

N.J. Farms' Latest Innovation: Solar Power

By LINDA A. JOHNSON, AP Business Writer Mon Aug 8, 3:12 AM ET



AP Photo: Ronny Lee picks apples in an orchard near a turkey barn with 360 solar panels

Move over, Jersey tomatoes. Some farmers are producing a new crop: energy.

They're putting solar power systems over barn roofs and fields to make electricity for their homes, farm pollution at the same time.

A further lure is a unique program that uses state rebates, credits and investor funds to cover all the upfront costs of the expensive solar power systems, including maintenance. The program also guarantees farmers at least 10 percent savings on their electric bills.

"That is just brilliant," said Carol Tombari, a senior project leader at the National Renewable Energy Laboratory in Golden, Colo.

Tombari said she knows of no such programs elsewhere, noting experts consider New Jersey to have the best combination of financial incentives and policies to encourage renewable energy.

Barely a year into what's called the Power Crop Initiative, two dozen farms have solar power systems running or are getting them installed soon, and dozens more are planned.

"It's a great concept," said Ronny Lee, owner of Lee Turkey Farm in suburban East Windsor, which also produces fruits, vegetables and flowers.

Lee, who last fall became the first farmer to get a solar system under the project, said his system on sunny days produces more energy than he uses.

"What I don't use goes back through my line and into the public grid, and I get credit for it," said Lee. "It makes a lot of sense."

Lee had his system installed on a barn roof that faces due south, where it captures the most sunlight and shades the roof, keeping turkeys inside cooler during the summer. He said farmers could also set up solar systems over marshy areas to produce electricity from unusable land.

The initiative is a partnership of the New Jersey Farm Bureau and Flemington-based Sun Farm Network, which designs, installs and maintains solar systems on farms, homes, churches and other buildings.

The partnership uses rebates from the state Board of Public Utilities' Office of Clean Energy to cover about half the system's costs, said Pamela Frank, Sun Farm's director of marketing and

public relations. Under a second state program to encourage production of clean energy, credits called renewable energy certificates, for the solar power the farmers produce, are sold to utilities or companies wanting to support renewable energy.

In Lee's case, Frank said, the combined financial incentives covered about two-thirds of the \$386,000 price tag for his system and his 20-year maintenance contract with Sun Farm. Credits for the solar power he produces each month will pay off the balance on his system over 20 years. The system could last up to 40 years.

Frank said the first 10 systems alone will prevent more than 4 million pounds of emissions of carbon dioxide, a primary cause of global warming.

The New Jersey Farm Bureau notified its 8,000 farmer members about the project 18 months ago, and at least 15 percent have shown interest, said bureau president Rich Nieuwenhuis.

New Jersey Agriculture Secretary Charles Kuperus said a majority of New Jersey farmers eventually might embrace solar power, which he thinks also would work for places such as vegetable and fruit packing sheds and horse barns.

"We're going to see this catch on," Kuperus said.

On the Net:

New Jersey Farm Bureau: <http://www.njfb.org>

Sun Farm Network: <http://www.sunfarmnetwork.com>