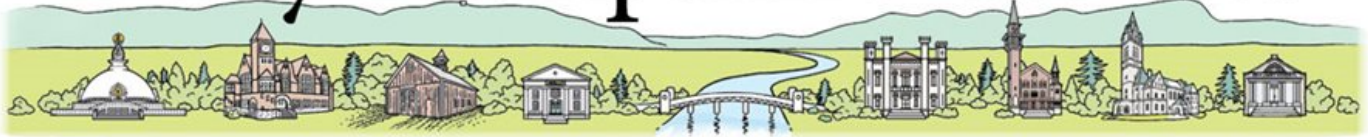


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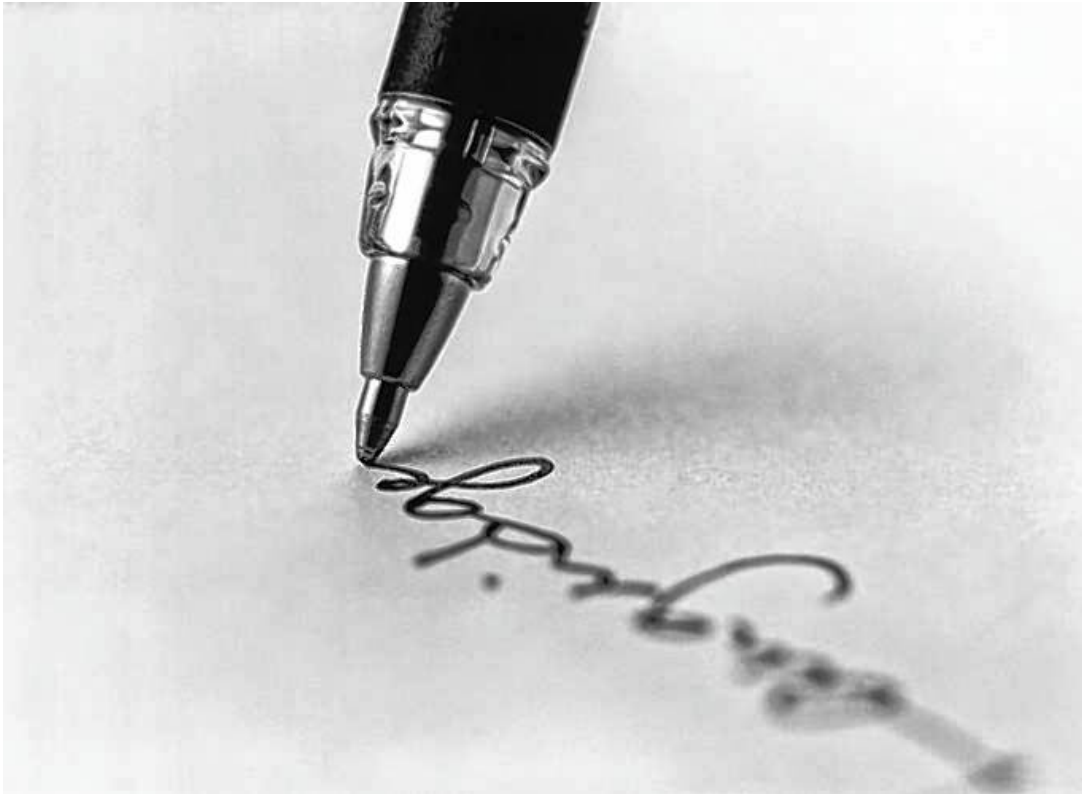


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Guest columnist Fred Beddall: Farmers want answers from MDAR



[By Fred Beddall \(/byline?byline= By Fred Beddall\)](#)

Published: 5/28/2021 12:57:59 PM

This time of year we farmers should be excused from attending planning board meetings or even reading the Gazette. When we do happen to catch a headline, such as “Dual use farm solar planned for N. Hadley” (Gazette, May 21) some of us have to wipe the grease and dirt off our hands to write a response.

