Island’s small businesses reduce their electric and gas costs,” said David Moreira, Director of Programs & Connections at Rhode Island Energy. “Our partnership demonstrates how collaboration can drive meaningful savings for participants and ratepayers, while supporting the long-term strength of Rhode Island businesses.”

“RISE is proud to partner with Rhode Island Commerce and Rhode Island Energy to help small businesses identify and implement cost-effective energy efficiency improvements,” said Jon Colando, Manager of Small Business Services at RISE. “As the program’s implementation partner, RISE works directly with local businesses to deliver energy assessments and guide the installation of efficiency upgrades that reduce operating costs, improve building performance, and support the long-term success of Rhode Island’s small business community.”

The application and list of eligible projects or purchases are available online.

Businesses with questions about the program are encouraged to reach out to Rhode Island Commerce at (401) 521-HELP or email energy.efficiency@commerceri.com.

NEWS CORNER

Revolution Wind comes online off the coast of Rhode Island

On Friday, March 13, the 704 megawatt Revolution Wind farm started pumping electricity onto New England's grid from off the coast of Rhode Island. The milestone came after Orsted fought, and repeatedly won, a series of legal battles against federal attempts to yank the project's permits. Orsted's chief development officer Amanda Dasch said Revolution Wind is adding affordable, reliable, American made energy to New England's grid while helping meet growing demand and lower consumer costs.

heatmap.news

Vineyard Wind 1 installs its final turbine off Massachusetts

On the same Friday Revolution Wind came online, Vineyard Wind 1, owned by Avangrid and Copenhagen Infrastructure Partners, installed its final turbine off the coast of Massachusetts. Together the two projects gave New England an offshore wind doubleheader in a single day. The Oceantic Network said the domestic offshore wind industry is demonstrating its true potential every day.

newbedfordlight.org

Maine tries again for 1.2 gigawatts of wind, with regional help this time

After nearly 20 years of attempts, Maine is making another run at large scale wind power in its far north, with an array of up to 1.2 gigawatts now under active development. This time, the state has something it did not have before, a coordinated push from its New England neighbors. Experts told Canary Media that regional cooperation may be what finally gets the project built.

canarymedia.com

Balcony solar bills make inroads across New England

Lawmakers across New England are considering bills to legalize plug in balcony solar, a small, simple technology that lets residents and renters generate their own clean power. Maine's bill was on track to pass as soon as the following week, with Connecticut and other states close behind. For homeowners and small businesses watching their electric bills climb, this is one of the more quietly hopeful stories of the month.

canarymedia.com

"OUR DEPENDENCE ON FOSSIL FUELS AMOUNTS TO GLOBAL PYROMANIA, AND THE ONLY FIRE EXTINGUISHER WE HAVE AT OUR DISPOSAL IS RENEWABLE ENERGY."

– HERMANN SCHEER, GERMAN POLITICIAN