

Solar Ireland highlights the growing benefits of solar for farmers and rural communities

Solar Ireland has expressed concern at the growing reliance on misinformation in public debate about solar farms and land use, reflecting a wider global trend where unverified claims often gain more traction than evidence. In Ireland, this risks drowning out the real experiences of farmers, the scientific assessments of land suitability, and the proven economic and environmental benefits that solar energy brings to rural communities.

Solar is becoming an increasingly valuable part of Irish agriculture, offering farmers a stable income stream, improved soil health, biodiversity gains, and new opportunities for farm resilience. Yet these benefits are often overlooked in discussions shaped by incomplete information or assumptions rather than facts.

Ireland can meet its 2030 solar targets using approximately 0.1% of national agricultural land. On solar farms, panels typically cover around 40% of each site, with the remainder left as grassland suitable for grazing.

“In practice, we see that Irish solar farms are designed to work alongside ongoing agricultural activity,” said Solar Ireland CEO Ronan Power. “Grazing continues on most sites, the land stays in grass, and farms retain long-term flexibility for future agricultural use.”

For many farmers, solar is becoming a valuable diversification option. Typical lease payments range between €1,000 and €1,400 per acre per year, creating a dependable income stream that can support investment in farm infrastructure, environmental compliance, energy efficiency upgrades and succession planning.

“We hear from farmers who are choosing solar because it gives them financial predictability in a way that works alongside grazing and day-to-day operations,” Power said.

A farmer from Westmeath wrote to us:

“A solar farm does not sterilise rural Ireland. It supports our ability to keep farming. It helps with income stability, improves biodiversity and still allows us to play an active role in the local economy.”

Agricultural context, land rights and the need for consistency

In regions dominated by beef and sheep farming, diversification plays an essential role in long-term viability. Solar farms in these areas complement existing land use rather than competing with high-value tillage or horticulture.

There is also inconsistency in current commentary. Solar farms are criticised when they cluster near grid connection points in counties like Meath and Kildare, yet similar objections emerge when projects are proposed in more rural counties. In reality, deployment is spread across the country.

Current connected capacity includes approximately 39% in Meath, 17% in Wexford, 11% in Cork, 9% in both Kildare and Waterford, 5% in Offaly and Kerry, and 3% in Tipperary, with all remaining counties making up the balance. This national pattern shows that solar is not confined to any one region, reinforcing the need for clear national guidelines so that planning, grid development, and farm decision-making are aligned rather than criticised from both directions.

Farmers also have the right to decide how their land is used, provided planning rules are met. For many, solar is part of a wider strategy to keep the family farm viable, support environmental improvements and strengthen financial security.

Supporting farmers facing rising climate and cost pressures

Farm organisations have repeatedly highlighted the financial pressures facing Irish agriculture, from persistently high energy prices to rising input costs and tighter margins. Recent reports from the IFA and Teagasc note the strain caused by higher electricity bills, compliance requirements, and volatility across dairy, beef, sheep, and tillage incomes.

“These pressures are real, and they affect every farm family,” Power said. “Solar is not a replacement for farming. It is one practical tool that can help stabilise income at a time when many farmers are facing rising costs and significant uncertainty.”

Irish farmers are also being asked to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, improve soil and water quality, and adopt new management practices, often requiring significant investment. “Farmers are navigating a period of major change,” Power added. “Solar provides stable income, reduces energy costs and gives land a period of rest. It is a practical support as agriculture works to meet its climate commitments.”

Community engagement, local benefits, and long-term partnerships

Solar projects also bring important social and economic benefits to the communities that host them. Developers increasingly work with local residents, community groups and voluntary organisations to ensure projects deliver tangible value throughout their lifetimes.

Across Ireland, this is already happening in practice. Solar projects are providing community benefit funds that support local schools, sports clubs, youth groups, heritage initiatives, accessibility projects and environmental improvements. Many developers now apply these funds on both RESS and non-RESS projects, ensuring neighbouring communities share directly in the value created.

Experience also shows that well-designed solar farms, delivered with early and meaningful engagement, can achieve broad local acceptance. In one large project beside a residential area, comprehensive consultation led to a smooth planning process with only a small number of observations. Local dairy farmers saw the development as a way to secure long-term, stable income without exposure to market volatility, while nearby businesses also expressed support.

In another project on poorer agricultural land, the landowner used the solar lease to protect family ownership and support succession, ensuring the land could continue to provide for the next generation. These examples underline how solar, when designed and communicated well, can work for communities, strengthen farm incomes and support rural development.

Solar development also supports wider local economic activity. During construction, projects create work for fencing contractors, civil engineering teams, landscapers, ecologists, archaeologists, electricians, and groundworks crews. Once operational, they generate long-term roles in maintenance, land management and biodiversity monitoring.

“As an industry, we want to see communities benefit directly from the projects they host,” Power said. “Solar can provide local jobs, support community organisations and help create new opportunities for young people in renewable energy. These projects are long-term neighbours, and strong community partnerships must always be at the heart of how we deliver them.”

Environmental benefits: better soil, stronger biodiversity, lower emissions

Scientific soil assessments are routinely carried out by developers as part of feasibility and environmental evaluation, ensuring that proposed solar farms are located on appropriate land and that agricultural use, such as grazing, can safely continue throughout the lifetime of the project.

Solar farms offer environmental co-benefits that complement agricultural use. Allowing land to rest from intensive farming can improve soil structure and organic matter. Permanent grass cover reduces erosion and supports water quality. Many sites incorporate hedgerow protection, pollinator-friendly planting, and wildlife corridors, enhancing biodiversity.

In 2025, solar generation avoided 395,877 tonnes of CO₂ and produced the equivalent electricity needs of approximately 370,000 homes. “Solar is becoming an important part of the rural economy and a practical support for many farm families,” Power said. “We are committed to working with farmers, communities and representative bodies to ensure the sector continues to deliver social, economic and environmental value.”

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Media Queries Please contact:

priscila.mcgeehan@solarireland.ie | +353 (0)86 201 4933

About Solar Ireland

Solar Ireland (formerly the Irish Solar Energy Association) is the national representative body for Ireland’s solar industry. Through evidence-based policy engagement, education and collaboration, we work to support a decarbonised, equitable and sustainable energy future. Our mission is to maximise Ireland’s solar generation in a way that delivers social, environmental and economic value for farmers, communities and the wider energy system. Learn more at solarireland.ie.