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Solar panels must not be built on good farmland, ministers say

A ministerial statement will be laid before Parliament making clear that such projects should only be given the go-ahead when ‘necessary’

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Councils will be urged by ministers not to approve planning permission for solar farms on high-quality farmland as part of Rishi Sunak’s drive to protect food security.

A written ministerial statement will be laid before Parliament on Wednesday making clear that such projects should only be given the go-ahead when absolutely “necessary”.

A new planning framework unveiled six months ago was meant to make the position clear, but ministers fear projects are still being approved that fall short of their demands.

Councils will also be told to take into account whether other solar farms are nearby when considering an application for a new one, thereby focusing on the “cumulative” impact.

‘Rising threats’

Claire Coutinho, the Energy Security Secretary, told The Telegraph: “As the Prime Minister set out this week, rising threats around the world mean we must have a renewed emphasis on our security.

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“That means protecting our food security whilst also delivering the cheap energy we need.

“We are taking further steps today to make sure we can get that balance right.

“I want to see more solar on rooftops and where that’s not possible for agricultural land to be protected and for the cumulative impact on local villages to be considered where they are facing a high number of solar farm applications.

“We will make sure we reach our solar targets in a sensible way, that delivers clean, cheaper energy but does not compromise our food security.”

Planning permission

However, in a separate move, farmers will be allowed to build wind turbines without planning permission under government plans to boost agriculture.

The Government will consult on allowing a single, small-scale wind turbine to be built under permitted development rights, it said on Tuesday as part of measures to support the sector.

Under current rules only wind turbines below 11.1m high can be constructed without planning permission, which experts say is smaller than most commercially available equipment.

There have been calls for permission to be extended to turbines as high as 30m, still well below the 120-150m of the largest onshore wind farms.

The intervention in solar farms comes amid signs in some parts of rural England that the conversion of agricultural land into solar farms is leading to disgruntlement from residents.

Critics have warned that such changes can undercut the UK's ability to grow its own food. Others have said that the projects amount to eyesores that blot the landscape.

But environmentalists argue that it is essential the UK grows its clean energy sectors if it is to become a net zero carbon emitter by 2050, a target both the Tories and Labour support.



Councils will also be told to take into account whether other solar farms are nearby when considering an application for a new one | CREDIT: Wayne HUTCHINSON / Alamy Stock Photo

Wednesday's intervention builds on a National Policy Statement issued earlier in the year which sought to make it harder to build on land with a grade of 1 to 3a, which is the highest quality land.

However, ministers fear that the statement alone has not had the desired impact and so want to provide more explicit guidance for both developers and those making planning decisions.

The written statement is expected to make clear that solar farms should only be built on high-quality land where "necessary" and that for the biggest projects, it should be avoided.

The plan was discussed at Cabinet on Tuesday when Ms Coutinho briefed colleagues about the announcement.

The move matches Mr Sunak's big-picture approach to Net Zero which has seen him argue that while the transition to clean energy must be made it should be done while minimising negative impacts and financial costs for households.

Keep the UK safe

It also comes after the Prime Minister reframed the election campaign around the theme of security in a speech on Monday in which he argued Sir Keir Starmer's Labour Party did not have the policies necessary to keep the UK safe.

Mr Sunak gathered British farmers at Downing Street on Tuesday for an event which was used to highlight the importance of the country growing its own fruit and vegetables for food security reasons.

Steve Barclay, the Environment Secretary, had said: "Food security is vital to our national security, which is why today's summit is so important, bringing together government and key representatives from the farming and food sector at Downing Street."

Tom Bradshaw, the president of the National Farmers' Union, said: "It was good to return to Number 10 today to see and hear the Prime Minister champion British food production, putting it at the top of the national political agenda. Food security is national security."

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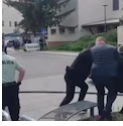


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