

Agricultural Good Practice Guidance for Solar Farms



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Context

This document describes experience and principles of good practice to date for the management of small livestock in solar farms established on agricultural land, derelict/marginal land and previously-developed land.

Proposed for publication as an appendix to existing best practice guidelines by the BRE National Solar Centre¹, it should be read in conjunction with BRE (2014) Biodiversity Guidance for Solar Developments (eds. G.E. Parker and L. Greene).

The guidance presented here has been developed with, and endorsed by, a number of leading UK solar farm developers and organisations concerned with agriculture and land management.

Introduction

Field-scale arrays of ground-mounted PV modules, or “solar farms”, are a relatively recent development, seen in Britain only since 2011, although they have been deployed in Germany and other European countries since around 2005. In accordance with the “10 Commitments” of good practice established by the Solar Trade Association², the majority of solar farm developers actively encourage multi-purpose land use, through continued agricultural activity or agri-environmental measures that support biodiversity, yielding both economic and ecological benefits.

It is commonly proposed in planning applications for solar farms that the land between and underneath the rows of PV modules should be available for grazing of small livestock. Larger farm animals such as horses and cattle are considered unsuitable since they have the weight and strength to dislodge standard mounting systems, while pigs or goats may cause damage to cabling, but sheep and free-ranging poultry have already been successfully employed to manage grassland in solar farms while demonstrating dual-purpose land use.

Opportunities for cutting hay or silage, or strip cropping of high-value vegetables or non-food crops such as lavender, are thought to be fairly limited and would need careful layout with regard to the proposed size of machinery and its required turning space. However, other productive options such as bee-keeping have already been demonstrated. In some cases, solar farms may actually enhance the agricultural value of land, where marginal or previously-developed land (e.g. an old airfield site) has been brought back into more productive grazing management. It is desirable that the terms of a solar farm agreement should include a grazing plan that ensures the continuation of access to the land by the farmer, ideally in a form that that enables the claiming of Basic Payment Scheme agricultural support (see page 2).



¹ BRE (2013) Planning guidance for the development of large scale ground mounted solar PV systems. www.bre.co.uk/nsc

² STA “Solar Farms: 10 Commitments” <http://www.solar-trade.org.uk/solarFarms.cfm>

Conservation grazing for biodiversity

As suggested in the Biodiversity Guidance described above, low intensity grazing can provide a cost-effective way of managing grassland in solar farms while increasing its conservation value, as long as some structural diversity is maintained. A qualified ecologist could assist with the development of a conservation grazing regime that is suited to the site's characteristics and management objectives, for incorporation into the biodiversity management plan.

Avoiding grazing in either the spring or summer will favour early or late flowering species, respectively, allowing the development of nectar and seeds while benefiting invertebrates, ground nesting birds and small mammals. Hardy livestock breeds are better suited to such autumn and winter grazing, when the forage is less nutritious and the principal aim is to prevent vegetation from overshadowing the leading (lower) edges of the PV modules (typically about 800-900mm high). Other habitat enhancements may be confined to non-grazed field margins (if provision is made for electric or temporary fencing) as well as hedgerows and selected field corners.

Agricultural grazing for maximum production

The developer, landowner and/or agricultural tenant/licensee may choose to graze livestock at higher stocking densities throughout the year over much of the solar farm, especially where the previous land use suggested higher yields or pasture quality. Between 4 and 8 sheep/hectare may be achievable (or 2-3 sheep/ha on newly-established pasture), similar to stocking rates on conventional grassland, i.e. between about March and November in the southwest and May to October in North-East England.

The most common practice is likely to be the use of solar farms as part of a grazing plan for fattening/finishing of young hill-bred 'store' lambs for sale to market. Store lambs are those newly-weaned animals that have not yet put on enough weight for slaughter, often sold by hill farmers in the Autumn for finishing in the lowlands. Some hardier breeds of sheep may be able to produce and rear lambs successfully under the shelter of solar farms, but there is little experience of this yet. Pasture management interventions such as 'topping' (mowing) may be required occasionally or in certain areas, in order to avoid grass getting into unsuitable condition for the sheep (e.g. too long, or starting to set seed).

Smaller solar parks can provide a light/shade environment for free-ranging poultry (this is now recognised by the RSPCA Freedom Foods certification scheme) – experience to date suggests there is little risk of roosting birds fouling the modules. Broiler (meat) chickens, laying hens and geese will all keep the grass down, and flocks may need to be rotated to allow recovery of vegetation. Stocking density of up to 2000 birds per hectare is allowed, so a 5 megawatt solar farm on 12 hectares would provide ranging for 24,000 birds.

