



## All-Party Parliamentary Group on Science and Technology in Agriculture

**Notes of a meeting held jointly with the Beef and Lamb All-Party Parliamentary Group on Monday 20 October 2014**

**Room S, Portcullis House**

**The solar harvest – new opportunities for UK agriculture**

**Present:**

**Members**

Neil Parish MP  
James Gray MP  
Countess of Mar  
Lord Cameron of Dillington  
Lord Boswell of Aynho

**Guest speakers:**

Guy Smith, NFU Vice President  
Kate Covill, Director of Orta Solar  
Jonathan Selwyn, MD of Lark Energy

**Overview**

The 2014 annual general meeting of the Beef and Lamb All-Party Parliamentary Group, co-hosted with the APPG on Science and Technology in Agriculture, focused on the use of solar energy technology on farms. Representatives from the solar energy industry as well as the farming industry were in attendance.

The meeting included the Parliamentary launch of new guidance compiled by the NFU and the BRE National Solar Centre, using on-farm case studies to demonstrate how ground-mounted solar farms can be combined with continued agricultural land use for small livestock such as sheep, chickens and geese.

The guidance was developed by a number of leading UK solar farm developers and organisations concerned with agriculture and land management, as a contribution to the debate about the multi-purpose use of land, and in particular how solar grazed lamb and free-range solar chicken might contribute to our future food and clean energy needs.

Guest speakers also described general principles of good practice to integrate solar installations into the rural economy, complementing existing advice on the management of biodiversity.

**Key points**

- Solar developers, NFU and farming representatives expressed positive views on the potential for solar technology to increase home-grown food production and self-sufficiency while at the same time contributing to increasing demands for renewable energy. However, they acknowledged the tensions surrounding this issue, and the need for realistic debate and consideration of both the potential and the limitations of on-farm solar technology.

- Members raised concerns regarding the impact of large-scale solar installations on the countryside both aesthetically and in terms of the potential long-term negative effects such developments could have on productivity, farmland biodiversity and environmental conservation on UK farms. Concerns over arable soils, the growth of grass and danger to wildlife in the vicinity of the solar panels in particular were highlighted.
- In response to these concerns, attendees highlighted the demonstrable benefits of solar technology in terms of maintaining farm incomes alongside ongoing farming activities, as well as supporting agri-environmental measures. It was also pointed out that the decision to adopt solar technology was entirely voluntary, taken on a case by case basis by each individual farmer.
- Furthermore, attendees added that since the installation of solar panels was guided not only by planning rules but also by the availability of grid connections, the potential expansion of ground-mounted solar technology was subject to built-in limitations. It was noted that – contrary to popular belief - only a very small proportion of farmland, around 0.01%, was currently used for solar technology.
- Specific concerns that grass did not grow under solar panels were refuted by industry attendees.
- It was also highlighted the since the solar industry is dominated primarily by SMEs, the wealth creation and employment-related opportunities of an expanding UK solar energy sector would provide a significant boost to prospects for UK economic growth.
- In the chair, Neil Parish MP indicated that he was not entirely convinced by the arguments in favour of ground-mounted solar installations in farming, but was reassured by some explanations provided by the guest speakers. He suggested that a key challenge for industry was how to frame it to the public, considering the view of the broader public and the impact of solar panels on the countryside.
- The meeting also highlighted a perceived need for the solar energy sector to provide more research-based evidence for their claims, particularly in areas such as the long-term effects on farmland biodiversity, soil health and agricultural productivity.
- Members indicated that they would be more inclined to recommend smaller scale solar developments, despite the larger schemes probably being more profitable in the short term. Speakers responded that this would change over time, and that in the long term advances in solar technology would make smaller schemes equally profitable – but the investment had to start somewhere.

Other issues raised during discussion included the use of batteries, community projects surrounding solar installations, the need to incorporate biodiversity impacts into assessments of solar, as well as wider questions of the impact of large-scale solar installations on the farming industry's relationship with the public.