



'Our fate depends on a government minister'

Thousands of farmers risk losing their land to Ed Miliband's solar revolution, writes Jonathan Leake

For Ed Miliband, the Energy Secretary, the months since the election have marked the start of Britain's green energy revolution. For farmers such as Robert and Emma Sturdy, the period has instead become the start of what they call the solar clearances. "Sometime very soon, we will find out if we are going to lose almost half our land to a massive solar farm," says Emma. "We have lived with this for four years and now our fate depends on the decision of a government minister."

"If Mr Miliband or his colleagues rule in favour of the solar developers who want our land, then we will lose nearly half our farm."

"And we are not the only ones – other tenant farmers all over the country face being cleared out too." The Sturdy family have been working as tenants at Eden Farm in Old Malton, North Yorkshire, since 1954 – paying rent to the Fitzwilliam Trust, which counts Helena Rees-Mogg, the wife of Jacob Rees-Mogg, the former business secretary, as a director.

But lately that trust, like many other landowners around the UK, has realised that the Government's policy to massively expand in solar energy is turning ordinary farmland into a potential goldmine.

Switching from crops to solar can boost the rental income of farmland at least fourfold. That prospect is tempting landowners across the UK to clear out the food farmers – and invite in the solar farmers.

The economics is simple. Farmers typically pay a top-rate annual rent of £500 per acre for good land growing lucrative crops such as potatoes. That can drop below £250 when crop rotations mean a field is producing anything less valuable.

Solar panels, by contrast, can generate rents of £1,000 to £1,200 a year every year for up to four decades, with rents linked to inflation. It is a huge increase in income for landowners that is impossible for farmers to compete with.

The UK's planning rules were, until recently, the only thing blocking a solar explosion. There were plenty of proposed solar farms but most had generated hundreds of objections from angry local people, and so were held up by lengthy planning inquiries.

In July, however, days after the general election, Miliband approved the 2,500-acre Sunnica solar farm on the Cambridgeshire-Suffolk border, despite the objections of thousands of local people, four local authorities and his own planning inspectors.

Two others – Gate Burton and Mallard Pass, both in Lincolnshire – were also approved and the Energy Secretary has since rubber-stamped the massive Cottam scheme in the same county.

Such decisions suggest hard-working farming families like the Sturdys stand little chance, says George Dunn, the chief executive of the Tenant Farmers Association.

"The decisions of Ed Miliband to approve the 2,500-acre solar farm being developed by Sunnica on the

Cambridgeshire-Suffolk border and the 3,000-acre Cottam solar farm in Lincolnshire have sent shockwaves through farming communities," he says. "Mr Miliband has said he saw the need to make 'tough decisions with ambition and urgency' to make the UK a 'clean energy superpower'."

"However, the concerns and feelings of local communities should be relevant, too."

The scale of the impacts could be huge. England's 22m acres of farmland divides up into about 105,000 farms of which 45pc are wholly or partially based on rented land, according to government data.

Edward Dewes has farmed his land just north of Coventry for more than four decades. The plot is rented from Coventry City Council and some years ago the local authority took 30 acres to create a cemetery.

Now he has been told that his remaining land is being taken, too – to make way for 60,000 solar panels. Council officers claim the benefits for climate change justify the loss of farmland, a claim initially rejected by the planning committee but now up for reconsideration.

Dewes, a widower with three adult children, has bought the farmhouse that went with the land and lives there with sheepdog Meg, so his home is safe. But if the project goes ahead he



Emma and Robert Sturdy fear losing nearly half their farm in North Yorkshire

will be surrounded on all sides by solar panels covering the land where his sheep once grazed. His house, once valued at £1m, will be massively devalued.

He is currently in talks with the council, so could not comment directly on his case. He says: "The solar gold rush is changing the relationship between landowners and tenants. It used to be that both sides benefited. But opening up the land for development of any kind destroys that relationship."

"If ministers are giving landowners new opportunities to make money from industrialising the land, it makes tenant farmers superfluous so many more of us will lose our land."

"It's like a rerun of the Highland Clearances, when Scottish landowners removed the peasants to make way for sheep. Tenant farmers are the modern equivalent of those peasants."

For the 54pc of farmers who own their own land solar energy could prove a blessing, offering the chance of diversification and extra income.

