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NFU Policy Position: solar power in agriculture

At a meeting of the NFU Policy Board on 7 September 2022, our policy position on solar power was discussed and clarified, given the increasingly large scale of some proposed solar farm developments, and the clustering of proposals close to high-capacity grid connections. Please refer to the recent brief statement and the full version of the policy position below.

Brief statement

The following media quote was made by NFU Deputy President Tom Bradshaw to the London City AM business paper on 21 August 2022:

“Renewable energy production is a core part of the NFU’s net zero plan and solar projects often offer a good diversification option for farmers. However, there is a need to strike a balance between food security and climate ambitions. It is important that large scale solar farm development is located on lower quality agricultural land, avoiding the most productive and versatile soils. Utilising roofs and farm buildings for solar **should also be incentivised** as it delivers a sustainable method of energy production while avoiding any land use conflict.”

Background

Solar photovoltaic (PV) power remains the most popular form of renewable energy generation in British agriculture, with at least 20,000 agricultural rooftop installations and about 1300 ground-mounted solar farms. The current UK land area used for solar farms is no more than 20,000 hectares. If solar power capacity grows by up to five times by the year 2035, as suggested in April’s Government Energy Security Strategy, the land under solar farms could increase to about 80-90,000 ha (the latest solar panels being more powerful and efficient). 90,000 ha is about **0.5% of UK total agricultural area**.

A new size class of super-large solar farm proposals (50-500 megawatts, typically 80-800 hectares) has emerged recently, with at least 15 such projects under development in Kent, Cambridgeshire, Essex, Anglesey and especially Lincolnshire. A cluster of four super-large developments proposed in north-central Lincolnshire and north Nottinghamshire, against a background of growing concern about competition for land use, backed up by well-orchestrated opposition campaigns, has led NFU Policy Board to revise its position.

Agreed policy position

“The NFU strongly encourages developers of large and super-large solar farms to follow existing best practice guidelines for multi-purpose land use (energy production, grazing of small livestock and agri-environmental measures). We call upon government and local planning authorities to recognise that such land remains agricultural (and indeed may revert in the longer term back to other agricultural use), which is especially important in the absence of a much-needed statutory underpinning of food production.

Development proposals for solar should be considered in the context of the importance of the nation's food security and resilience. In this context the NFU's policy is that solar farm development and associated accommodation and conveyance works, should be located on lower-quality agricultural land or brownfield sites, avoiding as far as possible development on agricultural land of classification 1, 2, 3a (Best and Most Versatile land). Further, the NFU has a strong preference for developments which are roof mounted, so avoiding land take altogether.

Where there is a cumulative effect of such developments in close proximity, the NFU believes that there must be strong collaboration between the developers to minimise the impacts such as coordination of construction programmes, sharing haul roads, etc., to avoid additional land requirements unnecessarily.

It is for individual landowners to make informed business decisions on diversifying land use in support of their own farm enterprises. Thus, where solar development is for on-farm energy needs, then the farm business concerned may choose to use some BMV land to meet this requirement.

The NFU is especially concerned that agricultural tenants' businesses can be adversely affected by solar developments. Landlords and developers should enter early and transparent discussion with tenants to ensure fair treatment."

On member support: "The NFU provides a business guide for NFU members affected by development of solar farms detailing how and in what circumstances compensation can be negotiated. The NFU offers support for mediation in cases where NFU members are involved both as developer and occupant."