

# Central San Joaquin Valley farmers, packers bet big on solar to cut power costs

**HIGHLIGHTS** .....

Dairies, produce packers and citrus houses are installing solar

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Farmers are trying to reduce their energy costs

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The size of the solar installations is growing

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Lower utility costs, federal incentives and business-friendly regulations are helping to drive the growth of solar power among central San Joaquin Valley farmers.

Although Valley farmers are no strangers to using the sun for power, agriculture companies are building bigger systems with the capacity of supplying a majority of their power.

New systems to come online include a 1,098-kilowatt installation at Baloian Farms in Fresno. Bee Sweet Citrus has a 2.4-megawatt system and Brandt Farms in Reedley has installed a 1-megawatt system. By comparison, the average home can operate on just a three- to five-kilowatt solar panel system.

Baloian Farms, a family-run company that grows and packs bell peppers, lettuce and onions, installed the system to stabilize its current and future energy needs and to contribute to the community.

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“As a company that relies on the consistent and reliable delivery of electricity to cool and store our produce, we are very happy to make an investment in this system where we become a positive contributor to the stability of the infrastructure that we rely on,” said Sierra Lopes, marketing specialist for Baloian Farms.

Lopes said that by the end of the year, the 3,360-panel system will account for about 63 percent of the company’s energy use at its Fresno plant.

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## **SOLAR IS NOT SCARY ANYMORE.**

Anne Hayden, marketing manager at Arise Solar in Fresno

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Solar and agriculture experts say solar is one of the few ways farmers can control rising business costs. Many growers have little to no flexibility in cutting expenses like feed, labor and complying with federal and state regulations.

“Agricultural solar operations are definitely on the rise as farmers are actively seeking to offset some of the high costs of energy on their farms,” said Michael Boccadoro, executive director of the Agricultural Energy Consumers Association.

Nationwide, the 2012 Census of Agriculture found that the number of farms with renewable energy systems was 57,299, up 144 percent from 2007. Of the energy systems in use, 36,331 were solar panels, or 57 percent of the total.

One in 10 California farms generates renewable energy, according to an estimate from the California Climate & Agriculture Network.

Anne Hayden, marketing manager at Arise Solar in Fresno, said her company has installed systems for farming companies that range from 200 kilowatts up to 3 megawatts. One megawatt of solar can power a national average of 164 homes, according to the Solar Energy Industries Association.

“Farmers are doing what they can to stay ahead, and they have seen the benefits of solar,” Hayden said. “With the federal tax incentives and seeing what their neighbors are doing, solar is not scary anymore.”

The federal tax incentive provides for a 30 percent credit for the cost of the system.

The drought also has renewed interest in solar as farmers’ energy costs have gone up because of the need to run irrigation pumps longer.

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**WE ARE SAVING \$300,000 TO \$350,000 A YEAR IN ELECTRICITY COSTS. AND WE CAN OPERATE MORE EFFICIENTLY AND TAKE BETTER CARE OF OUR COWS.**

Brian Medeiros, owner of Medeiros and Son Dairy in Hanford

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“People have spent a lot of money on new wells or pumps and they want to be able to offset that cost,” Hayden said.

Farmers also have benefited from being allowed to use one solar installation to offset the energy used by multiple meters, instead of needing a separate system for each meter.

“That important change made these projects cost-effective for farms and dairies,” Boccadoro said.

Brian Medeiros, owner of Medeiros and Son Dairy in Hanford, agreed that despite the \$2 million cost of his one-megawatt system, he has no regrets about the investment.

“We are saving \$300,000 to \$350,000 a year in electricity costs,” Medeiros said. “And we can operate more efficiently and take better care of our cows.”

Medeiros said that before he installed solar, he waited until temperatures hit 80 degrees or higher before turning on the misters and fans to cool off his 2,500 dairy cows. Now, he doesn’t hesitate to flip the switch on the cooling system when temperatures are in the 70s and higher.

“You can only push a cow so much,” Medeiros said. “Keeping them cool and comfortable is good for their health and longevity.”

*Robert Rodriguez: 559-441-6327, @FresnoBeeBob*



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