Growers farming the sun

Sutter Basin's newly installed solar panels provide best of all scenarios

Howard Yune, Marysville Appeal-Democrat, 1-24-10

Another group of farmers in Sutter County is harnessing the sun to dry their crops as well as grow them.

A solar power array just north of Knights Landing is the Mid-Valley's latest display of renewable energy. The owner, the Sutter Basin Growers Cooperative, activated 5 acres of light-gathering panels in December and will use the system to run its rice and bean dryers — and cut its power bill by up to 80 percent.

Conergy Projects Inc. in November began installing the 880-kilowatt, $4.5 million system, located just east of Highway 113. The company is covering installation costs in return for getting the federal and state tax incentives for solar power and is leasing the array to Sutter Basin for seven to 10 years, after which the cooperative can buy the equipment.

The Sutter Basin panels are expected to produce 1.4 million kilowatt-hours of power per year and create an annual carbon dioxide offset of about 1,111 tons, according to David Vincent, a Conergy project development manager. The cooperative dryers received about 12 million pounds of beans and 2.1 million pounds of rice last year.

Sutter Basin's array accumulates power credits from December to August, the slow period for grain drying, with its 11,922 photovoltaic modules producing energy even under cloudy skies.

Crop drying is an ideal candidate for solar power because the heaviest energy use is concentrated on the harvest season, said Ray Davis, the cooperative's general manager.

"The highest power use here is for four months," he said. "The rest of time it's minimal, so with solar power we can be building our credits up."

Sutter Basin follows the lead of Montna Farms, where MMA Renewable Ventures and SolarCity installed a solar panel system in October 2008 for rice drying. Savings at the Dingville farm, one of the nation's largest producers of short-grain rice, have run ahead of predictions, with the system supplying 75 percent of its power, according to Nicole Montna Van Vleck, the farm's managing partner.

Though the cost of equipment remains a roadblock to many, proponents said tax incentives and greater awareness of the technology can help solar power find its way among farmers — especially where the sun is as abundant as any crop.

"It doesn't always make economic sense, but when it does, it makes perfect sense," said Van Vleck. "I think if people see successes with it, it makes more people interested in pursuing it."

"It's big and getting bigger," said Vincent, the Conergy manager. "Farmers are realizing it's nothing more than farming the sun, and it's a direct moneymaker for them."