

The Sun on Your Roof

Running the enclosure algorithm on electricity

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By Jessica Mantonya, Hold in Common and Drug Policy Watch.

Sunlight is free. It falls on your roof whether you use it or not, and the equipment to catch it has never been cheaper. By every logic, the power should be getting cheaper and more yours. Instead, in much of the country, the rules around it are tightening, the credit for the surplus you share back is shrinking, and in many places it is simply illegal to sell the power you make to the house next door. That is strange, until you run the seven steps. The sun is being fenced.

Step 1 TARGET | *find shared value not yet owned*

Start with the commons, which here is almost comically large: sunlight and wind, free and falling on everyone, plus the electric grid, a piece of shared infrastructure that much of the country actually built in common (rural electric cooperatives and public utilities wired the places private companies would not). Cheap rooftop solar suddenly let an ordinary household catch some of that free energy directly. Enormous shared value, sitting in the open.

Step 2 REFRAME | *call the commons a tragedy*

So it gets a story. Rooftop solar is recast as unfair, a “cost shift” in which solar households supposedly dodge their share and burden everyone else, and as a threat to the stability of the grid. There is a sliver of a real question in there about grid upkeep, but the framing does the heavy lifting: the person catching free sunlight on their own roof is turned into the problem.

Step 3 ABSTRACT | *turn it into a countable unit*

Then everything is reduced to units the utility and its regulator define and meter: the kilowatt-hour, the interconnection standard, the capacity

market, the export rate. Sunlight on a roof is a commons. A metered, rate-classed, formula-priced kilowatt-hour flowing across a regulated interconnection is something the utility can measure, and you cannot fence what you cannot measure.

Step 4 TITLE | *vest the unit in a private owner*

The ownership is already written down. The utility holds a monopoly franchise over its territory and controls the rules of interconnection, who may generate, who may connect, and who may sell. You can own the panels, the roof, and the sunlight landing on them, and still need the monopoly's permission to do much of anything with the result.

Step 5 INVERT | *make the old custom a crime*

Here is the hinge. The natural thing, making power and sharing it, is turned into something you are not allowed to do. In most of the country it is illegal to sell the electricity you generate to your neighbor, because that is the utility's exclusive right. Going fully off-grid has been cited as a building-code violation in some jurisdictions. And where you may connect, the credit for the surplus you send back has been cut hard. In December 2022 California's regulators voted to do exactly that, and in April 2023 the policy known as NEM 3.0 took effect, slashing the average credit for exported rooftop solar from about thirty cents per kilowatt-hour to about eight, a reduction of roughly seventy-five percent.¹ The state's rooftop-solar industry shed an estimated seventeen thousand jobs in the aftermath.²

Step 6 TOLL | *charge for access, dump the cost downstream*

Now the tollbooth. Fixed monthly charges, demand charges, and the gutted export credit place a gate squarely between a household and the sunlight on its own roof, so that even people who paid for panels keep paying the monopoly to use what falls on them for free. The cost is dumped downstream onto working households and the energy-poor, who spend the largest share of their income on power, and onto the climate, which pays for every year that cheap clean generation is slowed down to protect an old business model.

Step 7 NATURALIZE | *erase the memory of the commons*

And the cover story: the utility model is simply how you keep the lights on. It is treated as natural law, as though the sun were not free and the rooftop not already yours, and as though Americans had not once strung their own wires through farmer-owned cooperatives when no company would. The memory of power as something communities built and held in common is quietly allowed to fade.

The loop

Then it loops. The monopoly's protected returns fund the lobbying and the rate cases that write the next round of rules, which protect the returns, which fund the next round. Concentration pays to defend concentration, here as everywhere.

Who pays for this fence

The cost lands hardest on the people with the least slack: the renter who can never install panels and just pays the rising bill, the working family for whom the power bill is a bigger share of the budget, often the woman balancing it, and the generation that inherits a hotter world because the cheapest clean energy was throttled to defend a monopoly. The household with a roof and the household without one are on the same side of this fence.

The counter-algorithm

The encouraging part is that the inverse is not hypothetical here either, it is already woven through American electricity. Roughly nine hundred rural electric cooperatives, owned by the members they serve, still deliver power across much of the country, living proof that the grid can be a commons.³ So do more than two thousand public, municipally owned utilities. Community solar lets people who cannot put panels on their own roof own a share of a local array. The counter-move is to re-legalize the obvious, the right to generate your own power and share it, to credit exported solar at what it is worth, and to expand cooperative and public ownership of the wires. And to remember out loud that we have done this before. The lights came on in rural America because neighbors built the lines together.

The fence around the sun

This is the whole program, run on daylight. A free and shared resource targeted, rooftop solar reframed as unfair, the sunlight abstracted into a metered kilowatt-hour, the right to generate and sell titled to a monopoly, the natural act of sharing power turned into something forbidden, a toll collected between you and your own roof, and the memory of the cooperative grid quietly erased. You have now seen the seven steps run on your hamburger and on your electric bill. Next time you will see them coming. The fence is easier to take down while you can still remember the field.

Notes and Sources

1. California NEM 3.0: CPUC vote December 15, 2022, effective April 14, 2023; average export credit cut from roughly \$0.30 to \$0.08 per kWh (about 75%). See [Solar.com](#).
2. On rooftop-solar job losses following NEM 3.0: [pv magazine USA](#).
3. On rural electric cooperatives (roughly 900, member-owned) and public power as existing commons models for the grid, see the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association and the American Public Power Association.
4. The seven-step framework is set out in “The Enclosure Algorithm”; its history in “The Quiet Fence.” First case study: “Spot the Fence No. 1: The Cattle Market.”

Spot the Fence is a recurring Hold in Common series that runs the enclosure algorithm on one commons at a time. Figures were checked against the sources above; the framing is the project's own.