

## **COUNTRYSIDE ALLIANCE BRIEFING NOTE: LARGE-SCALE SOLAR FARMS**

**Westminster Hall, Dr Caroline Johnson MP**

Thursday 18 April 2024

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- **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.**
- **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.**
- **During recent debates over the Energy Act 2023, the Countryside Alliance supported a range of amendments in relation to solar farming that we believed would improve the position of rural communities by promoting a fairer balance between demands on them and on urban areas to contribute to energy transition. These remain important considerations for the development of future policy.**
- **We agree with the Minister, Mark Spencer MP, that other government priorities, including the drive towards net zero carbon emissions, can only be sustained as long as there is food on the shelves. The interests of food security require that food production must continue to be the primary use for productive farmland.**

### **Background**

- 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.

### **Policy options**

- During recent debates over the Energy Act 2023 the Countryside Alliance supported a range of amendments in relation to solar farming that we believed would improve the position of rural communities by promoting a fairer balance between demands on them and on urban areas to contribute to energy transition.
- An amendment proposed by Alicia Kearns MP would have prohibited solar energy developments over 500 acres in size where over 20% of the land is well suited to agriculture and mandated the Secretary of State to create regulations to that effect. This would have curtailed the development of large-scale solar farms on productive agricultural land without preventing it entirely, which would be counter-productive since it would prevent, for instance, farmers from diversifying by siting small-scale generators on otherwise surplus land.
- An amendment proposed by Caroline Lucas MP would have required new homes to carry solar panels on their roofs and developments to be planned effectively to maximise solar gain. The Countryside Alliance fully supports the dual use of land that is already being developed so it can contribute to our energy needs, and a default expectation that new homes will incorporate solar panels is a sensible next step. The amendment was not dogmatic and provided for the regulations to specify exemptions where solar panels are not appropriate, for example a conversion to a residence of a listed building in a conservation area.
- An amendment proposed by Wera Hobhouse MP would have required the Secretary of State to report on enhancing rewards available through the Smart Export Guarantee to householders with solar panels. The Smart Export Guarantee is the Government-backed mechanism by which small-scale generators can be paid for exporting low-carbon energy back to the National Grid. Increasing these payments would improve the incentive to participate.
- A further amendment proposed by Wera Hobhouse MP would have exempted batteries used to store solar-generated energy, for example in homes, from VAT. In addition to Smart Export Guarantee payments, battery storage is important to allow homes to retain

generated electricity for use at times of low natural light. Exempting them from VAT would help make this key component of a home solar generation system more affordable.

- While these amendments were regrettably not accepted by the Government, we continue to believe that they remain important considerations for the development of future policy.

### **Countryside Alliance position**

- Energy security and food security are two key issues facing this country and must be tackled together, with the countryside playing its part to deliver sustainable environmental and economic growth.
- We recognise the importance of encouraging and supporting the growth of renewable energy projects; the UK needs a mix of sustainable energy to tackle the impact other energy sources have had on the environment.
- Solar energy is an important part of the UK's sustainable energy mix and we must prioritise the growth of solar projects on brownfield sites, roofs and new-builds which should reduce the pressure for solar farms on productive agricultural land.
- The clustering of developments around sub-stations has consequences for local landscapes and amenities, and the cumulative effect intensifies the harm caused.
- While it is regularly argued that sheep can be grazed around solar panels there are questions about whether that grazing will still be viable in three or four years' time. There are also questions about whether the land used for solar farms will ever return to agriculture.
- The Countryside Alliance was represented at a House of Commons roundtable event on UK food security in November 2022, hosted by the APPG for Farming. We argued that while solar farms can be profitable for landowners the deployment of large-scale solar farming projects has broader implications beyond the ability of single farms to generate revenue. There are impacts on tenant farmers threatened with eviction and further pressure on land values, which makes it harder for new entrants to join the sector and begin farming.<sup>1</sup>
- We agree with the Minister, Mark Spencer MP, that other government priorities, including the drive towards net zero carbon emissions, can only be sustained as long as there is food on the shelves.
- The interests of food security require that food production must continue to be the primary use for productive farmland.

### **For more information please contact:**

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<sup>1</sup> Countryside Alliance, [Countryside Alliance joins Commons food security summit](#), 09.11.22