Virginia has enacted significant policy to move the Commonwealth towards a clean energy future. With the passing of the Virginia Clean Economy Act, the state is on a path to zero carbon emissions from the energy sector by 2050. Through the Clean Energy and Community Flood Preparedness Act, Virginia joined the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative. In order to meet those lofty goals, we must defend and expand upon these clean energy commitments, including responsibly developing clean energy infrastructure, ramping up energy efficiency and solar investments, and ensuring an equitable transition to a clean energy economy.

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BUILDING AN EQUITABLE CLEAN ENERGY ECONOMY FOR COMMUNITIES & WORKERS
Virginia has made progress in addressing climate change, but we must prioritize supporting the people and communities that have been dependent on fossil fuels to ensure that they are not left behind. Virginia must optimize this moment to rebuild communities devastated by decades of fossil fuel dependency, connect impacted communities to new economic opportunities, and ensure that all environmental impacts of fossil fuels are remediated. As we transition to a clean energy economy, we have the opportunity to revitalize these communities and prioritize people most impacted by the transition, while also growing the workforce to include historically overlooked communities.

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SLASHING POLLUTION & ENERGY BILLS WITH VIRGINIA’S UNTAPPED RESOURCE: ENERGY EFFICIENCY
Virginia must make energy efficiency a bedrock component of our energy mix in order to lower Virginia’s rising energy bills and excess carbon pollution. Reducing inequitable energy burdens is especially important for low- and middle-income households, who pay electric bills that are the nation’s 6th highest and electric rates that are among the highest in the region. Without further action, our citizens, health, environment, and economy will continue to be unnecessarily sapped by our outdated and inefficient energy system.

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BRINGING MORE RESILIENT ENERGY TO VIRGINIA COMMUNITIES
With the Virginia Clean Economy Act, Virginia is poised to embark on a massive investment in large-scale solar and wind installations, and although such resources are necessary to decarbonize the power sector, such facilities suffer from the same reliability risks as other large-scale power plants. Small-scale energy resources, especially when paired with storage, are a necessary complement to larger resources. They improve grid reliability, reduce pressure on agriculture and forest land, and provide more jobs per megawatt compared to larger resources. Virginia must remove barriers to customer-owned clean energy, strengthen the renewable portfolio standard, and promote solar-plus-storage solutions for electricity resilience.

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MAXIMIZING BENEFITS & MINIMIZING IMPACTS OF UTILITY SCALE SOLAR
Virginia’s use of electricity and reliance on large-scale centralized power generation comes at a price. Even with the cleanest power generation projects, best practices should be employed to optimize energy output while minimizing environmental impacts. Utility-scale solar, by its very nature, uses many acres of land, which – if poorly developed – can unnecessarily harm primarily agricultural and forested lands. While renewable energy projects must be used to meet the Commonwealth’s energy demand going forward, Virginia’s executive branch, General Assembly, and regulators should strive to minimize the environmental impacts while maximizing the benefits of solar.

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ENSURING RESPONSIBLE DEVELOPMENT OF OFFSHORE WIND
With a pathway to produce 5200 megawatts of offshore wind (OSW) by 2035 and Dominion Energy on track to deliver half of that power by 2026, Virginia is well on its way to confronting the climate crisis and realizing the creation of thousands of jobs supporting its industry. Virginia must now ensure that OSW is done right, meaning it is brought online in a way that is fair, equitable, and beneficial for all Virginians. In particular, this means ensuring that the OSW job opportunities and training/educational programs are available, affordable, community-based, and widely promoted throughout the Commonwealth. It also means that OSW is responsibly sited both offshore and onshore with its transmission lines.

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The Golden Hour
Image credit: Alison Thomas
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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CHALLENGE

14,000 Virginians are employed in fossil fuel extraction, and 10,000 are employed in fossil fuel electricity generation, transmission, and distribution.1 Many of these jobs will be lost in the coming decades. Approximately 40 fossil fuel power plants currently operational throughout Virginia must be retired in order to meet the state’s carbon goals, and many have already shut down due to market changes.2 Those plants are disproportionately located in low-income communities and communities of color.3,4 The decline in the coal industry in recent decades has already resulted in severe declines in local tax revenues and job losses in Southwest Virginia.

New workforce development programs and incentives can help to ensure that the growing clean energy industry employs more of its workforce with a diverse Virginia workforce, ensuring Virginia communities benefit from these growing industries, rather than having to use out-of-state employees. All workforce programs and incentives must be designed to lift up disadvantaged communities, collaborate with unions, and provide opportunities such that the beneficiaries are representative of the diverse population of Virginia. Lastly, Virginia’s clean energy policies must be updated to ensure programs such as community solar, energy efficiency incentives, and renewable and energy storage mandates are applied equitably across all utilities in the state so that benefits of clean energy reach all Virginians.

