

Wind and solar aren't politically popular, but they've been profitable for 2 Indiana counties

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RANDOLPH COUNTY, Indiana — When over 650 kids descended on the local 4-H fair this summer to show livestock and exhibit projects, the grounds looked a little grander than in years past.

Children wearing cowboy boots and oversized belt buckles led heifers and steers around a shiny, new show area. Families scooted past neighbors, friends and cows to find accessible, air-conditioned bathrooms.

Teens dished out nachos and sugary elephant ears to hungry fairgoers in a brand-new kitchen, even as the 65-year-old milkshake machine still rumbled against a far wall.

Residents of this county on Indiana's eastern border have been showing swine, sheep and cattle on this site since the 1950s. But the fairgrounds had wilted under the weight of so many feet — and hooves. Now, it has a new life, thanks to a \$2.8 million renovation largely funded by a renewable energy company that operates wind and solar farms here and across the country.

Renewable energy money has changed more than just the fairgrounds; it has transformed this economically stalled county from corner to corner.



This same story of economic reinvigoration is playing out across the country in dozens of rural counties that have embraced renewable energy projects, delighting taxpayers, enriching county coffers and making previously unaffordable public works projects possible.

Despite deep-red voting records and conservative dispositions, many of these counties have few regrets about allowing towering wind turbines and lines of solar panels to dot bits of their countryside.

But increasingly, opportunities for other counties to cash in are being cut off.

The [Trump administration has cast a pall](#) over renewable energy production nationwide, shutting down offshore wind projects, ending energy development on public lands and making it significantly harder for many projects to get the necessary federal approvals and permits. A major energy buildout and rural economic engine has been halted in its tracks.

“If you don’t get away from [the green energy scam](#), your country is going to fail,” President Donald Trump said in late September at a meeting of the United Nations General Assembly.

The message has filtered down to the local level, making it increasingly hard for companies to build new wind and solar projects across America. A USA TODAY investigation has found that as of September 2025, about a quarter of U.S. counties had placed moratoriums, bans or restrictive rules on utility-scale wind or solar projects.

Some fear rural places like Randolph County and Benton County in western Indiana may be among the last to see a financial revitalization from renewables, as developers engulfed in regulatory confusion pause projects they worked — sometimes for years — to bring to fruition.

At an Indiana Fiscal Policy Institute luncheon on September 23, the [Indiana Capital Chronicle](#) reported state Secretary of Energy and Natural Resources Suzanne Jaworowski calling out counties that “string” companies along then reject projects as “disgraceful.”



The renewable equivalent of striking black gold

The country has undergone a profound shift in recent decades from finite energy sources such as coal- and gas-burning power plants to renewable energy generation through wind and solar installations.

This has necessitated a geographic shift, and energy extraction has found new pastures in the wind belt down the Great Plains from North Dakota to Texas and in the sunny Southeast

and Southwest. But developers of renewable energy projects have long struggled to find footholds in these bright, windy and predominantly rural counties.

Projects were welcomed in the 2000s, when they first began, but opposition has increased in the past decade. National and state Republicans' skepticism of climate change and pushback on lost coal jobs helped politicize the adoption of renewable energy. Of the 116 counties implementing bans or other impediments to utility-scale solar plants, half did so in 2023 alone.

Like many rural counties across the United States, Randolph had been in a slow-moving decline since the 1970s. Agriculture required fewer workers, and small-scale manufacturing moved away. Good jobs were scarce, young people left, and the [population declined by 18%](#).



It's a common story. But green energy can be an [economic windfall](#) in places that welcome it. Much as [Alaska](#), [North Dakota](#) and [Texas](#) grew rich when drilling companies struck oil and natural gas, solar and wind power can bring counties both construction work and cash, in the form of leases and tax revenue from the power plants.

However, it's not always an easy path.

In the late 2000s, former Randolph County Commissioner Tom Chalfant was asked to put a group of landowners together to hear from renewable energy developers looking to move into town.

Some residents initially had concerns, and questions swirled around how much money was involved and where the turbines would go.

“There’s always two or two or three naysayers, but when there’s 70 or so landowners who’d already signed up, well, I think they gave up,” Chalfant said. “I think they realized there were too many people that have a positive benefit coming ... they didn’t fight it.”

Energy giant EDP Renewables North America (EDPR NA) eventually won Randolph over. One hundred turbines later, the company’s first wind farm in Randolph went online in 2014.



The company now operates two phases of a solar park and two phases of a wind farm in the county, with another on the way. The projects sit on an amalgam of leases from 227 landowners and have a combined capacity of 698 megawatts, which is enough to power 164,600 homes, according to EDPR NA.

Randolph’s relatively easy beginnings are a special case; greenlighting energy projects is often a torturous, years-long process. It involves convincing landowners, signing leases, and running a gauntlet of county zoning and planning meetings.

A company must negotiate complex contracts, usually including tax abatements, direct payments to the local government, and sometimes the creation of community redevelopment zones and other specialized taxation areas.

It must win over residents who fear the project will destroy the landscape, reduce their property values and impede their very way of life, including the view from their kitchen window.

Still, when the years of negotiation are over and the last construction workers have left, what remains is money — serious money that can change a county's trajectory.

