



Testimony of Dan Conant
Founder and CEO — Solar Holler
Before the Committee on Small Business
United States House of Representatives

“Building a Renewable Energy Economy in Coal Country”

I. Introduction

Good morning Chairman Hunt, Ranking Member Gluesenkamp Perez, and all the members of the Committee. I am honored and humbled to have the opportunity to speak with you all today as a representative of the vanguard of a new industry in Appalachia. I want to share today with you three stories—the story of how we re-imagined who solar is for; the story of how we started training the first generation of solar installers in coal country; and the story of what the Congress can do to help further our mission of bringing clean, renewable energy and a jobs within reach of all of our neighbors across Appalachia.

My name is Dan Conant; I am the Founder and CEO of Solar Holler. We are based in Shepherdstown and Huntington, West Virginia. I also come to you as a former advisor to the US Department of Energy’s SunShot Initiative, and a veteran of multiple solar startups.

For generations, Appalachia has powered American prosperity with our coal. Solar Holler is ensuring that we will continue to power America in the 21st Century with

renewable energy. From the moment I moved back to my hometown to start up our company 10 years ago, we have relentlessly pursued innovative approaches that make solar the most affordable source of energy for all of our neighbors across Appalachia.

Due to this dedication and approach, we are a rapidly growing team of incredibly dedicated, talented, and passionate Appalachians. Over the past decade, we've started the industry from scratch in our region, and grown to a staff of 105 people. Our team models, designs, finances, and builds beautiful solar projects that will last for two generations—all the while producing free, clean energy. Every project our team designs and builds helps families, non-profits, and businesses across our region cut their power bills, while revitalizing the economy of West Virginia.

Our dedication to making solar the most affordable source of energy for the folks who need it most was shown in our very first project—a groundbreaking community effort with my congregation, Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church. The project won national accolades—including the Interfaith Power & Light National Renewable Role Model award—for a first-of-its-kind crowdfunding approach.

Rather than passing a plate or doing a traditional capital campaign, we crowdsourced water heaters. Members of the congregation (and half the businesses in town), agreed to let us connect an internet-connected remote control to their water heater. We connected one hundred water heaters in a network—a network that we registered as a virtual power plant on the PJM regional grid. By adjusting water heaters second-by-second in tune with fluctuations of the needs of the regional grid, we have been able to incorporate more renewable energy into Appalachia's grid. We also created a new source of funds to support solar projects at churches, homeless shelters, affordable housing, and libraries across our state. That first project with my church would have cost the congregation more than \$50,000 at the time. Instead it cost them \$1. Over 25 years, that project will save the Church more than \$100,000. That's

\$100,000 that rather than going to a large out of state corporation will go towards the mission and the ministry—feeding, housing, and clothing our neighbors.

We had to get creative and develop this approach because the normal model of using a Power Purchase Agreement in which a solar company sells the power to a non-profit was ruled by the West Virginia Public Service Commission to be at odds with our state-granted utility monopolies. Without those PPAs, the IRS had ruled that solar projects on non-profits are ineligible for the federal investment tax credit. Additionally, the USDA Rural Energy for America Program, which administers loan guarantees and grants to rural and small town solar projects, will not support any non-profit project.

Word in West Virginia gets around fast—especially when we do things first. Within a week so many community organizations wanted solar that we outstripped the capacity of the entire industry and everyone who had ever installed solar in our state. So we set to work building that capacity.

In 2015, we launched Rewire Appalachia—a workforce development and training program in partnership with Coalfield Development Corporation, a non-profit in Wayne County, West Virginia. Through this collaboration, Solar Holler gave more than 40 young folks whose families have been in the mines for generations a hand up into the solar industry. We invested in their associates degrees at Mount West Community College; we paid for their electrical journeyworker courses; and enrolled them in their NABCEP solar certification training coursework. Apprentices have been able to further their educations, while learning on the job under the close supervision and tutelage of our Master Electricians.

And we kept going from there. In 2020, we willingly and joyfully unionized our installation crews—ensuring that everyone has representation, and that even as we

move to the latest, greatest technology, we don't step back to the 19th century for workers.

Our latest efforts are focused on our high schools and vocational programs. This January, we launched internship programs with Wayne County, West Virginia Schools, as well as Boyd County, Kentucky Schools. Through this program, high school seniors spend 4 days per week in their vocational classes—learning electrical theory, drafting, etc. Then for one day a week, they're a paid member of our crews, learning on the job how to safely and beautifully install solar systems. After they graduate in June, they will be able to slide right into a career with Solar Holler.