Shuttered power plants and mines leave behind environmental hazards with insufficient funding for clean up or commitments from operators to remediate the spaces.

Shuttered power plants and mines leave behind environmental hazards with insufficient funding for clean up or commitments from operators to remediate the spaces. As new energy resources are constructed, the communities that are losing the economic benefits of fossil fuel production aren’t necessarily the communities reaping the benefits of Virginia’s clean energy economy. Fossil fuel declines result in a decline in tax revenue, which impacts the ability of local governments to maintain and invest in critical infrastructure, further harming economic development potential and impacting public health. These communities often face the overlapping challenges of economic downturn and environmental degradation.

On the opposite side, as a growing clean energy industry blossoms, clean energy employers have difficulty finding enough Virginia workers, and training opportunities are inaccessible to many. Companies will be forced to outsource jobs, and the clean energy industry will be less diverse without new equitable training and recruitment programs.

SOLUTION

Justice requires that the legacy impacts of the fossil fuel industry be addressed and that communities be compensated and prioritized in the transition. It is critical to engage impacted people in economic transition planning and decision-making, and to reinvest in communities where divestment has occurred for decades. In order to adequately plan for our energy transition and address the historic inequities experienced by communities of color, low-income communities, and front-line communities, more data is needed to understand what the full impacts of the energy transition will be on workers and communities and what opportunities the clean energy industry presents. With better data, we can direct resources such as funding for infrastructure and schools, environmental protections and enforcement, and education and job training opportunities to the people and areas most in need.
SLASHING POLLUTION & ENERGY BILLS WITH VIRGINIA’S UNTAPPED RESOURCE: ENERGY EFFICIENCY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Virginia must make energy efficiency a bedrock component of our energy mix in order to lower Virginia’s rising energy bills and excess carbon pollution. Reducing inefficient energy burdens is especially important for low- and middle-income households, who pay electric bills that are among the highest in the nation.1 Without further action, our citizens, health, environment, and economy will continue to be unnecessarily sapped by our outdated and inefficient energy system.

CHALLENGE

Though Virginia has recently passed significant energy efficiency legislation, the state still has substantial untapped potential to avoid wasting energy.2 This is reflected in our state’s high electricity bills,3 as well as some of the highest energy burdens borne by lower income Virginians.4 Efficiency—achieving the same output with less energy—lowers Virginians’ electric bills and rates, creates thousands of local jobs, and reduces the harms from energy-related pollution. Avoidable energy waste disproportionately hits low-income, Black, and Latinx residents.5

We could reduce carbon pollution 50% by 2050 if we fully tapped efficiency technology.6

Efficiency is also an important way to lower greenhouse gas emissions when doing so is more energy efficient than continuing reliance on fossil fuels.7

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Extend and strengthen the Energy Efficiency Resource Standard beyond 2025, including a low-income specific standard, so electric monopolies equitably lower pollution and bills while avoiding building far costlier power generators.

Allow electric utilities to electrify buildings when doing so is more energy efficient than continued reliance on fossil fuels.

Empower local governments to adopt “stretch codes” with stronger energy efficiency and climate standards.

Allow local governments to require large building owners to make their buildings’ energy intensity public, for greater transparency of building efficiency and related infrastructure costs when doing so is more energy efficient than continued reliance on fossil fuels.

Such policy will ensure Virginia’s monopoly electric utilities include more efficiency in their future energy mix and avoid building far costlier power generators.8 Ratepayer costs and climate pollution could also be further reduced by authorizing more efficient electrification projects to replace outdated appliances that rely on fossil fuel.

Promptly implementing highly efficient building codes for new and rehabilitated buildings and empowering local governments to advance efficiency are also critical for lowering bills and reducing pollution. The Commonwealth and residents, especially low- and moderate-income residents, will benefit. While the 2021 General Assembly sensibly called for building codes to be “at least as stringent as” International Energy Conservation Code when savings and other benefits over time would exceed the initial construction costs, it is unclear when and how Virginia regulators will actually implement such standards.

Lastly, localities need to be granted authority (a) to require building owners to publicly “benchmark” their buildings’ energy efficiency, so that potential tenants know energy costs in advance, incentivizing owners to make cost-effective building efficiency upgrades, and (b) to adopt “stretch codes” with stronger energy and climate standards, including net-zero goals, for buildings constructed within their jurisdictions.

