

## **Common sense energy policy benefits farmers, ranchers**

For farmers and ranchers, energy is one of the most expensive parts of our operations. There are simple solutions that would help us control these costs, but these solutions are currently inhibited because of needless obstacles in state law.

We need electricity to power center-pivot irrigation systems and stock water pumps. Gas and propane keep us warm through harsh winters. Diesel is necessary for our tractors and other equipment. Then there's driving to town, and back-up generators in case of power outages.

The energy we need is not only expensive, but also uncertain. Our dependence on fuels whose prices fluctuate with the whims of regional and global energy markets creates one more unknown for farmers and ranchers who must already deal with the many uncertainties that come with living off the land.

That's why we and many of our neighbors have embraced homegrown, renewable energy. Installing small-scale solar and wind systems on our property increases our energy security and allows us to lock in our cost of power for over 25 years. It also allows us to keep our energy dollars here in the state and support Montana businesses.

We believe we should have the freedom to choose an energy source that works for us.

Unfortunately, current state law includes a provision that makes it more difficult and expensive for farmers and ranchers to enjoy these benefits.

The state's "net metering" law allows utility customers to install a small wind turbine or solar array to provide energy for their own use. The owner is guaranteed fair credit for any excess energy he or she returns to the utility, which utilities then sell at retail price to neighboring customers. But Montana's current net metering law states that the output from a renewable energy system can only be credited to one electrical meter.

The majority of farmers and ranchers, and many rural Montanans, have multiple electrical meters on their property. We have separate electrical meters for the house, the shop, the barn, and each of our irrigation systems or water pumps. Each of these meters is billed separately by the utility company, though they are all accounts under our name and the bills arrive on the same day.

Under current law, if we have six electrical meters on our property, we would need six separate wind or solar systems in order to apply their output to our six electrical meters. Because of the smaller size of these multiple systems, and the need to build each of them at the far-flung

locations of the meters on our property, we are unable to capture the economies of scale that a single larger wind turbine or solar array would provide.

If a farm or ranch could opt for one large wind or solar energy system, they could use the credits to offset some or all of their energy use. We only want to be able to build a renewable energy system at a reasonable cost, and have fair credit for the energy we actually produce.

Because of the current law, Montana ag operators who want to generate their own electricity are saddled with a burden that makes the use of solar and wind energy artificially expensive. Investing in solar and wind energy could be a cost-effective choice to power our operations. Where's the common sense in setting up arbitrary hurdles that increase the costs of using energy from the sun and wind? There's just no good reason for it.

This barrier must be removed. We urge the Montana Legislature to pass SB 134, sponsored by Sen. Jennifer Fielder (R-Thompson Falls), to enable "Aggregate Net Metering" so that Montana's net metering law works for farmers and ranchers. Allow the output from one renewable energy system to be credited to the multiple meters on a farmer or rancher's own property. All this will require from utilities is implementing simple accounting procedures. This common-sense solution will drastically increase the feasibility of small-scale renewable energy installations for Montana's rural residents, farmers, and ranchers.

Montana's agricultural producers are the backbone of the state's economy. We deserve an energy policy that works for us, not against us.

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