

# Meet the new solar company developing in Franklin County

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**The Ottawa Chamber of Commerce board members met with Orion Renewable Energy's Michael Cressner and Alicia Smith on July 23 at an introduction event. [Submitted photo].**

**By Judd Weil**  
Ottawa Herald

Orion Renewable Energy is planning a decades-long investment in Franklin County with its massive solar farm, the Prairie Sunlight project. This would be Orion's first development in Kansas.

## Orion is not new to the solar game

Orion was founded in 1998 by four pioneers in the renewable energy industry whose experience dates back to the 1980's.

Orion is headquartered in Oakland, Calif., the state where the American renewable energy industry began decades ago. The majority of its renewable energy projects, spanning over its 25-year history, have been developed in the middle third of the U.S.

“Orion is one of the most established and experienced renewable energy developers in the United States,” said Michael Cressner, Vice President of Strategic Initiatives. “We have an especially long history working with farmers and ranchers throughout the midwest.”

Orion was the first company to develop and construct a wind project in Indiana and one of the earliest renewable energy developers in Illinois.

According to Cressner, since Orion’s founding, it has developed over 9,000 MW of renewable energy projects that are currently operating or under construction throughout the U.S. These projects produce enough electricity to power more than 2.5 million average American homes.

Franklin County can be added to Orion’s track record thanks to the energy company’s Prairie Sunlight project.

## **The Prairie Sunlight project**

Orion is proposing to develop an approximately 185 MW solar energy project in Franklin County. The proposed project is about a mile south of Ottawa.

Should the Prairie Sunlight project reach fruition, it could generate 185 megawatts at full build-out. That is enough electricity to power more than 26,000 average Kansas homes.

“Orion’s agreements with more than a dozen landowners, the majority of whom are active farmers in Franklin County, are through solar lease agreements,” Alicia Smith, Prairie Sunlight project Manager.

There is also the possibility of a battery energy storage system connected to the solar project.

Smith said Orion’s decision to develop in Franklin County is because Kansas utilities have the need for more energy and specifically for low cost and renewable energy sources such as solar. “We have a team of individuals which performs analysis on grid capacity, topography, solar resource availability, power demand, and other factors that determine suitability of an area for a solar project,” said Smith. “These factors along with landowners’ excitement and willingness to participate are the reasons we are pursuing development of Prairie Sunlight.”

## This is a partnership

Smith said Orion's deal with landowners is a partnership; they share a common vision for how Prairie Sunlight can benefit the environment and the greater Franklin County community.

Prairie Sunlight represents a substantial capital investment of \$400 million. In the first 25 years of operation the project is anticipated to provide more than \$100 million in property taxes, funding improvements to schools, road upgrades and maintenance and fire and emergency response services.

Landowners will retain ownership of the land. Solar lease payments throughout the project's operational life will allow these families to have a long-term and steady source of income not tied to commodity prices. They can continue to farm other land they own and invest in other opportunities in the community.

*Orion has been mostly well-received*

Concerns have been raised by Franklin County residents, particularly at an open house event in March, when a group of county residents held signs to protest the proposed Prairie Sunlight project.

However, Cressner said most talks in Franklin County have been positive.

"The vast majority of the conversations that we have had with the community have ranged from simple curiosity to outright enthusiasm about the project," said Cressner. "Since beginning conversations with Franklin County residents back in 2018, our goal has always been to be transparent and provide facts about solar generally and our proposed project specifically. As development of the project has progressed over the years, we are now at the point where we can provide more specifics about the proposed project. This is why we have spent the last several months engaging with community members and residents to provide opportunities for folks to ask questions and for us to better understand any concerns."

Cressner explained the engagement has included creating a project website, hosting a public open house, going door-to-door to talk with neighbors throughout the proposed project area and participating in events and forums with various organizations throughout Franklin County to discuss the project, all of which they will continue to do.

"As with any new project, we appreciate that there are a lot of questions and concerns which it is our responsibility to respond to," said Cressner. "There is a lot of misinformation circulating about solar energy generally and the Prairie Sunlight project specifically. We have found the single best thing we can do is to provide as much factual information to as many people as possible."

## Being a good neighbor

Orion is dedicated to building a relationship with Franklin County based on trust.

“We are proud of our history and track record as a company, especially the long-term relationships that we have built with the communities where we’ve worked,” said Smith. “At the end of the day, that is what we should be judged by. Trust is earned, and a large part of Orion’s success is attributed to our ability to earn that trust and develop projects that are a net benefit to the communities that host such projects.”

Smith said while every community is different, Orion has a universal approach to being a good neighbor: listen to the concerns and needs of a community, adapt the project to better respond to that feedback, speak honestly about the pros and cons of a project, and ultimately figure out ways that each project can positively contribute to the greater community over the decades that such projects will be operating.

