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Solar co-op waits for grid updates

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It has over 150 solar ground units installed in southwestern Ontario, but 550 more of AGRIS Solar Co-operative's units have yet to be connected to the grid

by KAREN BRIGGS

AGRIS Solar Co-operative Inc., a sister co-operative to the 90-year-old AGRIS Co-operative Ltd., expects to install some 700 solar panel units on farm properties in Essex, Kent, Lambton, Middlesex, and Elgin counties – but to date, only about 150 have been connected.

"We are being constrained by the limitations of the Ontario power grid," says Jim Campbell, general manager of AGRIS and secretary of AGRIS Solar, which is the largest solar co-operative in the province.

Some constraints were expected, he says, "but we didn't anticipate the magnitude of the current limitations. I don't think anyone expected the grid capacity to be quite as frail as it is.

"Hydro One is slowly upgrading the grids," Campbell says. "They are also allowing some of the units which are limited by power constraints, to be relocated to other sites where the hydro capacity is sufficient to handle them."

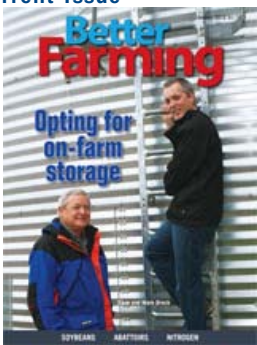
Those units which will be relocated, however, will likely be placed in groups of 50, rather than singly as per the original plan. That consolidation, says Campbell, will necessitate an environmental assessment before work can progress, which will further delay the project and make it difficult to project a completion date.

Under Ontario's green energy generation programs, projects that generate more than 10 kilowatts and have not obtained a capacity allocation exemption must undergo environmental assessment. Capacity allocation exempt projects are those generating up to 250 kilowatts if connected to a line that carries less than 15 kilovolts or those generating up to 500 kW if connected to a line that supports 15 kV or more.

For farmers involved in the co-operative, the solar units are just another way "to diversify and make the land work for them," Campbell says. He notes the panels are quiet, unobtrusive, and unlike wind turbines, have not garnered objections from neighbours.

"Everyone understood going in, that there would be some issues with the grid, and that as capital cost change, the price for the energy that is generated by the units will fluctuate as well," he says. **BF**

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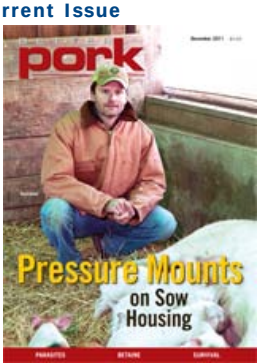
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