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Another Voice: Solar and wind power can help farmers prosper

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By Larry Beahan

In 1850, my great, great-grandfather, living on an 80-acre Tug Hill Farm situated between the Adirondacks and Lake Ontario, told census takers that he owned: three horses, five milch cows, two working oxen, six sheep, four pigs and four other cattle.

If he were alive today the “other” commodity would have been solar panels; no, with all the snow up there, wind turbines.

Grampa Gifford’s land is now scenic state forest grown over with northern hardwoods. East of there, Tug Hill farmers still graze cows but their cows are shaded by Maple Ridge Wind Farm turbines. Income from the turbines makes it possible to squeeze a living out of that snowy perch on Tug Hill.

Western New York has, in common with Tug Hill, lots of vacant farmland where making a living, farming, is tough. Some of this land is well situated to harness wind but much of it is better suited to solar panels. I was surprised, and it may surprise you, to learn that cash crops can be grown under solar panels and that a solar farm produces many times the energy of a similarly sized corn field, devoted to ethanol.

Successful full-scale agriculture has been demonstrated beneath the panels of solar farms in Massachusetts, Arizona, Germany, China, Croatia, Italy, Japan and France. Wheat, potatoes, clover grass, carrots, broccoli, peppers, beans, cilantro, tomatoes, Swiss chard and kale have all prospered in solar panel shade.

I was given a pint of “Photovoltaic Honey,” honey made by bees working a field of flowering plants sown under the panels of a solar farm. To supply bees with nectar, plant native pollinator plants like: daisy fleabanes, red columbine, trout lily, joe-pye-weed, gentians, sunflowers, and bloodroot. Besides honey, you will have a resplendent display.

Goats, cows and sheep have been tried grazing under the panels. Sheep are the most effective. They reproduce quickly and keep the plantings trimmed away from the panels.

In Ireland, Lyn and I stopped in a tavern, looking for dinner, at tea time. “Tea” was a luscious stew with chunks of tender lamb, carrots, onions and potatoes floating in gravy. Alongside was heaped country bread and a bottomless jar of blackberry jam. What a dinner was that!

Solar farms on [Grand Island](https://buffalonews.com/2019/04/15/work-begins-on-20000-panel-grand-island-solar-array-over-neighbors-objections/) (<https://buffalonews.com/2019/04/15/work-begins-on-20000-panel-grand-island-solar-array-over-neighbors-objections/>) and at [Mount Morris](https://spectrumlocalnews.com/nys/rochester/news/2019/01/24/nyserda-green-lights-3-local-mega-solar-farms-) (<https://spectrumlocalnews.com/nys/rochester/news/2019/01/24/nyserda-green-lights-3-local-mega-solar-farms->) are both to be sown with pollinator plants and sheep will graze at Mount Morris. Soon photovoltaic lamb stew served with biscuits and honey may be standard at “tea time” around here.

Grampa Gifford’s farm fed our family well. If he had known about solar farming or wind turbines, we’d still be up there.

Larry Beahan of Amherst, is conservation chair of the Sierra Club, Niagara Group.

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