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[OUR VIEW: A bill to help put ag waste to work as energy](#)

Through the state's Net Energy Metering program, homeowners and businesses that install small-scale solar and wind facilities can deduct the power generated by their system from the power provided by utility companies. In other words, when rooftop solar panels make power during the day, a homeowner's electricity meter runs backward and the electricity produced is deducted from the electricity used.

However, up until now net metering only applied to wind and solar power generation. A bill that has passed the state Senate and awaits approval by the Assembly would change this, and allow all state-recognized forms of renewable energy -- including biomass -- to be included in the net metering program.

SB 489 will be especially helpful to farmers who want to convert agricultural waste to energy to supplement the power they must use to run the farm. Under current rules, farmers must go through a costly and lengthy application process to get such systems OK'd.

Until recent air regulations took effect, many farmers in the Central Valley disposed of ag waste through open burning, which contributed to the region's poor air quality. That means biomass energy production, which can involve methods such as nut-hull burning, will be highly regulated. But it makes sense to pursue new, innovative ways to transform waste.

Utility companies have long opposed net metering, so it's no surprise they oppose SB 489. But they are virtually alone. A long list of agricultural and solid waste industries, as well as environmental groups, are behind the bill. While SB 489 alone will only incrementally address the state's energy challenges, the bill represents a step toward cleaner energy and minimal-waste methods of generating power.