Over the past winter I’ve had plenty of time to dig in to the facts about Massachusetts’ new “dual use” solar policy. It’s being sold to the public as a rare “win-win” for the climate and farmers. Unfortunately, it’s really just another “win-lose.” The winners are solar companies and big

landowners; the losers are farmers, particularly those who lease or borrow land, and new entry farmers.



Here are some of the false promises: that a wide variety of crops can be grown in 50% shade; that typical farm practices like plowing and greenhouse production can occur under them; that the hydrology and soil will be largely left intact; that the state will require farming to continue under the arrays; and that someday the panels and associated underground wiring might be removed.

Here is some of the truth: that there is no science to support the claims of crop success under heavy shade; that instead the state agencies are approving conversion of prime, irrigated crop land to low value pasture; that extensive trenching and import of sand fill will permanently alter the soil structure; that there will be no agency oversight that farm production or revenue meet any quantified targets; that the projects will be owned by out-of-state corporations; that the cost of all farmland will now be inflated, further harming all farm businesses.

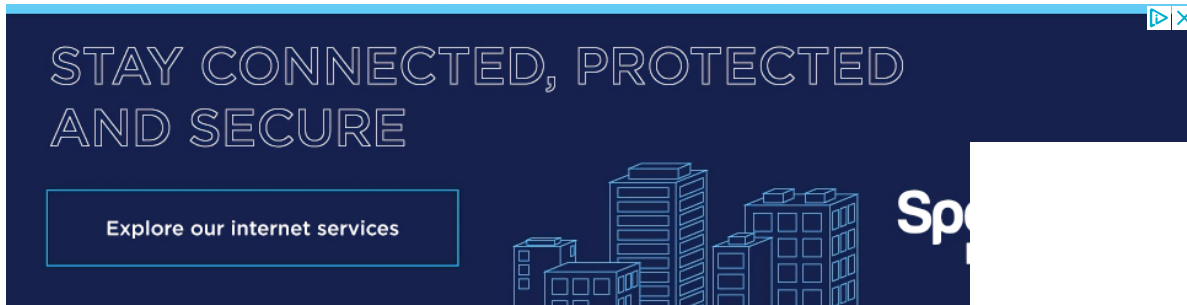
Farmers have to be business people as well as mechanics. We have to know what's realistic as well as what is possible. We get a little terse, sometimes when confronted with doublespeak, such as, "you can run a viable farm business under 50% shade and a forest of metal poles 10-feet tall."



The solar companies, whose executives I have heard call a potato a legume, want you to believe that "dual use" solar means the farm business is just as viable as the solar electricity business. The one business is based on hard work, sacrifice, and luck; the other is based on guaranteed government subsidies. Yes, 80% of the revenue from "dual use" solar is a direct pass through of special ratepayer fees, state mandated. Massachusetts has created the largest of all the state "SMART" incentives for conversion of farmland to solar... as long as it is "dual use," a concept which is unproven and whose results, for the farming portion, will be unmeasured.

The plans that are coming out look more like a 4-H project than a farm business (no offense, 4-H ers!); but they will convert the farmland, almost certainly forever, to make electrical generation the dominant use, in terms of financial return. It's possible that Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources officials think farmers would rather be paid solar rents than earn a living farming.

Are local electrons more necessary than local food? Should we import even more than the current 90% of our food from out of state? Will it arrive on a solar-powered electric truck?



Fred Beddall, of Northampton, has been a full-time farmer 24 years.

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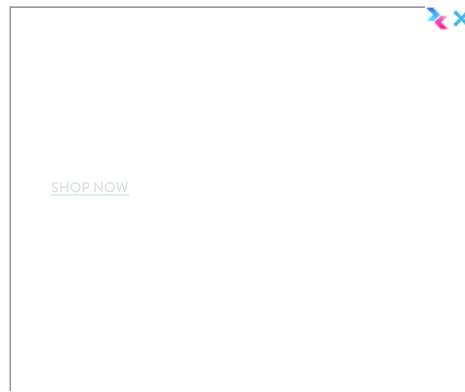
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