# Solar and protecting our Food Security and Best and Most Versatile (BMV) Land

## Statement made on 15 May 2024

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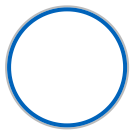
## Statement made by



**Claire Coutinho**

Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero

Conservative

East Surrey

Commons

## Statement

Food security is an essential part of national security. This Government is fully committed to delivering robust UK food security and recognises its paramount importance to our national security. This is reflected in our commitment to maintain the current level of food we produce domestically. Heightened geopolitical risk has brought this into sharper focus and we think it is more important than ever that our best agricultural land is protected and our food production prioritised.

Similarly, we have seen our energy security threatened following Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine with the government spending over £40bn to pay up to a half of people's energy bills. We are combatting this by racing ahead with deployment of renewable energy; nearly half of our electricity today is produced from renewables which is up from only 7 percent in 2010. Solar power is a key part of the Government's strategy for energy security, net zero and clean growth. This position was reinforced in the new National Policy Statement (EN-3), published in January this year, which stated that "*Solar also has an important role in delivering the government's goals for greater energy independence and the British Energy Security Strategy states that government expects a five-fold increase in combined ground and rooftop solar deployment by 2035 (up to 70GW)*".

Government recognises that, in some instances, solar projects can affect local environments which may lead to unacceptable impacts for some local communities. The planning system is designed to balance these considerations against the need to deliver a secure, clean, green energy system for the future.

**Protecting the Best Agricultural Land**

The new National Policy Statement that we published in January makes clear that "*applicants should, where possible, utilise suitable previously developed land, brownfield land, contaminated land and industrial land. Where the proposed use of any agricultural land has been shown to be necessary, poorer quality land should be preferred to higher quality land avoiding the use of "Best and Most Versatile" agricultural land where possible.* The Government in Powering Up Britain: Energy Security Plan clarified that while *"solar and farming can be complementary"* developers must also have *"consideration for ongoing food production*."

Nevertheless, in balancing both the need for energy security and food production, we are concerned that as large solar developments proceed at pace, more of our 'Best and Most Versatile' (BMV) land could be used for solar PV instead of food production. I am therefore setting out further detail about how our policy on balancing these competing priorities is intended to be applied.

As is outlined in the National Policy Statement, the starting position for solar PV developers in taking forward Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects is that applicants should seek to minimise impacts on the best and most versatile agricultural land (defined as land in grades 1, 2 and 3a of the Agricultural Land Classification) and preferably use land in areas of poorer quality.

The National Policy Statement can also be a material consideration in determining applications under the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 and is broadly consistent with the approach to agricultural land in the National Planning Policy Framework which states that "*Where significant development of agricultural land is demonstrated to be necessary, areas of poorer quality land should be preferred to those of a higher quality. The availability of agricultural land used for food production should be considered, alongside the other policies in this Framework, when deciding what sites are most appropriate for development*".

This means that due weight needs to be given to the proposed use of Best and Most Versatile land when considering whether planning consent should be granted for solar developments. For all applicants the highest quality agricultural land is least appropriate for solar development and as the land grade increases, there is a greater onus on developers to show that the use of higher quality land is necessary. Applicants for Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects should avoid the use of Best and Most Versatile agricultural land where possible.

For Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects, including those already in the system, the National Policy Statement and from today this WMS are likely to be important and relevant considerations in the decision making process. The Government will keep under review the evidence base underpinning the National Policy Statement published in January.

**Addressing Cumulative Impacts**

While the total area of agricultural land used for solar is very small, and even in the most ambitious scenarios would still occupy less than 1% of the UK's agricultural land, we are increasingly seeing geographical clustering of proposed solar developments in some rural areas, such as in Lincolnshire. When considering whether planning consent should be granted for solar development it is important to consider not just the impacts of individual proposals, but also whether there are cumulative impacts where several proposals come forward in the same locality.

In parallel, my Department will be expanding the Renewable Energy Planning Database to include additional information on the types of agricultural land used by existing solar projects and those in the planning pipeline. This will enable us to carefully monitor the use of land by renewable projects in all regions of the UK.

**Improving Soil Surveys**

The Government has heard concerns about the perceived inaccuracy and unfairness of soil surveys undertaken as part of the planning process for solar development. The Government will address this by supporting independent certification by an appropriate certifying body, subject to relevant business case approval, to ensure Agricultural Land Classification Soil Surveys are of a high standard, requiring surveyors to demonstrate meeting an agreed minimum requirement of training/experience. We will also seek to ensure consistency in how data is recorded and presented, so that reports on agricultural land classification are consistent, authoritative and objective.

**Supporting solar on rooftops and brownfield sites**

Finally, I want to highlight that increasing the deployment of rooftop solar remains a priority for Government. The installation of qualifying energy-saving materials, including solar panels, in residential accommodation and buildings used solely for a relevant charitable purpose currently benefits from a zero rate of VAT until March 2027, at which point they will qualify for the reduced rate of VAT at 5%. At the Autumn Statement 2023, the 100% First Year Allowance for main rate plant and machinery assets, and the 50%

First Year Allowance for special rate plant and machinery assets, including solar panels, were made permanent. These measures complement the business rates exemption for eligible plant and machinery used in renewable energy generation and storage introduced in 2022.

This year, UK Government launched a new package of measures to support British farming. Under the second round of the Improving Farm Productivity grant, between £15-25 million was made available for the installation of rooftop solar and other equipment to help farms reduce fossil fuel use, improve their energy resilience, and accelerate progress towards net zero.

We also unlocked a key barrier for large-scale commercial rooftop solar, including on farm buildings, through changes to permitted development rights (PDRs) under the Town and Country Planning Act 1990. Concurrently, we introduced a new PDR allowing for the installation of solar canopies in non-domestic car parks.

We will shortly be delivering the Future Homes Standard which will set the energy performance of new homes and is due to come into force in 2025. Our consultation proposals setting out the proposed technical detail of the standard demonstrated the effectiveness of rooftop solar in reducing energy bills for consumers with solar panels. For non-domestic buildings, the Future Buildings Standard consultation proposed significant amounts of rooftop solar which is also expected to drive the use of solar power on warehouses and commercial buildings.

Additionally, social housing and the public sector both offer excellent opportunities to fit solar on homes and reduce bills. As such, we plan to explore further how to ensure that social landlords can provide solar to their tenants, and work across government to help schools, colleges, hospitals, and other buildings to supply themselves with solar power.

Further information on these initiatives will be set out in the upcoming joint government/industry Solar Roadmap.

I am making this statement with support from my Rt. Hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and Envionment, Food and Rural Affairs.

## Statement from

**Department for Energy Security and Net Zero**

## Linked statements

This statement has also been made in the House of Lords

**Department for Energy Security and Net Zero**

Solar and protecting our Food Security and Best and Most Versatile (BMV) Land

Lord Callanan

Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Minister for Energy Efficiency and Green Finance)

Conservative, Life peer

Statement made 15 May 2024

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Lords