Virginia’s energy is also wasted by outdated appliances that run on fossil fuels, which cannot be upgraded to utility-delivered electric appliances due to needlessly restrictive policies. Action is also needed to ensure that buildings are built with efficiency in mind from the start. Although the best time to make a building energy efficient is when it is first built, builders lower their construction costs by excluding efficiency measures, resulting in 50 to 100 years of higher energy costs and pollution.

Government policy is needed to overcome all these barriers so that energy resources are used efficiently and households save money.

SOLUTION

Virginia should build on policy that expands access to energy efficiency by setting stronger energy efficiency targets and removing the restriction on the more efficient electrification of buildings and related infrastructure currently powered by polluting fossil fuels.

Efficiency is also one of our best climate action tools, both to lower upstream power plant pollution and to shift buildings away from fossil fuel.

If we fully tapped efficiency technology, we’d reduce carbon pollution 50% by 2050.9

Though energy efficiency is a smart investment, longstanding barriers block its full implementation in Virginia: upfront costs of retrofits can deter some households, while regressive elec-
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
With the Virginia Clean Economy Act, Virginia is poised to embark on a massive investment in large-scale solar and wind installations, and although such resources are necessary to decarbonize the power sector, such facilities suffer from the same reliability risks as other large-scale power plants.

Small-scale energy resources, especially when paired with storage, are a necessary complement to larger resources. They improve grid reliability, reduce pressure on agriculture and forest land, and provide more jobs per megawatt compared to larger resources. Virginia must remove barriers to customer-owned clean energy, strengthen the renewable portfolio standard, and promote solar-plus-storage solutions for electricity resilience.

CHALLENGE
Virginia faces an immense challenge in transitioning to clean energy while ensuring electricity reliability. To do that most effectively, Virginia must deploy renewable energy in all its forms. While multi-acre utility-scale solar installations may be common, solar can also be installed on rooftops and through “shared solar” where customers can subscribe to a local, off-site solar installation. Current policy, however, skews towards large-scale resources, undervaluing the role that smaller-scale solar and wind, battery storage, and microgrids can play on the grid, especially with regards to grid resilience. Specifically, Virginia’s current policy ignores the benefits of distributed generation related to transmission capacity, energy balancing, distribution capacity, and line losses.

Currently, the policies and programs meant to expand access to distributed solar in the Commonwealth aren’t applicable across all utility territories. In 2020, the legislature supplemented that policy by authorizing different shared solar programs in Dominion and Old Dominion Power territories. (Appalachian Power Company was excluded.) The rules regarding customer-owned generation are different and more restrictive for rural electric cooperatives and municipal electric utility customers.

Even within the Virginia Clean Energy Act, policies apply differently among utilities: the distributed generation carve-out within the renewable portfolio standard applies only to Dominion Energy, and a home with more than 15 kW of solar pays standby charges in Dominion territory but not in Appalachian Power or Old Dominion Power territories.

SOLUTION
Virginia needs a comprehensive, unified state policy on distributed energy that does not vary from utility to utility.

Increasing and strengthening the distributed generation carve-out within Dominion’s renewable portfolio standard will support more growth in this vital sector as well. Additional incentives and financing options for customers to be able to afford their own clean energy systems must also be expanded, such as through low-interest loans, rebates for low-income customers, and tax credits.

The Commonwealth must also support the development of more energy storage systems, and microgrids are needed in combination with generation resources in order to further increase resilience and reliability, particularly in low-income and disadvantaged communities.

The current aggregated net metering program should be expanded to more customer types such as multi-family housing providers, universities, and local governments.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS
Expand the Dominion Energy shared solar program to all customers.

Prohibit utilities from charging unreasonably high minimum bills for shared solar customers.

Support solar-plus-storage for buildings that can serve as resilience hubs for communities.

Increase the renewable portfolio distributed generation set-aside from 1% to 10%, and create a set-aside requirement for Appalachian Power.

Increase low-income clean energy access with $2 million/year for the Clean Energy Advisory Board and $2 million/year for grants for schools in disadvantaged communities.

Create a 25% investment tax credit for customer-owned renewables.

Prohibit standby or demand charges that apply only to distributed generation customers.
MAXIMIZING BENEFITS & MINIMIZING IMPACTS OF UTILITY SCALE SOLAR
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
Virginia’s use of electricity and reliance on large-scale centralized power generation comes at a price. Even with the cleanest power generation projects, best practices should be employed to optimize energy output while minimizing environmental impacts. Utility-scale solar, by its very nature, uses many acres of land, which – if poorly developed – can unnecessarily harm primarily agricultural and forested lands. While renewable energy projects must be used to meet the Commonwealth’s energy demand going forward, Virginia’s executive branch, General Assembly, and regulators should strive to minimize the environmental impacts while maximizing the benefits of solar.