In Randolph, millions of dollars have poured into school districts, emergency services, bridge repairs, streets, sidewalks and parks. EDPR NA is on track to pay the county over \$65 million by 2038.



This same scenario is playing out nationally in hundreds of counties, said David Adelman, a law professor at the University of Texas, Austin, who studies renewable energy legal and economic issues, especially in rural communities.

“It’s easy for (communities) to get scared that they’re going to be overwhelmed by all this development,” he said. “But a gigawatt or so of development isn’t a huge amount of land in most counties, and it can be really consequential for the residents.”

For Randolph, a county that had a budget of about \$20 million in 2025, the tens of millions of dollars that have flowed in from renewable companies since 2014 make "a whole world of difference," said Andy Fahl, a lifelong resident who now mows solar fields for EDPR NA and works as one of the company’s liaisons to the community.

Farming the sky with wind turbines

One of EDPR NA's leases belongs to Chris Retter, a fifth-generation Randolph County farmer.

The Retter family has grown corn, soy and a little bit of wheat for decades. But around 2011, Retter’s father got a letter from a developer, looking to lease land for a wind farm.

The economy was looking bleak, Retter said. So while the offer to rent out acreage for wind turbines was unfamiliar, it landed at a time when the family had a hard time saying no to stable income.



“It was kind of a no-brainer,” Retter said. “The money was enticing.”

Then came a messy construction process. Retter said the sheer amount of people and equipment felt like an urban invasion into the family’s rural slice of Indiana.

Farm roads were squashed under the weight of cranes and large trucks. When EDPR NA installed transmission lines to send power away from the turbines, the process ruptured sections of his [drainage tile](#), the critical but expensive underground plastic tubing that lowers the water table and keeps crops from getting waterlogged.

But EDPR NA paid to fix everything: building new tile and new roads. Between land farmed by Retter, his mother, his brother and their sons, the family saw four turbines installed. And they could still plant rows of soybeans right up to the access paths around each turbine.

In 2017, EDPR NA approached the Retters again. The company wanted to know if they were interested in leasing out more land, this time for solar panels.

This was a tougher decision, Retter said. Solar panels take farmland out of production for between 20 and 50 years, unlike wind.

“You feel like you’re doing something you’re not sure your ancestors would have approved,” he said. “That weighs on you.”

In the end, the decision came down to the money. For many farmers, deciding to lease land to solar panels might be the difference between one day saving or selling their farms, Retter said.

Today more than 100 acres of Retter land, much of which used to grow corn for ethanol, now hosts solar panels for the Riverstart solar park — a simple shift from one form of energy production to another.



What renewable energy can buy a farmer, or a county

A two-and-a-half hour drive west of Randolph in Benton County, a retirement home for women sits on 1,900 acres. It too has cashed in on the renewables boom.

The century-old [Caldwell Home](#) leased land for the state's first wind farm in 2007. Now 12 turbines slowly churn away on the property, bringing enough revenue to cover 15% to 20% of the facility's annual budget.

The extra \$80,000-plus a year allowed the home to install a new elevator, a new generator and repair the roof.



“It changed how it felt around here,” said Jay Davis, one of the home’s trustees. “Everything was a little newer, a little less apt to breaking and needing repairs.”

How renewable money is spent has a big impact on how locals think about it.

“Having very specific purposes for the money is helpful,” said Matt Eisenson, a fellow at the Sabin Center for Climate Change Law at Columbia University. “It helps people see the project as something tangible and good.”

In Randolph, EDPR NA paid tens of thousands of dollars for tornado repairs last year. They redid over 60 miles of roads after construction and funded the county courthouse’s HVAC system upgrade — a \$1.5 million project.

Benton has seen similar benefits from direct payments from renewable energy companies. But for residents here, one of the biggest shifts has been seeing their taxes go down, by a lot. Township property tax rates in the county that sat around 2.5% in 2007 had dropped to 1% by 2018.

“That’s why these wind and solar projects are not just benefiting the landowner where the projects are located,” said Connie Neininger, a consultant who researches renewable energy ordinances and zoning laws in Indiana counties. “They’re benefiting everyone in the county.”

This isn't true of Randolph, which wrote its contracts differently, or in many other counties. With the easily visible benefits limited to leasing landowners or parents of school-age children, some residents don't feel the positives.

Discomfort and outright distrust toward renewables still crops up occasionally on Facebook and in county meetings.

Jon Peacock, a Randolph farmer, has not leased to wind or solar. He just didn't trust it. And he's worried the county is too enamored by the promise of more cash from new solar projects to fully consider what they're giving up in contracts.



"I think we can be smarter about where we put solar panels. I think we can put some thought or some discussion into how much is enough," he said.

Peacock and other residents have expressed concern about how renewable projects change the landscape and tie up farmland for decades.

But while the focus on money draws skepticism from Peacock, the new stream of cash flowing into Randolph is also what is creating jobs and keeping county infrastructure afloat, according to Fahl, who spends many an afternoon mowing the grass poking up around EDPR NA's solar fields.

In Fahl's opinion, the money gained from renewables is helping some Randolph residents enter a period of prosperity, which will in turn build philanthropy across the county.

“I’m a firm believer that that’s where your fire trucks come from, your hospitals, your libraries, your auditoriums. That’s what I see down the road,” Fahl said. “I’ll be dead and gone, but it will be generational wealth.”

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