Community engagement is a top priority for Orion as a company, along with maintaining a passion for the projects they develop in those communities.

As a company, Orion has been actively connecting with individuals, organizations, and businesses to better understand how the project can better benefit the community. Its partnerships include organizations that promote local businesses and community improvement initiatives that will benefit all of Franklin County.

## Property rights matter

When asked about respecting property rights of those for and against their project, Orion wanted to make it clear that unlike other types of development, once the solar project reaches the end of its operational life, the solar facilities are removed and the land is remediated and returned to its original use.

“We have no right to be on anyone’s property who chooses not to work with us,” said Cressner. “We cannot condemn land or use eminent domain to gain rights to land. What we are proposing in Franklin County is a solar project that is to be built on the private land of landowners who want to host a project.”

Cressner continued, “many of these landowners’ income from the project will help them keep that land in their family for future generations.”

Prairie Sunlight will be carefully sited away from property lines and homes. It will include extensive landscaping to help the project better blend into its surroundings and

create new wildlife habitats that include pollinator species that will benefit adjacent agriculture.

Cressner said the project will not encroach on anyone's property rights. He ensured that neighbors will be able to continue to utilize their land as they see fit.

"Solar projects by their nature make good neighbors: they don't produce air emissions or generate odor, they don't use water, and outside of a short construction period they don't generate road traffic and add to congestion," said Cressner.

## **Prairie Sunlight is environmentally promoting**

Unlike other types of industrial, commercial or residential development, Orion said Prairie Sunlight will have a positive impact on soil quality during the project's development, completion and decommission.

Orion said its project will preserve farm ground much like CRP does.

During construction, the project carefully plans for minimizing grading and controlling run-off. After construction, the project will install and maintain ground cover throughout the solar site that is specifically meant to control noxious weeds, increase water retention, reduce runoff, and increase soil nutrients.

After Prairie Sunlight reaches the end of its operational life, Orion is obligated by county regulations and the agreements with landowners to fully decommission the solar facilities and return the land to its original use.

## **The financial perks for Franklin County**

When it comes to the Prairie Sunlight project's finances, Orion stated these types of projects are capital intensive both to develop and construct.

Orion expects the project to require an investment of over \$400 million.

On average, solar projects enter into 20-to-30 year power purchase contracts for the electricity that is generated and therefore expect to operate for decades. That translates into decades of steady income to participating landowners to maintain and invest into their operations and decades of steady tax revenues for Franklin County.

Tax revenues are projected to be more than \$100 million dollars for Franklin County in the first 25 years of operations. Per prior comments made by Orion, broken down, that includes about \$57 million generated for the Ottawa school district.



## **Adding to the local economy and generating jobs**

The economic impact of solar farms can be significant and could benefit Franklin County and the rest of Kansas economies in various ways.

Hundreds of jobs are expected to be created during the construction phase of the Prairie Sunlight project. Skilled positions such as engineers, electricians, construction workers and project managers will be needed.

“Once operational, solar farms require a smaller, yet steady workforce that will be based in Franklin County for decades to maintain and manage the facility,” said Smith. “Both directly and indirectly Prairie Sunlight will generate millions of dollars, beyond the over \$100 million in property taxes paid by the project, that goes back into the local, regional, and state economies. Regions with renewable energy infrastructure can attract additional investments and industries, particularly those focused on sustainability and green technologies.”

## **Orion wants to be a member of the community**

Orion has taken purposeful steps to be an immediate good neighbor and long-term member of the Franklin County community.

The solar company has made itself available in Franklin County by setting up a website for the Prairie Sunlight project website, [prairiesunlightsolar.com](http://prairiesunlightsolar.com). Orion also has a company website, [orionrenewables.com](http://orionrenewables.com), which provides additional information on Orion and Prairie Sunlight such as a convenient way to contact company and project representatives.

Once the project is operational there will be local employees at the project’s operations and maintenance facility for contact as well.

## **Orion’s future in Kansas**

Orion thinks solar companies are flocking to Kansas because the state and the U.S. needs more electricity to maintain current demand and provide for future growth.

“Solar happens to also be one of the most economical forms of electric generation which is a big reason Kansas and just about every state in the US is seeing so much new solar development,” said Cressner.

Orion is pursuing a few other developments in Kansas, but is hopeful Prairie Sunlight will be the first operating solar project in the state.

“Our vision is that this project will be a source of pride for the community, just as so many power plants around the country have been for other communities who have done their part to keep the lights on for decades,” said Smith. “We also want Prairie Sunlight to help keep local landowners on the land and to preserve the land for future agricultural use. Finally, we believe that the more than \$100 million in project lifetime property taxes will support the health of local schools and county services for decades to come.”

Before Orion can begin development of Prairie Sunlight, the project will first need to obtain a local special use permit. The process is expected to be completed in early 2025.

If successful, it could begin construction as early as 2026 with a commercial operation date in 2027.