

Renewable Energy for Farmers and Ranchers

The Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002 created the Renewable Energy Systems and Energy Efficiency Improvements Program under Title IX, Section 9006. This program funds grants and loans to help rural business owners and agriculture producers purchase renewable energy producing equipment. In March of 2008 the USDA announced they were accepting applications for these grants and loans and had secured in excess of \$220 million dollars as incentive funds for energy efficiency improvements and purchasing renewable energy systems.

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Food production and distribution accounts for 12-15% of energy use worldwide. Currently, fossil fuel based products fill more than 90% of that use. With the right renewable energy sources in place, we could decrease that use to 3%.

Rural businesses and farms often pay exorbitant costs to have utilities extended to their location. Solar powered energy alleviates this problem by providing hot water to farmhouses, powering gates and corrals, pumping water for livestock and irrigation, and powering utility buildings and task and security lighting. Dairy and livestock farms use large amounts of energy to maintain temperature and air quality in enclosed buildings. Farms using greenhouses traditionally use the sun for light, but rely on fossil fuels for heating the building in cold weather. The same sunlight that allows them to see could also be utilized for heating purposes. Solar power is also an excellent alternative for crop and grain drying. Farmers have traditionally laid their product out to let it dry in the sun, but run the risk of losing grains to birds, rodents, and the elements. With simple modifications a solar powered building could be used in much the same way, but with added protection from animals and foul weather. Solar power also offers a huge measure of protection against power outages. Even a short outage could threaten livestock security and livelihood and incur costs in lost production.

The Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002 offers cash and tax credit incentives to farmers for converting. But farmers also benefit from decreased production costs when solar power, and not a utility board, supply their energy needs.

Solar and wind powered energy also present a unique moneymaking opportunity for the rural farmer. The location of farmland makes it ideally suited for solar and wind power caches, in effect making renewable energy the latest crop. Many farmers are allowing their land to serve a dual purpose; it's still used for agricultural purposes, but it's also being 'rented' by local utility boards and corporations to generate solar and wind power. In fact, farmers across the country are being paid as much as \$2,000 per year for the use of a small section of land.