Renewable energy

OUR ASK

Support a growing agricultural contribution to renewable energy generation and faster, affordable access to rural electricity grid connections.

Why it's needed

Farmers and growers are already generating clean energy and helping meet renewable energy ambitions, alongside their traditional role in food production and delivery of other environmental and land management services. Generating energy can work alongside food production, but farmers' inability to secure grid connections and planning permission means they are limited in what they can do.

Farmers own or host about 70% of the UK's total solar generation capacity, whether on rooftops of agricultural buildings or in solar farms. Solar remains the most popular form of renewable energy generation in British agriculture, with at least 20,000 agricultural rooftop installations and about 1,300 ground-mounted solar farms.

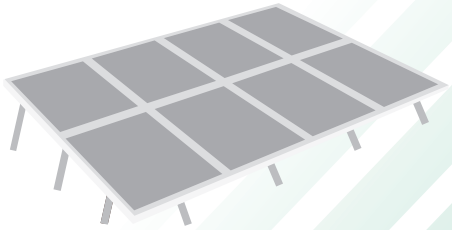
The current UK land area used for solar farms is no more than 20,000 hectares. With most installations having only a modest visual impact, solar PV is regarded by many experts as one of the most environmentally benign renewable energy technologies.

Agricultural buildings are ideal platforms to host solar panels. Solar modules on roofs blend in with the image of a working farm. Utilising roofs and farm buildings for solar should be incentivised as it delivers a sustainable method of energy production while avoiding any land use conflict.

However, ground-mounted solar must be recognised by local authorities as another way of helping farming business become more sustainable and viable. Permitted development rights for stand-alone solar need to be expanded to allow for an adequate level of self-generation to help farms become more self-sufficient in energy.

Larger ground-mounted solar sites, sometimes known as solar farms, should be located on lower-quality agricultural land or brownfield sites. This may not always be practical in some parts of the UK. In this case, it may be reasonable for the developers to show that they have minimised using the best land as much as possible. This should be reflected in the National Planning Policy Framework and Planning Practice Guidance.

On-farm wind power is a vital complementary element of year-round independent on-farm electricity generation, alongside rooftop solar. But the burden of full planning application, and poor prospects of approval under current planning policy, means that only a handful of on-farm wind turbines have been installed in the past eight years.



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The NFU backs calls for a revision of permitted development rights on planning for small-scale on-site wind generation, where the electricity generated is principally being used directly by farmers or other small-to-medium sized enterprises.

The current permitted development for small wind turbines is limited to very small rotors with one-metre blades, on towers up to about 10 metres tall – this should be increased to around 25-30m, capable of making a significant contribution to self-sufficiency in energy.

Crucially, many farmers and growers looking to invest in, or increase their generation of, renewable energy are constrained due to local grid connectivity issues. Improved rural electricity grid access, including streamlined and fairer processes to obtain flexible connections that make use of the latest export limitation and communications technology, would ensure farm businesses are not held back from generating their own power.

What it would deliver

Producing land-based renewable energy, for on-farm use or to supply others, displaces greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and is an important part of the NFU's net zero ambition. In the longer term, boosting renewable energy and the bioeconomy could deliver substantial estimated GHG savings and GHG removals of up to 26 MtCO2e/year.

The NFU's aspiration is for every farmer and grower to have the opportunity to become a net exporter of low-carbon energy. Even if UK agriculture's solar generation capacity increases five-fold by 2035, as envisaged in the government's Energy Security Strategy, the land under solar farms would only increase to 0.5% of the total agricultural area, complementing food production rather than competing with it.

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