



## Pennsylvania used to lead on energy. Now it's falling behind.

Pennsylvania tightly embraces the fossil fuel industry, preventing sustainable economic growth, energy diversification, and a cleaner future, particularly for young people.



The offices of a coal mining company in Kittanning, Pa.

Michael S. Williamson / The Washington Post

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by Patrick McDonnell, For The Inquirer  
Published Jan. 2, 2024, 5:00 a.m. ET

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After driving the industrial revolution as the first fossil fuel state, Pennsylvania is now an obstruction to the United States' new economic evolution — rapidly building a renewable energy future and achieving net-zero greenhouse gas emissions. Stubborn visions of returning to a dirty economy from decades past, as well as willful political ignorance, are making the Keystone State the poster child for communities being left behind.

The stratospheric level of state ineptitude is having grave consequences for our residents, and for U.S. climate goals. Our socioeconomic landscape is being reshaped, whether in how we power our homes, fuel our vehicles, or plan resilient communities.

Yet, Pennsylvania tightly embraces the fossil fuel industry more than ever, preventing sustainable economic growth, energy diversification, and a cleaner future for all of us, particularly our young people.

It's imperative that civic and political leaders around the country recognize that as Pennsylvania's energy policies go, so goes the country's climate achievements.

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Embracing a clean energy future is a natural progression for the commonwealth. As the nation's historic energy leader, we know how to efficiently and effectively turn natural resources into electricity, power, and industrial might.

Energy production has defined Pennsylvania for much of our state's history. We are home to the [nation's first modern oil well in 1859](#), and in 2024, we are the country's last major holdout on keeping dirty fuel as a primary — and heavily subsidized — energy source.

Briefly, in 2010, Pennsylvania became a leader in solar energy production as [one of the top five states in the nation](#). But the fossil fuel industry swiftly killed renewable energy policies, [down-ranking Pennsylvania to 45th](#).

As a result, the state ranks fourth in the nation in greenhouse gas emissions — emitting 213.5 million metric tons of carbon dioxide each year, according to data from the [U.S. Energy Information Administration](#).

Opponents of energy progress claim a [myriad of excuses](#) that Pennsylvania, as a [top energy producer](#), won't have the same success with solar and wind as states that don't produce much [homegrown energy](#).

But other enterprising states with a similar history of mining coal and drilling oil and gas have increased their investments in modern, cleaner energy sources. Oil-rich Texas has built [large wind and solar farms](#) for decades, leading Texas Monthly to bill the state as “[the past, present, and future when it comes to fueling the world](#).”

Ohio ranks [fourth in anticipated renewable energy projects](#) and recently announced more than two dozen utility-scale solar power farms that work in cooperation with livestock farmers.

Kentucky's largest utility company received approval in November to install 877 megawatts of solar generation and 500 megawatt-hours of battery storage, which gives it a [900% solar increase](#).

Even West Virginia, the archetype of a coal mining community, incentivized a major battery manufacturer to the state, building on a long-abandoned steel plant site and giving the local community a [new sustainable economy to build from](#).

There is no reason why Pennsylvania cannot diversify and clean up its energy industry — and we only need to look to our neighbors for proof.

Pennsylvania could be a leader in renewable energy if state legislators wanted it. Currently, coal plants sit idle as natural gas takes over the power grid. In 2022, there were only [4,492 coal miners in Pennsylvania](#). That's a 50% decline from the industry's peak in 2012. When fossil fuel industry executives decide to leave a town, they [leave the people behind, too](#).

We can be creative about our energy future. Flat terrain from abandoned strip mine sites offers prime locations for solar power projects. The strong labor movement that extracted the coal, operated power plants, and manufactured the nation's steel can lead the next generation in energy production.

This time, the green energy movement will right the past wrongs of the industrial revolution by ensuring marginalized communities benefit, and set benchmarks in environmental justice.

Last year's union strikes remind Americans of the strength and protections unions provide to workers. By intertwining unions with the green sector, the state paints a future where renewable jobs are abundant, well-paying, and protected.

Pennsylvania is a climate bellwether state. What happens to our energy economy in the coming decade will dictate in many ways how well, or poorly, the United States' green economic transition and decarbonization efforts are progressing.

That isn't to undercut the part California, Massachusetts, and New York are playing in jump-starting the shift to green energy. But the hopes and dreams of

a climate-forward United States will ultimately come down to what happens in fossil fuel states like Pennsylvania.

If change is achievable here, no challenge is impossible.

*Patrick McDonnell is the president and CEO of PennFuture. Previously, McDonnell was secretary of the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection.*

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