Solar farm design and layout

In most solar farms, the PV modules are mounted on metal frames anchored by driven or screw piles, causing minimal ground disturbance and occupying less than 1% of the land area. The rest of the infrastructure typically disturbs less than 5% of the ground, and some 25-40% of the ground surface is over-shaded by the modules or panel. Therefore 95% of a field utilised for solar farm development is still accessible for vegetation growth, and can support agricultural activity as well as wildlife, for a lifespan of typically 25 years.

As described above, the layout of rows of modules and the width of field margins should anticipate future maintenance costs, taking into account the size, reach and turning circle of machinery and equipment that might be used for 'topping' (mowing), collecting forage grass, spot-weeding (e.g. of 'injurious' weeds like ragwort and dock) and re-seeding. Again, in anticipation of reverting the field to its original use after 25 years, many agri-environmental measures may be better located around field margins and/or where specifically recommended by local ecologists. All European farmers are obliged to maintain land in "good agricultural and environmental condition" under the Common Agricultural Policy rules of 'cross compliance', so it is important to demonstrate sound stewardship of the land for the lifetime of a solar farm project, from initial design to eventual remediation.

The depth of buried cables, armouring of rising cables, and securing of loose wires on the backs of modules all need to be taken into consideration where agricultural machinery and livestock will be present. Cables need to be buried according to national regulations and local DNO requirements, deep enough to avoid the risk of being disturbed by farming practice – for example, disc harrowing and re-seeding may till the soil to a depth of typically 100-150 mm, or a maximum of 200 mm. British Standard BS 7671 ("Wiring Regulations") describes the principles of appropriate depth for buried cables, cable conduits and cable trench marking. Note also that stony land may present a risk of stone-throw where inappropriate grass management machinery is used (e.g. unguarded cylinder mowers).

Eligibility for CAP support and greening measures

From 2015, under the Common Agricultural Policy, farmers will be applying for the new Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) of area-based farm support funding. It has been proposed that the presence of sheep grazing could be accepted as proof that the land is available for agriculture, and therefore eligible to receive BPS, but final details are still awaited from Defra at the time of writing. Farmers must have the land "at their disposal" in order to claim BPS, and solar farm agreements should be carefully drafted in order to demonstrate this (BPS cannot be claimed if the land is actually rented out). Ineligible land taken up by mountings and hard standing should be deducted from BPS claims, and in the year of construction larger areas may be temporarily ineligible if they are not available for agriculture.

Defra has not yet provided full details on BPS 'greening' measures, but some types of Ecological Focus Areas may be possibly located within solar farms, probably around the margins, including grazed buffer strips and ungrazed fallow land, both sown with wildflowers. Note that where the agreed biodiversity management plan excludes all forms of grazing, the land will become ineligible for BPS, and this may have further implications for the landowner, such as for inheritance tax.

Long-term management, permanent grassland and SSSI designation

Since solar farms are likely to be in place typically for 25 years, the land could pass on to a succeeding generation of farmers or new owners, and the vegetation and habitat within the fenced area is expected to gradually change with time. According to Natural England, there is little additional risk that the flora and fauna would assume such quality and interest that the solar farm might be designated a SSSI (Site of Special Scientific Interest) compared with a similarly-managed open field. However, there could be a possible conflict with planning conditions to return the land to its original use at the end of the project, e.g. if this is specified as 'cropland' rather than more generically as 'for agricultural purposes'. If the pasture within a solar farm were considered to have become a permanent grassland, it may be subject to regulations requiring an Environmental Impact Assessment to restore the original land use, although restoration clauses in the original planning consent may take precedence here. It is proposed that temporary (arable) grassland should be established on the majority of the land area that lies between the rows of modules. This would be managed in 'improved' condition by periodic harrowing and re-seeding (e.g. every 5 years), typically using a combination disc harrow and seed drill.

Other measures to maintain the productivity of grassland, without the need for mechanised cultivations or total reseedling, could include: maintaining optimum soil fertility and pH to encourage productive grass species; seasonally variable stocking rates to prevent over/under-grazing with the aim of preventing grass from seeding and becoming unpalatable. Non-tillage techniques to optimise grass sward content might include the use of a sward/grass harrow and air-seeder to revive tired pastures. When applying soil conditioners (e.g. lime), fertilisers or other products, consideration should be taken to prevent damage to or soiling of the solar modules.

