

Energy is also a farm crop

2 farms in Monmouth County are part of solar program

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The sun's rays don't just help Howell farmer Sue Keymer grow organic produce.

She uses the power of the sun to generate electricity to run everything at her farm from water pumps to the toaster in her home.

"Solar is just the way to go," Keymer said.

Keymer's Merrick Farm is one of 12 in New Jersey — and two in Monmouth County — that farm the sun's rays for electricity. She's part of a program called Power Crop Initiative, a venture between the New Jersey Farm Bureau and Sun Farm Network, an investor-owned Raritan Township company that designs, installs and operates solar systems.

The program, which just completed its first year, uses rebates from the New Jersey Clean Energy Program and private investments from Sun Farm, to install solar systems with no upfront costs to the farmer. At least 12 more farms, including two in Ocean County and one in Monmouth County, are scheduled to have systems installed by the end of the year.

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

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.

"Nothing could make more sense than using the sun to generate energy on a farm," said Mark Warner, Sun Farm Network's CEO and president.

How does it work?

Take Keymer's system. Of the project's \$74,000 cost, about \$45,000 was paid through a rebate from the New Jersey Clean Energy Program. Another state program, which encourages production of clean energy, also helps pick up the cost.

Sun Farm Network buys credits, called renewable energy certificates, which represent the benefits of the solar power the farmers produce. The company sells those to utilities or other companies to support renewable energy, said Pamela Frank, Sun Farm Network's director of sales, marketing and public relations.

The balance is paid by the farmer over time. Just like a utility bill, the farmer gets monthly bills from Sun Farm Network based on how much electricity the system has produced. The



(STAFF PHOTO: DAVE MAY)

Sue Keymer of Howell uses the power of the sun to generate electricity to run everything at her farm from water pumps to the toaster in her home.

rate is set at 90 percent of what the farmer would have paid had he or she bought the power from the utility, giving the farmer a 10 percent saving.

The money sent to Sun Farm is used to pay the balance for the system over time. At the end of the contract, typically 20 years, the balance is paid off and the electricity is free.

Keymer said her bill from Jersey Central Power & Light "is down to almost nothing."

But she said saving on her electricity bill was not her primary reason to have solar power. She touted solar energy's clean environmental benefits over electricity produced by fossil fuels.

"People should just try to be sustainable when they can and burn less fossil fuels because they are polluting the earth," she said. "If you can cut it a little bit, you should."

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.

Jackson farmer Jeff Adams plans to have a system installed this fall at The Farms of Stan-Mar, his family farm. He will use solar panels to generate electricity for a barn and two apartments.

He was attracted by the program's incentives. "Bringing the technology of solar power . . . onto the farm would be a perfect natural," he said.

Solar power helps farmers reduce their costs and helps them to stay in business.

"As we look to sustaining agriculture in New Jersey, we want to make sure we preserve our farmland," said Charles M. Kuperus, state secretary of agriculture.

"Understand that preserving our farmland is only one part of our strategy. Sustaining and keeping these family farms vibrant and thriving is another part."

Meanwhile, solar power produces benefits by reducing the strain on the electric system during times of peak demand for power, such as when everyone turns on air conditioners, said Lance Miller, chief of staff at the state Board of Public Utilities.

The 24 farms that either use solar power or that soon will generate enough electricity to meet the needs of about 40 homes, he said.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.