But for the rest, solar developments are becoming an existential threat. Miliband's plans include a tripling of solar capacity within five years, from 15 gigawatts now to nearly 50GW – and 70GW by 2035.

This means installing about 350,000 acres of panels – an area

bigger than Berkshire – although some would be on roofs rather than fields. In the last seven days alone, plans were announced for a 5,000-acre solar farm to be built between Long Stratton and Diss in Norfolk. Another 4,000-acre farm is planned at High Grove near Dereham, also in Norfolk.

By contrast, the current largest solar farm in the UK is Shotton Solar Park in Flintshire, Wales, which covers just 250 acres.

Two years ago the Rock Review of tenant farming, led by Baroness Rock, recognised the potential scale of the threat to tenant farmers.

It warned that solar was a looming threat and called for stronger compensation arrangements.

"Long-term land use changes that take land away from agriculture such as Biodiversity Net Gain [rewilding] and solar panels have immediate benefits for landlords in the shape of large and often upfront payments."

"These land use changes can have an immediate and substantial impact on the business viability of tenants"

It called for a major review of compensation arrangements so that tenant farmers could no longer be thrown off their land or lose their homes, without consultation or compensation. No such changes have been made and there is also nothing on offer for the far greater numbers of people whose properties lie adjacent to solar farms and face industrialisation of their treasured landscapes.

Oxfordshire is home to one of the largest and most hotly fought developments, planned by the Blenheim Estate on farmland around Blenheim Palace, a UNESCO World Heritage site.

The massive Botley West solar farm would be 11 miles long, four miles wide and cover 3,200 acres – roughly the size of Stevenage – including 2m solar panels on land that is mostly green belt. About 15 villages and 10,000 homes would see their landscapes transformed.

Asked about the fate of the estate's tenant farmers, Dominic Hare, Blenheim Estates' chief executive, said arable farming would cease. "We will start to care for the land more thoughtfully while it recovers and improves under panels."

Those claims are rejected by Prof Alex Rogers, chairman of Stop Botley West community group, who says taking so much land out of food production would be disastrous.

"We estimate that around 8,000 tonnes of food will be taken out of the nation's food supply per year, making a total of 360,000 tonnes of food lost over the 42-year expected lifespan of the solar panels."

Solar farms in idyllic rural settings can destroy businesses as well as landscapes. In Cornwall, the hundreds of objections lodged against a 210-acre solar farm planned at Carland Cross, near Newquay, include one from a luxury wedding venue that now faces closure.

"We will have 12 months of noise and dust during the construction stage which makes the venue unlettable," wrote Kenneth Evans, owner of Hendera Barns, adding that a luxury wedding and holidays venue newly surrounded by an industrial solar farm was unlikely ever to remain viable.

Solar Energy UK, trade body for the industry, says developments on farmland are essential for the UK to meet its targets for renewable energy.

Chris Hewett, the chief executive of Solar Energy UK, said: "Responsible solar developers will also encourage parties with whom they lease land to

handle matters of tenancy in a sensitive manner, but ultimately this legal and commercial relationship is entirely the responsibility of the landowner."

Who, then, can protect tenant farmers? The National Farmers' Union (NFU) has been criticised for doing little – its critics say that although its members include tenant farmers, its ruling council is dominated by those who own their own land.

Tom Bradshaw, the NFU president, says solar farms should be developed on low-grade farmland wherever possible but adds: "Renewable energy production is a core part of the NFU's net zero plan and solar

projects can offer a good diversification option for farmers."

This week the Government offered some hope when it announced plans to create a commissioner for the tenant farming sector. "Positive relationships between tenants, landlords and advisors are essential for a fair and sustainable sector," said Daniel Zeichner, the rural affairs minister.

But buried in the small print he made clear that the commissioner will have no statutory powers, and would be blocked from issuing penalties or publicly identifying poor practices.

For many tenant farmers, the protection of a watchdog with no teeth is no protection at all. Many fear that

speaking out against solar developments will prompt their landlords to cut short their leases.

One of them, whose family has farmed 150 acres in mid-Cornwall with cattle, sheep and arable crops for three generations, said: "My grandfather started this farm and my father was born in our farmhouse where I grew up, and my son, too."

"Now my landlords have told me they wanted to put 150 acres under solar panels – and there is nothing I can do about it. My home is part of the farm so I could lose that too."

"We have no idea what to do or where to go. And no one seems to care."

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