Southern states like to brag about their sunny weather. Florida even calls itself the Sunshine State. Yet the region lags well behind in terms of putting that sunshine to work. But it appears that change is coming. Solar generating capacity in the Southeast is expected to nearly double over the next three years, though from a low baseline.

The situation has been fairly dismal. For instance, despite growth in solar over the past few years, solar is only 0.2% of Florida's summer generation capacity according to the Energy Information Agency. Not coincidentally, Florida is also in the top ten states in terms of CO_2 emissions. True, solar is hampered in the Southeast by high humidity and cloud cover, compared with the Southwest, but there are plenty of places using significant solar power that have equal or lesser solar resources. For instance, Massachusetts has more solar than Florida.

Much of the lag is due to policy decisions, not lack of potential. Of the states in the region, only North Carolina has a renewable portfolio standard. Moreover, the power industry in the Southeast is still run the old-fashioned way. Utilities are vertically integrated monopolies, whose rates are regulated by often-cosy state regulatory commissions. There are no organized interstate markets – what power is shipped across state lines is based on negotiated contracts. In short, unlike much of the country, the regulatory picture hasn't changed much since the 1950s. This tends to reduce pressure on utilities to innovate or minimize costs.

As the NY Times reported on Monday, much of this is due to resistance on the part of Florida utilities. who "have spent tens of millions of dollars on lobbying, ad campaigns and political contributions. And when homeowners purchase solar equipment, the utilities have delayed connecting the systems for months." The utilities have a great deal of political clout, purchased the old-fashioned way in the form of campaign contributions: "From 2014 through the end of May, Florida's four largest investor-owned utilities together spent more than $57 million on campaign contributions." Still, there do seem to be some signs that the sun is breaking out from behind the political clouds.

In 2017, I did a survey of state renewable energy programs, which turned up a few positive developments, including South Carolina (due to one determined Republican legislator) and Georgia (mostly due to pressure from military bases). Despite resistance from Duke Power, solar also seemed to be making some legislative headway in North Carolina.And in South Carolina, the legislature has passed legislation raising a cap on the amount of solar power customers could sell back to

the grid and allowing compa ies to buy solar directly from generators, without going through the utility. Progress seems to be accelerating. CleanEnergy.org reports that the Southeast now has 8 GW of installed solar, but that amount is expected to double by 2021. According to the report, one source of progress has been activity by corporations such as Facebook, Google, Target, Walmart, and Johnson & Johnson.

On the utility side, Duke Power is the biggest solar provider. But Florida Power & Light (FPL) has the most ambitious plan going forward. Under its 30-30 plan, the company intends to install 30 million solar panels by 2030. According to FPL, it has secured solar sites for solar energy centers across Florida. (Building the solar itself would allow FPL to include it in its rate base and earn a profit on the investment.) It touts the plan as "the largest installation of solar panels by a regulated utility in the world and a 67 percent fleet-wide reduction in carbon dioxide (CO2) emissions rate by 2030 as compared to the national average." The company plans to close its last remaining coal plant in the state by the end of the year. FPL has also proposed a 1.3 GW community solar program, which it says would be the largest community solar program in the world. As with other community solar programs, subscribers would purchase their power from solar generators. Meanwhile, Tampa Electric has committed to 600 MW of solar by 2021.

It's heartening to see the situation in the Southeast starting to change with regard to solar. A lot remains to be done on other issues, however. FPL, despite its newfound enthusiasm for solar, has an abysmal record regarding energy efficiency. Moreover, the states from Virginia down to Georgia have high potential for shallow-water offshore wind, which as yet remains unexploited. And it would be great to see FPL's solar efforts replicated elsewhere. Still, what had been a very discouraging picture for renewables does finally seem to be changing in this quadrant of the country.