At Solar Holler, we like to say it takes all kinds to pull a solar project off. It of course takes talented, eagle eyed electricians and roofers. But it also takes designers, engineers, warehouse and procurement staff, accountants, project managers, financiers, marketing, and everything else that it takes to support a team as big as ours. With no existing industry in the regions where we work, we've had to build up a new one. We needed to build the supply chains, build the financing tools, and work with local building inspectors who had never seen a solar project before.

II. Market Demand for Renewables in Appalachia

It may seem counterintuitive that solar could be doing so well in Coal Country. After all, the common perception around the nation is that solar is eating into coal's market share. But coal jobs have been declining for generations in my state due to automation and the move toward surface mining from underground mining.

Yet every day we work with retired miners, kids of miners, and families who have been sustained by coal for generations. When you ask a retired miner why they're going

solar when they spent a lifetime in the mines, the answer is invariably the same: to save money and free themselves from the utility. It's no wonder. Since 2003, utility rates have dramatically increased across our state—increasing at the fastest rate of any state in the nation. During that period, rates increased at an average of 5.5% per year, compared to a national average increase of 1.4% annually. In just the past 4 years, utility rates have skyrocketed—up 47% since 2019.

That drastic increase is hard on our neighbors. We have the second lowest median income in the nation. Median income is 29% below national average. So when utility rates rise, it hurts. At 12,000 kWh per year, the average utility bill eats up more than 4% of the median take home income.

III. Solar Economics in Appalachia

While monopoly utilities continue to increase their rates year after year for West Virginians, solar has gotten cheaper. And cheaper. And cheaper. Since 2010, the price per Watt of a solar panel has decreased by over 80%. Utility scale solar farms have declined from \$4.50/Watt to just \$1.03/Watt. Nationwide, residential scale solar prices have declined by 24% just in the last 5 years. Across Appalachia, homeowners and businesses alike are looking to these declining prices as a source of relief from their ever-increasing utility rates.

IV. Policies that are Building the Clean Energy Economy in Appalachia

While our team is amazing and I'm proud of the work we've done to build this industry, there is still so much more to do in the coming decade. Fortunately, the Inflation Reduction Act that was passed and signed into law last year is already having an incredible impact on my state.

At Solar Holler, we believe that solar won't just power our grid for the next Century, it must—and it will—power our economy, too. That's why we only use Appalachian-made panels, and work with Ohio-based racking companies.

Since the Inflation Reduction Act passed, manufacturing has started its long-awaited return to West Virginia. In the past year, 5 major facilities have been announced and are under construction. We have clean steel, electric school buses, and next generation grid-level batteries. Collectively, these facilities are employing more than 2,900 people—and breathing new life and energy into entire towns. These investments were made possible by both the incentives themselves, as well as the long term certainty the IRA provided.

As I mentioned at the start, our mission is to bring solar within reach of everyone—not just the well-to-do. That's why we work with congregations and shelters and affordable housing. That's why we work with retirees and folks across the coalfields that the rest of the country has forgotten.

The changes in the Inflation Reduction Act have supported our work—by leveling the playing field for schools, churches, hospitals, food banks, and every other tax exempt entity. Tax exempt entities are now being supported the same way a manufacturing facility always had been.

We have all the tools we need to ensure that all Americans have access to affordable clean energy that is made in America. This year, and in the coming years, Congress could help level the playing field for all Americans and organizations wanting to go solar in three principal ways:

1. Ensure that the provisions of the Inflation Reduction Act are quickly, and fairly, rolled out.

2. Ensure that homeowners investing in their own systems have parity with utility and corporate owned systems by allowing homeowners to access the same tax credits encouraging American manufacturing and investment in coal country.

V. Conclusion

Chairman Chairman Hunt, Ranking Member Gluesenkamp Perez, and all the members of this Committee—thank you for inviting me to share these thoughts with you today. I am thrilled every day to be doing my part to build a 21st Century industry in my home state. We have demonstrated that there is demand for solar, even in Coal Country. Yet there are still challenges that keep many of our neighbors and community organizations from enjoying the benefits of lower bills, and control over their power source. I look forward to working with this committee to bring solar within reach of all Americans.

Thank you,

Dan Conant

Founder & CEO

Solar Holler