

The Daily News

Mining the sun?: Groveland Mine could be solar energy site



THE ENTRANCE TO the Groveland Mine property off Groveland Mine Road in Felch and Norway townships. The Michigan Department of Natural Resources wants to see if a developer would be interested in setting up a large-scale solar array on the state-owned brownfield site. (Betsy Bloom/Daily News photo)

FELCH TOWNSHIP — It's a place where trees no longer seem willing to cover the legacy of clawing out iron from the land.

With little other long-term value, the Michigan Department of Natural Resources has suggested the Groveland Mine in Dickinson County, now a brownfield site, be used to produce something new: solar power.

The DNR, which took over the property in the mid-1990s, has approached Felch and Norway townships about letting the site be host to a large-scale solar energy array.

The agency wants to solicit proposals later this month for leasing a portion of the Groveland Mine's 593 state-held acres to a potential solar power developer, such as a utility or a private company that would sell the electricity.

David Price, who oversees forest planning and operations for the DNR Forest Resources Division, told the Felch Township Board earlier this week that utilities have shown interest in the prospect.

Such a setup could generate 100s of megawatts of clean electricity, Price said, adding that the Upper Peninsula's annual snowfall amounts apparently were not a concern for potential developers.

A solar array at Groveland Mine would give the township some return in the form of property taxes, Price said. And the site is close to existing transmission lines and a relay station, providing energy in a region that now has some of the steepest electricity rates in Michigan, 67% higher than the state average, according to the DNR.

"It certainly would provide a relatively reliable source of power for the U.P.," Price said.

He described the property, covered with discarded iron ore tailings from the mine, as otherwise *"unproductive,"* inhospitable to past attempts to grow trees for timber.

Yet this project still would leave a fair amount of the Groveland Mine area open to outdoor recreation, Price said. It would not infringe on the four man-made ponds there or the snowmobile trails.

First opened in the 1800s, the Groveland Mine once produced 2 million tons of iron pellets a year, going from underground to open pit mine about halfway through the last century. It employed 500 before being shut down in 1981, with the state taking ownership in the mid-1990s.

The DNR also is looking at the 169-acre 7 Mile Pit former sand and gravel mine downstate in Crawford County as a potential large-scale solar array site.

The setup at both sites could be similar, though on a smaller scale, to what now is under construction in Shiawassee County in lower Michigan. The \$250 million Assembly Solar Project in Hazelton and Venice townships will put solar panels over 1,200 acres, according to owner Ranger Power.

Should the company decide to close down the solar array at Groveland Mine in the future, it would be responsible for removing all equipment from the property, Price said.

The DNR wants to seek proposals for the solar array over an eight-week period, starting Friday, Price said. The state then would schedule site visits in April for 7 Mile Pit and May for Groveland Mine.

The land lease process would start in June, with the prospective developer responsible for obtaining all necessary authorization from the Michigan Public Service Commission and complying with local zoning and building requirements, according to the DNR.

The array itself also would have to be surrounded by a 6-foot-high fence and the leasee given exclusive rights to that area, Price said. But he again stressed that access to the ponds and trails would not be affected.

Price acknowledged that another proposed solar power project in neighboring Delta County has been “*somewhat controversial*” with local residents.

But this project got the full endorsement of the Felch Township Board,

with Township Supervisor Robert Mattson promising to talk with Central Upper Peninsula Planning and Development Regional Commission on whether rezoning might be needed to accommodate the plans.

DNR officials also met this week with the Norway Township Board, which welcomed the potential solar project as well.

“We’re 100 percent with them,” Norway Township Supervisor Donald Byczek said. *“We would do anything we can for it.”*

In other action Monday, the Felch Township Board:

- Will begin advertising for a new Norway Lake Park manager after learning James Collier resigned earlier Monday.
- Set a budget meeting for 4:30 p.m. Thursday at the township community center off M-69 in Felch.
- Will seek a meeting with the Dickinson Iron Community Service Agency on future plans for the community center, which serves as a senior meal site. DICSA also recently decided to rent the former medical clinic space in the center for storage and other uses.