



SOMERSET POULTRY REAP THE REWARDS OF A SOLAR FARM

Somerset farmer Mr Martin Ford, of Yeowood Farm, Congresbury, is now enjoying the benefits of renting out part of his land for a four-hectare solar farm. Not only does his huge flock of free-range hens enjoy grazing under the panels; diversifying into solar power has actually enabled him to invest in other new revenue streams on the farm, as well as giving him a secure source of extra income.

The new 1.3MWp solar farm, which provides enough power for more than 287 homes, has given Mr Ford the chance to invest in further diversifications on his farmland without compromising his existing revenue streams. He said: “It’s been very important, especially over the last year or two, because I’ve been doing a lot of other diversification. I’ve recently completed a swimming pool project and an office suite, which I’ve had to obtain a business loan for.”

“Obviously, the income from the solar farm was good security, because it’s a guaranteed income for 25 years, and so the bank looked upon it very favourably as a good, safe source of income. It helped in securing a business loan and I’ve been able to finance other projects on the farm.”

However, Mr Ford’s main business remains poultry farming with the two Yeowood Farm sites – Home Farm and Twin Elm Farm (where the solar farm is located) – housing 8,000 and 16,000 free-range layers respectively. It was therefore essential that the solar development integrated seamlessly with his core farming activities.

Lightsource Renewable Energy – the company that installed and operates the solar farm – were able to meet the needs of Mr Ford and, most importantly, his sizeable flock of chickens by raising the security fencing around the panels by 18 inches to allow the hens easy access to grazing. Mr Ford explained: “Although they are housed in sheds, the hens are free to roam outside. The solar farm had to fit the hens, not the other way around.”

The solar panels also provide other benefits. Mr Ford continues: “Things have worked out very well because for the various assurance schemes that we have to comply with, notably Freedom Foods, we have to supply the hens with a certain minimum area of what they refer to as ‘shade and shelter’ from overhead predators, from fierce thunderstorms, downpours and so on.

“If you haven’t got tree cover, then you have to make artificial shades and shelters which is a bit of a nuisance. But the panels obviously qualify for that shade and shelter, so that works a treat.

The chickens have settled in well to their new-look surroundings and the panels have not caused any fear amongst the flock, as Mr Ford explains: “They [the hens] do use them well – they like going in and around them. At their height they probably don’t look up much! They don’t notice them at all and are just looking straight ahead underneath at all that nice grass!”

Mr Ford was already enjoying the benefits of solar power before getting involved with Lightsource Renewable Energy. He had installed his own 50KWp roof system on the hen house on Home Farm in order to reduce his high energy bills from the lighting and fans.

As well as saving money, he also earned from Feed-in Tariff (FiT) payments. He explains that when FiT payments were far higher than they are now in 2011, many firms approached him wanting to rent land for solar projects, but when the FiTs dropped, so did their interest.

However, the idea of a solar farm was now planted in Mr Ford's mind, so when he saw an advertisement by Lightsource – the UK's leading solar farm developer and operator - in Farmer's Weekly he "speculatively replied to the advert" and approached them directly.

Installing your own solar panels for power is one thing, but what made Mr Ford want to go further and allow Lightsource Renewable Energy to install an entire solar farm over four hectares?

He explains: "Well, returns in farming, as you're probably well aware, are not particularly good, and to earn a pension equivalent to the solar farm income, I would have to put away a huge amount of money...you're probably looking at having to invest £120,000 to try and get that sort of return. So financially it stacks up and I see it as part of my pension."

Mr Ford also offers some sound advice to any farmer who is thinking about diversifying into solar power. He said: "Don't do it in a wet spring like 2012! No, seriously, Lightsource were pretty good but some other friends who've gone with other less experienced firms did end up in some trouble trying to get connected in time.

"Secondly, ensure the developer you are speaking to understands British farming as much as they do solar power. A solar farm designed well can really integrate within your farming business and really make a difference. Like I said, I made Lightsource fit the panels around the hens not the other way round and an experienced developer will always try to integrate your farming priorities within the design of the solar farm."

For more information on Martin Ford's swimming pool diversification visit www.ourpooltime.co.uk