Utility-scale solar, by its very nature, uses many acres of land, which – if poorly developed – can unnecessarily harm primarily agricultural and forested lands.

CHALLENGE
A utility-scale solar facility is one that generates power and feeds it into the grid, supplying an electric utility with clean power. Recently Virginia has experienced an increase in both the number and size of utility-scale facilities and this trend is likely to continue as Virginia transitions away from fossil fuel based generation. On average, utility-scale solar requires roughly seven to ten acres per megawatt produced. This can result in significant shifts in land use. In fact, in the spring of 2019, the Spotsylvania Board of Supervisors approved the largest solar energy facility on the East Coast utilizing over 3,500 acres of forested land in Virginia and expected to produce 500 megawatts (MW) of power.

The Virginia Clean Economy Act declared 16,100 MW of solar and on-shore wind to be in the public interest. It is expected that utility-scale solar facilities will produce the majority of that new generation, and it will happen quickly.

Virginia needs greater deployment of renewable energy projects. However, all projects should take into account site-specific conditions. Decision makers must ensure proper site selection and best practices to minimize any associated negative impacts. The expected amount of solar development raises concerns with regard to conversion of farms and forests; environmental degradation; loss of habitat; and impacts on historic, cultural, and scenic resources. However, those concerns can be minimized if handled correctly.

SOLUTION
Virginia’s policymakers should implement and promote best practices for utility-scale solar, including:

Avoidance of Resources and Proper Site Selection
Appropriate direction should be given to the industry by prioritizing and incentivizing post-mining land, landfills, brownfields, and other former industrial or commercial sites. Focusing the initial round of development on these sites avoids unnecessary impacts to our forests and agriculturally productive lands, whose highest and best use is to remain green, either for traditional uses or specifically to address climate change.

Distributed Generation and Co-Locating Solar Facilities
Maximize efficient use of the land by incentivizing and prioritizing solar within the built environment, e.g., rooftops, parking garages, commercial sites, government owned buildings/properties, and other energy generation sites (see Bringing More Resilient Energy to Virginia Communities pg 83).

Minimize Wildlife Habitat Disturbance and Protect Ecology
Minimize the impacts on habitat and the movement of wildlife. Ensure that solar developers are communicating early and often with federal and state wildlife agencies.

Best Practices
Projects should include recognized best management practices with regard to water quality and sustainable groundskeeping. Water Quality protections/standards (time of year restrictions, turbidity/TSS standards, etc.) should be incorporated into the state permitting process addressing potential in-stream impacts. The use of native pollinators can improve erosion control, pesticide avoidance, stormwater infiltration, wildlife habitat, and reduce long-term maintenance costs and emissions. Lastly, we should encourage compatible onsite agricultural uses where practical.

Minimize Anticipatory Clearing of Forested Lands
Anticipatory clearing occurs when a landowner clears the forested land in anticipation of submitting an application for a solar project.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS
Incentivize solar developers to use previously developed or degraded land, such as post-mining land, by funding the Virginia Brownfield and Coal Mine Renewable Energy Grant Program, offering bonus credits for brownfields projects within the Renewable Portfolio Standard and dedicating more resources to the Brownfields Program in order to better identify brownfields and assist developers with siting concerns.

Provide funding for pilot projects that explore ways solar development can complement agriculture, demonstrating design, economic feasibility, and promotion of both dual use and community solar projects.

Direct the Virginia Department of Energy, in coordination with relevant agencies and universities, to produce an annual Solar Status report tracking distributed, community, and utility-scale projects (applications, under construction, and in production) in order to achieve consistency with state goals, including agricultural and forest land protection and water quality restoration targets. The report will track progress toward VCEA metrics and provide a foundation for future policy and program improvements.

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ENSURING RESPONSIBLE DEVELOPMENT OF OFFSHORE WIND

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

With a pathway to produce 5200 megawatts of offshore wind (OSW) by 2035 and Dominion Energy on track to deliver half of that power by 2026, Virginia is well on its way to confronting the climate crisis and realizing the creation of thousands of jobs supporting its industry. Virginia must ensure that OSW is done right, meaning it is brought online in a way that is fair, equitable, and beneficial for all Virginians. In particular, this means ensuring that the OSW job opportunities and training/educational programs are available, affordable, community-based, and widely promoted throughout the Commonwealth. It also means that OSW is responsibly sited both offshore and onshore with its transmission lines.

