



Dairy Cares Newsletter

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The use of photovoltaic solar panels on California dairies continued to grow in 2015, and the trend looks likely to continue in 2016 and beyond. This expansion is a significant part of the overall growth in sustainability on dairies in the Golden State.

Mike Monteiro and his brother Manuel operate Lakeside Dairy south of Hanford. They installed an 891-kilowatt solar-power system in 2011. It was the first large-scale solar installation in Kings County. Mike figured that other California dairy farmers would come to see solar as a “viable option.”

Indeed, in 2015, three major milk cow operations in Kings County deployed large solar-panel systems, including Medeiros and Son Dairy in Hanford. “We’re extremely focused on improving efficiencies across the entire farm,” said owner Brian Medeiros. “Solar is one of those crucial tools that makes a lot of sense.” Five H Farms in Merced has begun utilizing a 699 kW solar system that it estimates will save the dairy more than \$6.2 million over a 25-year period. And, in Tulare County, Dyskstra Dairy, Five Star Dairy and Vander Eyk Dairy are all installing solar systems. A significant number of other California dairies are considering solar panel options.

Ben Curti, of Curtimade Dairy, who “went live” with his 719-kilowatt solar system shortly after the Monteiro brothers, is considering adding another 300 to 400 kilowatts to his system. In addition to the benefit of going green, Curti sees benefits to his bottom line with his solar ensemble: “I don’t have to feed it,” he humorously noted, “and I know it’s going to keep making me money. It’s the simplest income stream I’ve ever seen.”

While the potential financial benefits of utilizing solar systems on dairy farms will vary, the steep drop in cost of the systems since 2011 all but assures that dairy operators can find a solar setup that works for them. Solar arrays generate the most power when demand is often highest for farm equipment, such as fans to cool cows, along with chillers and separators.

Among the notable financial incentives to go solar are a federal tax credit of 30 percent of the cost and a state “net energy metering” (NEM) program, under which electricity generated by a consumer connected to the electricity grid may be used to offset electricity provided by a utility. NEM compensates consumer-generated electricity from solar at the retail rate for that power, and the “self-generation” from solar panels – which has a fixed cost after installation -- will help insulate dairy operators from utility price increases in the future.

In addition, legislation passed in 2012 facilitates greater installation of renewable energy projects by agricultural customers. Senate Bill 594 recognized that agricultural energy usage is often spread out over many acres and therefore the state’s agricultural sector needed NEM “aggregation.” This has allowed dairies to create one central generation facility that serves multiple electric accounts dispersed throughout their farms on contiguous or adjacent property.

A number of solar industry representatives will be participating in this year’s World Ag Expo in Tulare, and one of the agriculture tours offered by the Expo is a visit to a dairy operation that draws power from a five-acre solar panel installation on its property.

The increasing utilization of clean energy is yet another example of the commitment to sustainability of California’s dairy families.

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Dairy Cares is a statewide coalition supporting economic and environmental sustainability and responsible animal care. Our members include Bar 20 Dairy Farms, California Cattlemen’s Association, California Dairies Inc., California Dairy Campaign, California Farm Bureau Federation, Dairy Farmers of America-Western Area Council, Dairy Institute of California, GHD Services, Inc., Harris Construction, Hilmar Cheese Co., HP Hood, Joseph Gallo Farms, Land O’Lakes, Merck Animal Health, Milk Producers Council, Ruan Transport Corp., Western United Dairywomen, Yosemite Farm Credit and others. For information, visit our web site or call 916-441-3318.