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Stop whining about solar panels — we need more now

An all-hands-on deck approach to 100 percent renewable energy is needed



[Guest Column](#)

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The more a solar facility looks and operates like an agricultural use, the easier it will be to integrate it into the rural landscape, writes Ivy Main. (Photo courtesy Furman University)

By Bobby Whitescarver

Clouds of soil stir around the hooves of our cattle as they walk through the brown, dried-up pasture. Smoke haze from the megafires out west 2,000 miles away permeates the sky. It's just as the scientists said: The weather is getting warmer and weirder.

We have a cattle farm in the Shenandoah Valley. Usually at this time of year, the pastures are green and lush with grasses and clovers, but this growing season, we are 10 inches behind with rainfall. There is nothing left in our pastures for our cows to eat. We started feeding them hay in July. Normally, we don't feed hay until December.

Megafires out west, monsoon rain in Arizona, heat-wave deaths in Oregon, drought in the Valley . . . and [we argue](#) over how many solar panels farmers can put on their land. What's up with that?

We need to get serious about reducing carbon-dioxide in our atmosphere. When I was born, in 1955, the atmospheric concentration of CO2 was 313 parts per million. On June 7 this year, climate scientists from Scripps and NOAA announced that the average concentration was 419 ppm—the highest it's been in three

million years.

Weaning ourselves from fossil-fuel-generated electricity is the quickest and best way to reduce CO2 in the atmosphere. We need to put solar panels on every building, every brownfield, and, yes, on marginal farmland where it's appropriate.

When farmers go before a local board to get permission to put up solar panels, they typically hear two arguments. One, the panels would be better placed on all the big box stores, warehouses and distribution centers. And two, it's going to ruin the viewshed of the neighbors.

So why don't we put solar panels on all those big buildings? Because the utility companies that supply the electricity to the building make it financially unfeasible. We need to fix that. Perhaps through creative funding or better incentives. We also need to create incentives for all new buildings to produce renewable energy.

As for farmland solar panels ruining the view for the neighbors, farmers are not in business to provide their neighbors with a view. We are in business to produce food, fiber, fuel, fertilizer and a whole host of environmental services such as producing clean water, wildlife habitat and clean energy. If there were an income stream for providing views, we would certainly entertain that.

Now, what about the issue of farmers putting distributed or utility-scale solar on their land? It needs to be done right. It shouldn't be put on prime farmland soil, and we shouldn't cut down native hardwood trees to put up solar panels. Panels should be allowed on marginal farmland — land with shallow soil, highly erodible soil, land too steep to drive a tractor on, or other land that is not producing food, fiber, fuel and fertilizer in a sustainable manner. In fact, solar panels with bird habitat and proper screening would be better than continuous corn on shallow and highly erosive soil that washes into nearby streams along with the fertilizer and pesticides in the runoff water.

To get this right, localities need to provide farmers with proper guidance for putting renewable energy projects on their land. Requirements for buffers, setbacks, screening, pollinator-friendly vegetation, grazing under the panels, soil erosion and water runoff controls, decommissioning of land (returning it to farmland), proximity of solar technology to existing transmission lines, and minimizing the use of prime farmland soils for solar installations should be in place now.

We need an all-hands-on deck approach to 100 percent renewable energy. Legislators should increase incentives for solar panels on rooftops and help localities welcome well-sited distributed and utility-scale solar projects.

Bobby Whitescarver is a farmer in the Shenandoah Valley, the owner of two distributed solar generation plants, an award-winning author, and a teacher of natural resources management at James Madison University. Contact him through his website at www.gettingmoreontheground.com.



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