CHALLENGE

In 2020, the Virginia Clean Economy Act (VCEA) was enacted, which envisions development of 5200 megawatts of offshore wind by 2035. This sizable commitment to offshore wind helps position the Commonwealth to become an offshore wind hub for the industry – an industry with the potential to create jobs for thousands of Virginians, to build wealth, and lift communities from poverty.

To attract these employers here and capture the job-creating and cost-saving benefits of offshore wind development, Virginia must ensure it stands up a ready workforce for offshore wind. To do otherwise risks losing large manufacturers, like Siemens-Gamesa, from locating in Virginia. Virginia must quickly train and deploy a large and diverse workforce to support the construction of wind turbines along with the manufacturing of its parts.

The VCEA provides general guidance governing Dominion’s OSW workforce development plans as presented to the State Corporation Commission, especially as it applies to employing local workers and individuals from historically disadvantaged communities. Policies must be enacted that require Dominion to meet specific and measurable hiring goals so as to ensure that this ratepayer-funded project equitably delivers on the intent behind the VCEA. Policy must also clarify that Dominion’s hiring plans must be interpreted as limited to the 150 jobs that Dominion has stated it will create directly with the construction of its Coastal Virginia Offshore Wind (CVOW) project, but be instead reflective of Dominion’s larger role in supporting the majority of the offshore wind jobs generated by suppliers, manufacturers, subcontractors, etc.

Dominion is required to work with a number of state agencies including the Department of Energy (DOE), which is also tasked by Executive Order 43 to develop a clean energy workforce development plan. These plans must be the result of a robust public outreach and engagement process, especially within low-income communities and communities of color. Also, the necessary training and educational programs outlined in the plan must be fully funded, including the funds necessary to promote these programs across the state, especially in said communities.

Virginia must also ensure responsible development of offshore wind, which includes protection for marine mammals and other wildlife, especially the endangered North Atlantic Right Whale. Onshore transmission lines must be responsibly sited, i.e., minimizing and mitigating the impacts of routing lines through environmentally sensitive areas and environmental justice communities especially.

SOLUTION

Offshore wind can provide clean energy at the scale necessary to confront the climate crisis head-on. If implemented responsibly, this renewable energy resource can create thousands of family-supporting jobs for Virginians and be delivered in a way that is fair, equitable, and beneficial for all.

These are family-supporting, career-length jobs that can employ a broad swath of Virginians, including people with and without high school diplomas, workers impacted by COVID, military personnel transitioning to the civilian workforce, and returning citizens.

In addition to tremendous job opportunities, offshore wind turbines made and constructed with American parts and labor also bring significant cost savings. Globally, costs have plunged 32% in the past year, and industry experts anticipate even further price drops as the U.S. builds its own manufacturing and supply chain instead of importing European parts. State regulators and Dominion must ensure that project approvals ensure competitive, least cost prices for offshore wind.

State and federal agencies must ensure responsible development of offshore wind infrastructure using least-conflict siting and best available science to avoid, minimize and mitigate impacts to ocean and on-shore wildlife and habitat, cultural resources, and communities, and must pursue stakeholder-informed decision making.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Enact policy that reflects the VCEA’s intent for diverse and equitable hiring, with specific and measurable goals. This would include requirements that Dominion submit diversity, equity, and inclusion plans, including a workforce diversity plan addressing all CVOW-related hires across construction and the supply chain as well as a supplier diversity program plan.

Direct funds to be administered by departments under the direction of the Secretary of Commerce, to support clean energy workforce development programs that are accessible, affordable and community-based, and provide the funds necessary to promote those training opportunities to the specific communities outlined in the VCEA (i.e., historically disadvantaged communities, veterans, local workers).

State natural resource agencies should use environmental review processes to require avoidance and minimization of impacts to offshore, nearshore, and onshore habitats, and compensation for the impacts that cannot be avoided.

Wind turbine off of Virginia’s coast.

Image credit: Hunter Noffsinger, Sierra Club Virginia Chapter
ENDNOTES

BUILDING AN EQUITABLE CLEAN ENERGY ECONOMY FOR COMMUNITIES & WORKERS

SLASHING POLLUTION & ENERGY BILLS WITH VIRGINIA’S UNTAPPED RESOURCE: ENERGY EFFICIENCY

BRINGING MORE RESILIENT ENERGY TO VIRGINIA COMMUNITIES

MAXIMIZING BENEFITS & MINIMIZING IMPACTS OF UTILITY SCALE SOLAR
1 Skyline Drive Winter Snow, Shenandoah National Park Image credit: Hugh Kennedy, Shenandoah Environmental Council

ENSURING RESPONSIBLE DEVELOPMENT OF OFFSHORE WIND

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