

Alliance raises concerns over trend of solar farms on productive agricultural land

The importance of solar energy to meeting the UK's energy security needs and fulfilling its commitment to net zero is undeniable. Solar development must continue but it is important to ensure that it is situated in the right places.

The Countryside Alliance is concerned about the trend of situating solar farms on productive agricultural land. This arises for a range of reasons:

- Leaving less land available for agricultural production presents a threat to UK food security. While the Government is right that food security does not necessitate self-sufficiency and it is reasonable to assume that some level of international trade in food will always remain a contributory factor, the war in Ukraine and its associated impacts on global food prices have demonstrated that the maintenance of historical trade patterns cannot be relied upon. Domestic production is essential to food security.
- Subsidies and developer impetus have created a situation where the conversion of agricultural farms to solar can be lucrative to landowners. There are, however, broader economic implications beyond the ability of single farms to generate revenue. Tenant farmers have been threatened with eviction so that land can be used for solar, and further pressure has been brought to bear on land values. These trends risk making it harder for new entrants to join the sector and begin farming, in turn threatening the long-run agricultural skill base.
- The economic viability of solar farms relies on cost-effective connection to an electric substation, which requires proximity. As a result, solar farm developments tend to cluster in areas where a nearby substation is available. This results in a disproportionate impact on affected communities.

A perception has been allowed to develop that agricultural land has become the default option for solar energy infrastructure because it can be cheaper than alternative sites when deployed at scale, not because it is the right social and environmental option.

The Countryside Alliance fully supports net zero carbon emissions for the UK as an environmental and economic policy objective. We are conscious, however, that achieving this aim will require the maintenance of public support, including from the rural population.

Accepting that the drive to net zero involves costs as well as benefits, rural Britain must not be required to bear burdens that are impractical and disproportionate. Other important objectives, principally food security, must not be sacrificed.