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Foreign companies shouldn't pick winners and losers in US energy

BY SCOTT BROWN, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR - 07/27/17

Suniva, Inc., a bankrupt solar module company based in Georgia and owned by a Chinese conglomerate, has filed a rare petition under the 1974 Trade Act that could cost nearly 90,000 American jobs across the U.S. solar industry.

Suniva, which at its peak employed fewer than 400 workers, claims that U.S. solar manufacturers need blanket protection from imports, no matter where they are manufactured, and regardless of whether foreign manufacturers are competing fairly or unfairly.

The petition calls on the U.S. Government to establish a minimum price for solar modules at a level not seen since 2012. The proposed tariff would more than double the price of solar modules, forcing American utilities and homeowners to pay more than any other major market in the world. The only company to join Suniva in its petition is SolarWorld, a bankrupt, German-owned company.

The proposed cost increases would cripple the U.S. solar industry, which has grown more than 175 percent over the past six years and now employs more than 250,000 workers in small businesses throughout all fifty states.

The Solar Energy Industry Association (SEIA), which represents the entire solar industry and strongly opposes the tariffs, estimates that the proposed trade action would cost 88,000 American jobs, including highly skilled engineering, construction, installation and electrician jobs, many of them union workers. Simply put, the adoption of this trade policy would erase the significant progress that the U.S. solar industry has made, raise the cost of electricity for consumers and utilities, cost thousands of Americans jobs and bankrupt dozens of locally-owned small businesses throughout the country.

New Hampshire can hardly claim to be the center of the U.S. solar industry, but even in our small northern state, solar engineering and installation jobs grew more than 60 percent in 2016. Locally-owned solar installation and engineering businesses in New Hampshire employ more workers than Suniva and SolarWorld did at their peak. All of these jobs would be jeopardized by the proposed trade action.

Advocates of U.S. workers correctly complain about foreign subsidies that cost American jobs, but not all foreign investment hurts U.S. workers. Unlike subsidies for garment factories, cell phone assembly or computer chip manufacturing — all of which receive at least as much or more in foreign subsidies — foreign investment in low-cost solar panels creates hundreds of thousands of U.S. jobs for electricians, installers and local developers which can't be outsourced to low-wage countries.

If foreign governments are willing to invest billions of dollars to lower the cost of solar, create a new American industry and reduce our greenhouse gas emissions, let's have more of it.

Republicans and Democrats agree that well-paid jobs for American workers are essential for our economy and the health of our communities, and there is no doubt that our trade policies should help rather than hurt American jobs. However, a policy that saves a small number of jobs for two foreign-owned companies while taking jobs away from tens of thousands of Americans in a new and growing industry makes no sense. Our trade regulations should not be used to pick winners and losers among our workers.

Scott Brown is the CEO of New Energy Capital Partners, a private investment firm, which has financed the construction of clean energy projects that have employed more than 40,000 direct and indirect workers since 2004 (based on national employment data for the solar sector).