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Net metering in Massachusetts: To lift the cap or not - by Susan Bernstein

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Legislation passed the state senate in July to increase the 1,600 megawatt (MW) cap on solar energy incentives, known as net metering. The bill calls for raising the cap immediately, and, as the sponsor and long-time clean energy advocate senator Ben Downing of Pittsfield said, to “task the administration with the authority to craft a program for what it looks like moving forward.” Senator Downing has stated that net metering has proved to be an incentive for clean energy, with the use of solar power having increased from less than 3 MW in 2007 to nearly 867 MW of solar power currently. Some utilities, such as National Grid, have already hit their cap for the year.

The Baker administration also filed a solar bill in mid-August, directing the state's Department of Energy Resources to: establish a solar incentive program with a CAP above 1,600 MW of generated solar energy; promote a stable, equitable, and self-sustaining solar market at a reasonable cost; promote equitable access to solar energy; identify incentives, credits, or revenue; and ensure that costs are shared collectively among all ratepayers of the distribution companies. Net metering is the process by which solar energy is generated and credit can be received for any generated energy that is not used. The process enables customers of the utilities to sell unused solar-power generated electricity back to the utilities. Mass. has limited the number of credits each of the state's utilities can have for large scale projects. The utilities claim that the non-solar energy customers subsidize the solar energy customers and the Baker Administration appears to be attempting to ameliorate this situation in the legislative language of its bill.

Additionally, the Massachusetts Net Metering Task Force, a legislatively created Task Force aimed at addressing net metering and thereby promoting solar energy, issued its report in April. Indicating that the Baker administration is committed to reaching the 1,600 MW target as well as establishing a sustainable program beyond 2020 at reasonable cost, it pinpointed the dilemma between the competing issues: (1) create credit and incentive levels in order to continue to expand the solar industry; and (2) find a solution to equalize the way the ratepayers are charged for those accessing solar energy and those not.

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