

Report: Use brownfields as energy parks

MSU report suggests solar panels, wind turbines

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WALKER, Mich. (AP) - After losing tens of thousands of manufacturing jobs in recent years, Michigan has no shortage of abandoned, run-down factory sites for which state and local leaders are trying to find new purposes.

Michigan State University researchers released a report Tuesday recommending the redevelopment of unused or underutilized industrial areas as renewable energy parks.

The report suggests some of these "brownfields" could be used for the installation of solar panels or wind turbines capable of generating an estimated 5,855 megawatts of electricity -- enough to power about 1.8 million, or nearly 50 percent, of Michigan's homes.

The study estimates that transforming brownfields into renewable energy parks would stimulate an investment of more than \$15 billion in solar and wind energy equipment and related construction. It also would create 17,500 short- and long-term jobs.

"The opportunities are extremely huge," said Soji Adelaja, director of Michigan State's Land Policy Institute and the report's lead author.

With its location among the Great Lakes, the state has the potential to generate enough wind energy to sell it to other states, he said.

To establish Michigan as a leader in the renewable energy industry, the study recommends that the state amend current brownfield-redevelopment guidelines to fast-track renewable energy projects and make funding a priority.

It also suggests more comprehensive studies of the sites and the limitations imposed upon them by existing, surrounding structures.

The state has about 44,000 acres of development-ready brownfield property, according to the report released at a news conference at Avastar Park, a 45-acre industrial park created by renovating the site of a former General Motors Corp. plant.

"What a fitting location to introduce new possibilities to restore disinvested industrial sites to position Michigan to pursue new opportunities in the 21st century," said Walker Mayor Rob VerHeulen.

City officials in Walker are developing an ordinance that would allow wind turbines to be installed on small towers and building roofs, said Frank Wash, planning director for the Grand Rapids suburb.

"Those would be permitted in all of our zoning districts," Wash said.

Besides being well-suited as sites for the installation of solar panels and wind turbines, brownfields also could be used to make equipment for generating electricity from the sun or the wind, Adelaja said.

"That potential will be huge," he said. The study did not examine that aspect of developing brownfields into renewable energy sites because there were so many variables.

Adelaja said using old industrial sites in such ways can create good-paying jobs and diversify and strengthen Michigan's economy.