Good practice in construction and neighbourliness

Consideration should also be given to best practice during construction and installation, and ensuring that the future agricultural management of the land (such as a change from arable cropping to lamb production) fits into the local rural economy. Site access should follow strictly the proposed traffic management plan, and careful attention to flood and mud management in accordance with the Flood Risk Assessment (e.g. controlling run-off by disrupting drainage along wheelings), will also ensure that the landowner remains on good terms with his/her neighbours.

Time of year should be taken into account for agricultural and biodiversity operations such as prior seeding of pasture grasses and wildflowers. Contractors should consider avoiding soil compaction and damage to land drains, e.g. by using low ground pressure tyres or tracked vehicles. Likewise, when excavating cable trenches, storing and replacing topsoil and subsoil separately and in the right order is important to avoid long-term unsightly impacts on soil and vegetation structure. Good practice at this stage will yield longer-term benefits in terms of productivity and optimal grazing conditions.

Evidence base and suggested research needs

A number of preliminary studies on the quantity and quality of forage available in solar farms have suggested that overall production is very little different from open grassland under similar conditions. A more comprehensive and independent evidence base could be established through a programme of directed research, e.g. by consultants (such as ADAS) or interested university groups (e.g. Exeter University departments of geography and biosciences), perhaps in association with seed suppliers and other stakeholders. Productivity of grasses could be compared between partial shade beneath the solar modules and unshaded areas between the rows. Alternatively daily live weight gain could be compared between two groups of fattening lambs (both under the same husbandry regime) on similar blocks of land, with and without solar modules present.



Case Steiger Quadtrac used to deliver inverters and other heavy equipment to site under soft ground conditions (photo courtesy of British Solar Renewables)



Cable trenching, showing topsoil stripped and set to one side, with subsoil placed on the other side ready for reinstatement (photo courtesy of British Solar Renewables)

Agricultural case studies

Benbole Farm, Wadebridge, Cornwall

One of the first solar farms developed in Britain in 2011, this 1.74 megawatt installation on a four-hectare site is well screened by high hedges and grazed by a flock of more than 20 geese. A community scheme implemented by the solar farm developers enabled local residents to benefit from free domestic solar panels and other green energy projects.



Eastacombe Farm, Holsworthy, Devon

This farm has been in the Petherick family for four generations, but they were struggling to survive with a small dairy herd. In 2011/12, a solar developer helped them convert eight hectares of the lower-grade part of their land into a 3.6 megawatt solar farm with sheep grazing, which has diversified the business, guaranteeing its future for the next generation of farmers.



Higher Hill, Butleigh, Somerset

Angus Macdonald, a third-generation farmer, installed a five megawatt solar farm on his own land. Located near Glastonbury, the site has been grazed by sheep since its inception in 2011.



Newlands Farm, Axminster, Devon

Devon sheep farmer Gilbert Churchill chose to supplement his agricultural enterprise by leasing 13 hectares of grazing land for a 4.2 megawatt solar PV development, which was completed in early 2013. According to Mr Churchill, the additional income stream is "a lifeline" that "will safeguard the farm's survival for the future".



Trevemper Farm, Newquay, Cornwall

In 2011, the Trewithen Estate worked with a solar developer to build a 1.7 megawatt solar farm on 6 hectares of this south-facing block of land, which had good proximity to a grid connection. During the 25-year lease, the resident tenant farmer is still able to graze the land with sheep at his normal stocking density, and is also paid an annual fee to manage the pasture.



Yeowood Solar Farm, North Somerset

Completed in 2012, this 1.3 megawatt installation on 4 hectares of land surrounds a poultry farm of 24,000 laying hens, which are free to roam the land between and underneath the rows of solar modules, as well as other fields. The Ford family, farm owners, also grow the energy crop miscanthus to heat their eco-friendly public swimming pool and office units.



Wyld Meadow Farm, Bridport, Dorset

Farmers Clive and Jo Sage continue to graze their own-brand Poll Dorset sheep on this 4.8 megawatt solar farm, established on 11 hectares in 2012. The solar farm was designed to have very low visual impact locally, with an agreement to ensure livestock grazing throughout the project's lifetime.



Wymeswold Solar Farm, Leicestershire

The author pictured in July 2014 at Britain's largest connected solar farm. At 33 megawatts, this development provides enough energy to power 8,500 homes. Built on a disused airfield in 2013, this extensive installation over 61 hectares (150 acres) received no objections during planning and is grazed by the landowner's sheep – just visible in the background.



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