

# Landowners cover countryside with solar panels in ‘sunrush’

The surge is being driven by cheaper technology, carbon targets and the return of government subsidies

by Adam Vaughan, Environmental Editor and Will Humphries, Community Correspondent, 20 April 2024.



*The proposed Lime Down Solar Park would cover swathes of agricultural land in north Wiltshire*

Craig Fuller is a rural property buying agent, so when plans recently revealed that his country home could be surrounded on all sides by solar panels as part of proposed 2,000-acre solar park, he knew the devastating impact it would have on house prices in the area.

“I should think house prices will fall by 30 to 40 per cent,” he said of the proposed Lime Down Solar Park, which would cover swathes of agricultural land in north Wiltshire with three-metre-tall solar panels and security fencing.

“It’s going to be devastating. I know three neighbours trying to sell and in all cases their prices have been knocked by at least 30 per cent. We are talking proper houses around £10 million, £4.5 million and one was £2.5 million. They will feel the impact the same as they will in all the villages.”



*Craig Fuller joined protesters against the Lime Down development in Parliament Square?* TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER RICHARD POHLE

Fuller, 58, and his neighbours are being caught in the wave of dozens of huge new solar farms planned around the country, which is being described as a “sunrush”.

Millions of solar panels will be erected from marshes in Kent and former farmland in Essex and Wiltshire, to near the site of old coal power stations in Nottinghamshire.

Historic estates are increasingly utilising solar, with [the King submitting plans for 2,000 solar panels](#) across two hectares of horse grazing paddocks on the Sandringham estate. The 2.1 megawatt solar farm is designed to make the estate largely self-sufficient with a supply of green electricity.

Others such as the Blenheim and Badminton estates are getting involved in much larger projects which will result in thousands of acres being covered in solar panels.

The surge is being driven by the return of government subsidies for solar power, carbon targets and new lows for the cost of panels. Driven by production in China, solar panels are now so cheap they are even being used as fences by homeowners in Germany and the Netherlands.

Jenny Chase, a solar analyst at Bloomberg New Energy Finance, said they had become “super cheap” and predicted: “We are going to see them everywhere.”

David Cameron’s government effectively brought new solar farms to a halt by cutting incentives in 2016. However, the government introduced new contracts in 2022 [offering a guaranteed minimum power price for solar developers](#). More than 50 solar schemes secured such contracts in an auction last year.

There is about 9 gigawatts of solar installed in the UK today, supplying about 5 per cent of electricity, mostly in large projects but also across the million-plus homes with panels. The figure is set to spiral.

A further 12GW has planning permission, according to examination of government data by the energy analysts Cornwall Insight. An additional 10GW has been submitted but does not yet have a green light.

One of the most contentious plans is Lime Down Solar Park. It is designed to create 500MW of renewable energy, enough to power 115,000 homes, from six agricultural sites surrounding historic north Wiltshire villages such as Sherston, Norton and Hullavington. These sites would need to be connected into the National Grid's substation 25 miles away in Melksham.

Island Green Power, the developer, says it will give a "net gain in biodiversity".

"There are only nine landowners in the whole scheme and most of them are neighbours we have lived alongside, so it's incredibly divisive," Fuller said. "There is a lot of bad feeling and it's caused a huge amount of resentment."

Lime Down Solar Park could power 115,000 homes in Wiltshire, but has divided the community.

What makes it all the more galling is some of the landowners involved have previously opposed solar parks and far smaller developments in the surrounding countryside.

Jonny Walker, one of the landowners offering up 130 acres of his farmland, wrote in August 2021 in opposition to a planned solar farm near his land. He complained about "the long-term detrimental effect it will have on a beautiful and diverse area of countryside".

He was also against the removal of "grade 3 arable land from production for 40 years" and argued for the "importance of self sufficiency in food and maintaining a biodiversity of flora and fauna, which will be totally lost by the construction of an industrial-scale solar park".

Walker told The Times he was "still completely anti-solar" and described solar farms of any size as being a "blight on your life and a blight on the landscape" but said changes in government subsidies offered to farmers post-Brexit made his "moderate quality" grade 3b agricultural land "unprofitable" to farm.

