


Solar dreams turned into nightmare for Wythe farmer

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By Zach Cooley

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The project could have provided clean energy for every home in Wytheville.

It turned into an unimaginable nightmare from which Eric Crowgey cannot wake.

The fourth-generation farmer bought property away from his own farm after an American company offered to place solar panels on the property.

Crowgey agreed on the conditions that his land remain in agriculture and that he would be able to raise sheep under the panels.

During the long permitting stage that accompanies the acquisition of any solar farm, the project was sold to another American company, which was later bought out by an Israeli company.

Thus began the never-ending headache for Crowgey.

Disregarding Department of Environmental Quality regulations, the foreign company decided to bury the top soil in rock and dirt, rendering Crowgey unable to graze sheep and the project farmland nonproductive.

“We started the project in order to have clean energy and agriculture,” Crowgey explained. “Now we will end up with a piece of property that won’t grow anything, all because the solar array is owned by a foreign company with no Virginia values.”

Although the company is under DEQ review with more than \$100,000 in accumulated fines, this is of no consequence to the multimillion-dollar conglomerate inundated with a wealth of attorneys ready to pummel any small town farmer.

“It’s easier for them to pay the fines than to do the right thing,” Crowgey stated glumly. “These companies need to be held accountable.”

As stipulated in the contract, the company was to lease the land from Crowgey, pay him royalties from energy profits and allow him to raise sheep under the panels.

Payment for only one portion of the agreement was rendered.

Even though the agreement has not been carried out as promised, clean energy is being generated for 4,500 homes, approximately a thousand more than are within the town of Wytheville.

“Now, I’m left with a strip mine,” Crowgey said. “This concept is so new that these companies can come in with their promises and get away with this.”

Crowgey says he got along great with the first American company based out of Virginia simply because they followed the rules. His assumption that all subsequent companies would follow suit was incorrect.

Still, he was given no choice in the matter of a foreign takeover with the company handling his project. Had he known what would ensue, Crowgey says he would have never considered the project unless he could be guaranteed that each of the clauses within the mutual agreement could be honestly upheld.

Unfortunately, he was never given that option.

He also noted that this particular company has a half-dozen other projects in the state of Virginia alone, which have similarly become victims to such wrongdoings and are under review for numerous fines by the DEQ.

“They are trying to hold their feet to the fire,” Crowgey said. “But they keep lying, saying that they have solved the issues, when nothing is being done.”

Still, he says, that may not be the case for all solar energy companies.

“I’m sure there are other solar companies that are good,” Crowgey offered. “We just got stuck with an unscrupulous one by default.”

He also said that a \$75 million project such as this is quickly sold off to these wealthy foreign companies, who make a quick profit by their sinister processes. When the grading contractor was uncompensated by the company, a \$300,000 lien was placed on Crowgey, since the land is in his name.

“I had to hire my own attorneys to get out from under that,” he added. “The county taxes have not been paid and this is just the tip of the iceberg.”

Companies such as this are endorsed by a Virginia-Israeli advisory board, initiated by former Gov. Ralph Northam, which brought these companies to the commonwealth and encourages them to set up shop here. However, until they can be stopped, the same process will continue.

“They have a pattern,” he noted. “Until they are held accountable, they will just keep going.”

The project that started as a potentially game-changing positive for Wytheville and its agriculture has ended up a complete disaster, thanks to this Israeli solar energy company.

“I have no respect for this company or any of the individuals who work for it,” Crowgey said. “I’m just sick over this whole situation.”

Energix, the Israeli company that owns the solar farm in Wytheville, along with several other across the state, was recently hit by fines for violating erosion and sediment control rules at seven sites. The DEQ has cited the company four times. Action will be taken on the latest citation after June 21, when a public comment period ends.