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This solar panel con will destroy our farms

By a monstrous sleight of hand, the Government is allowing some of our best soil to be built over

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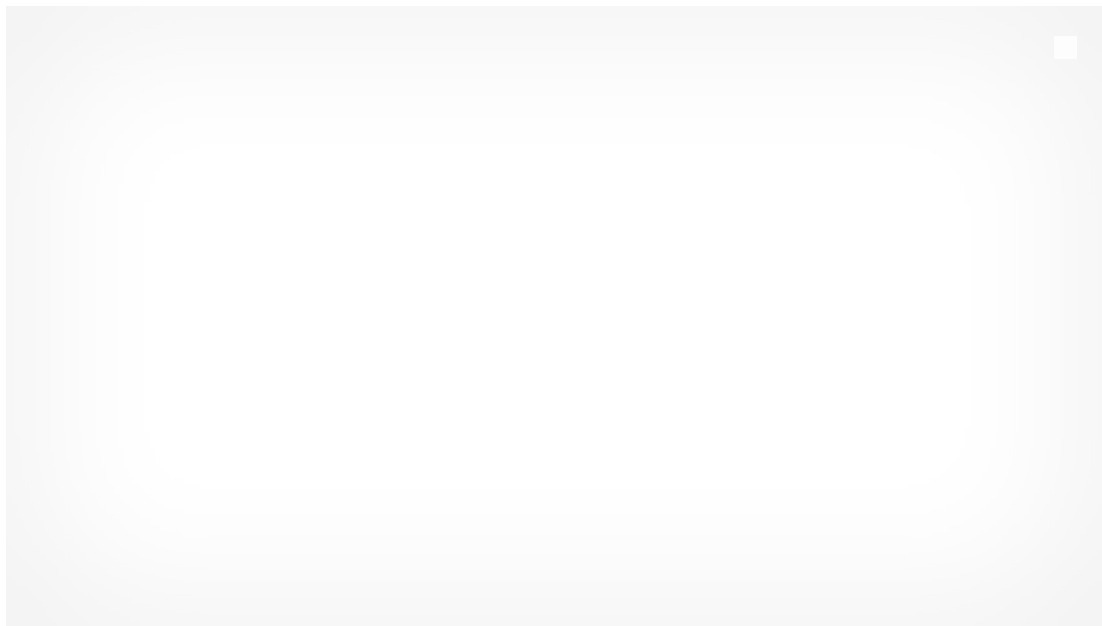


Yesterday the Government made a great show of trumpeting it won't allow solar panels on our "best" farmland, preaching the value of "food security".

It was just that: a show. The reality is that the Government's definition of good farmland remains Grade 3a and above, so technically little has changed. Instead, the policy has been tweaked so that a number of strongly contested plans for solar "parks" will no longer be waved through by the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, Claire Coutinho.

Planning applications for nationally significant infrastructure projects controversially bypass local councils and go straight to her. In January, the government updated its policy to say that because it assists with a "critical national priority", planning for low-carbon infrastructure should generally be approved by the Secretary of State.

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Yesterday's announcement means that she will now have to take some other factors into consideration, such as where local communities and landscapes might be seriously blighted by an over-concentration of solar panels.

This might be enough to put a stop to plans for the very divisive Lime Down installation, part of which is on the Duke of Beaufort's Badminton Estate. Locals are incensed and the area was becoming so festooned with anti-solar posters that they had to be removed from the verges.

The issue is a highly embarrassing one for Rishi Sunak. When he was campaigning to be leader in August 2022, he wrote that on his watch "we will not lose swathes of our best farmland to solar farms. Instead, we should be making sure that solar panels are installed on commercial buildings, on sheds and on properties."

At the time “best farmland” was described by environment secretary George Eustice as above Grade 4 (the grades run from 5, the worst land, to 1, the best). But, in September 2022, Eustice backtracked, announcing that he had made an “error” and that Grade 3b land was excluded.

It was hard not to feel that the Government, perhaps desperate to meet net zero targets, perhaps also under pressure from solar lobbyists, had moved the goalposts. Certainly it appeared to open the floodgates to plans for solar farms on 3b land.

The backlash to this seems to have taken the Government by surprise, in part because they naively assumed that rural people were fools who would swallow three whopping half-truths.

The first of these is that Grade 3b land is not “good” land; this devious distinction is an absurd sophistry. Anyone with a basic understanding of farming knows that some of the world’s most productive dairy pasture would be classified as 3b for arable purposes. And 3b arable land is still capable of producing cereal yields that farmers in many grain producing countries could only dream about.

Build on it, and we might find ourselves having to import thousands of loaves of bread each year to make up for the grain currently grown on each acre, driving up food prices during a cost of living crisis.

Furthermore, many fields include both 3a and, on slightly wetter bits, 3b land. There are suspicions that unscrupulous developers may try to use this to rig the system by soil sampling in poorer parts of fields.

The second half-truth is that solar “farms” remain farmland because you can graze sheep under the panels. Well, yes, you can, but not at what I’d consider a meaningful density that would put much lamb on British tables.

The third half-truth is the assertion that solar farms lead to net biodiversity gain. Pretty flowers sown under panels do not a healthy ecosystem make. Any real gain would only be achieved by greenwashing: taking other land out of production to re-wild it, worsening food insecurity.

It’s frustrating that the Government has painted itself into this corner. It has allowed itself to be portrayed as enriching the few – large landowners, Chinese manufacturers and the offshore investors in solar projects – at the expense of the many: such as householders seeing their properties devalued on the edge of vast solar complexes.

In the meantime, on my farm alone, I have about an acre of roof space on my cattle sheds that the Government doesn’t seem to want to make it worth my while to cover in solar

panels. Surely that would be the truly small-c conservative way to proceed?

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