He said the push by government for solar "gives opportunities for companies who want to do solar to make hay and make offers to farmers beyond their wildest dreams, which will allow them to stabilise their business and give security for the next two generations in a period where they can see no future prosperity on poor grade 3b land".

"The government has got this completely wrong and shouldn't be allowing these vast solar farms to be built," he said.

"There is no point abusing farmers and landowners in the local community because the government wants solar and needs it and has made this opportunity available to solar companies."

Island Green Power, the developer, said it understood "the importance of carefully balancing renewable energy initiatives with the need to preserve the aesthetic and environmental integrity of the areas where we operate".

It said it was at an initial phase of consultation and wants "to ensure people living and working in the area have a chance to inform and influence the development of our proposals from an early stage".

In the past, developers tried to keep projects below 50MW, a threshold above which projects become “nationally significant infrastructure” and the energy secretary approves or rejects schemes. Now, panels are so cheap companies “might as well go as big as they can” to hit economies of scale, said Tom Edwards, a modeller at Cornwall Insight.

Botley West Solar Farm, proposed on former farmland on the Blenheim estate in Oxfordshire, will be the biggest in Europe if it wins planning permission next year and is operating by 2027 as planned.

Mark Owen-Lloyd, the scheme’s director, argued the 840MW project looked big on maps but the visual impact on the ground would be small. “If you see it on the ground from the roads and footpaths, you only see small glimpses,” he said.

He rejected criticism from opponents who said the scheme was taking land out of food production. “The people who have offered the fields to us are farmers. They’re continuing to farm, but they’re going to farm with the revenues from the solar farm giving them financial stability,” he said.

One cluster of proposed large solar farms is in the former coal heartland of Nottinghamshire. The hotspot there is partly due to the closure in recent years of old coal power stations, including West Burton and Cottam, opening up capacity on the National Grid’s transmission system.

Some of the schemes are planned on former farmland, many in Lincolnshire due to grid capacity. Loss of land from food production to energy production has raised the hackles of many.

However, Tom Lancaster at the Energy and Climate Intelligence Unit, a think tank, said sheep could benefit from grazing on land with solar panels by being protected from the heat. Moreover, he said the government’s 70GW solar target by 2035 would see solar farms only cover 0.5 per cent of UK land. Even then, it would still be less than the land covered by golf courses today.

The National Farmers Union said 0.1 per cent of utilised agricultural land was covered in solar farms but it was important projects avoided the richest soils where possible.

Chris Hewett, chief executive of the industry body Solar Energy UK, said solar farms were “well-liked by the public” and it was “only a tiny, if vocal, minority that has given some politicians the impression that solar farms are unpopular”.

Protesters against large-scale solar farms in the countryside waved placards outside a Westminster Hall debate last week on the subject and were joined by Andrew Bowie, the renewable energy minister, who told them their concerns were “completely legitimate”.

Bowie said the government was actively looking into what it could do to protect valuable farmland from being used for large-scale solar farms.

More than 13,600 people have signed a parliamentary petition in recent weeks calling on the government to introduce new restrictions on 50MW solar facilities on farmland to protect landscapes and food security.

The petition author states: “Establishing formal priorities for solar development on brownfields, rooftops and lower-grade land, plus regional solar density caps, could help ensure energy targets are met without compromising rural landscapes or broader security interests.”

Paul Miner, head of policy and planning at CPRE, the countryside charity, said parliamentarians needed to remember that climate change was the biggest threat to the countryside and time was running out to stop it.

“Decarbonisation must be rapid and make the best use of our finite supply of land,” he said.

“We are calling on the government to set a target for 60 per cent of new solar panel installations to be on rooftops; make rooftop solar panels a condition of planning approval for new homes, commercial buildings and large car parks; and set a ‘roof-first’ solar policy that also prioritises brownfield sites for solar farms and protects greenfield land.”

A Department for Energy Security and Net Zero spokeswoman said: “We must protect our nation’s food security. This is why we want to see more solar — one of the cheapest forms of energy — but on brownfield sites, rooftops and, where possible, avoiding use of our best agricultural land.

“We are reducing pressure on rural communities by making it easier for solar panels to be installed on industrial rooftops, warehouses, car parks and factories, cutting through the red tape that limits the amount of solar businesses can currently install.

“Last year, renewables accounted for almost half of our electricity and our ambition is to achieve 70GW solar capacity by 2035.”