

PROGRESS: AGRICULTURE

Integrating industry

Independent cranberry growers consider solar energy to keep business alive

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Though the sleek metallic panels may not look like something that belongs on a farm, solar energy is making its way into local cranberry bogs. Massachusetts is the second-largest producer of cranberries in the country, trailing only Wisconsin according to the USDA's National Agricultural Statistics. A large portion of the cranberry production can be found in local towns like Carver, Plymouth and Wareham. The Cape Cod Cranberry Grower's Association reported that 2011 was one of the largest years on record for cranberry production in Massachusetts with an estimated crop of nearly 2.4 million barrels.

But for local independent growers, the greater supply means a decrease in demand. In a market that is constantly uncertain, some growers are considering other ways to diversify their income by renting their land to renewable energy companies.

Independent grower Mike Paduch has already begun that process at his Carver bog. He has teamed up with Entero Energy to build a solar array on top of his existing bog, allowing him to maintain the vines below.

"In my case this was a project that came to me. At the time the school was going to be rebuilt, they were going to make it a green school and the price of cranberries was dropping and I had asked the question whether solar panels could be put on a bog. The answer was, 'yes they could,'" he said.

"This bog, while it is a pretty bog, it is built on clay and produces a little less. The cranberry industry for the independents has been uncertain, so for me it was a matter of this opportunity coming up and I feel like it is a win-win because the town would get a break on their electricity for the school, the town would also get to tax the property more than they are taxing it now and I would at least get enough to make my mortgage payment and we still can keep the bog a bog underneath it."

For Paduch, maintaining the bog he worked so hard to create is as important as keeping his business viable as the industry seesaws. After meeting with the

Department of Environmental Protection and cranberry experts from the UMass Cranberry Station, he was given the go-ahead to build the array on top of his bog. Following several public hearings on the project, the town accepted the site plan and signed a net metering contract for the energy produced.

"We are trying to find ways to keep the small family farm going and it is not an easy thing to do because everything is geared toward high volume, high production, low costs, and growing cranberries in Massachusetts is challenging compared to some other places," he said. "In order to meet those challenges we have to find other ways to supplement our income."

While not every independent cranberry grower is rushing into solar, several are considering it if the prices continue to be fickle. Carver independent grower Dick Ward, who owns a 50-acre bog, would like to have that option in the future to keep his business running.

"For the 2009 crop we were getting \$64 a barrel, and the 2010 crop, which the payments came in last year, it was \$10 base price," Ward said. "We went from \$64 to \$10. If I don't have any way to diversify a little bit on my income then the next thing you do is you have to sell out."

For someone like Ward who has spent decades working the land himself, selling out would be a tough pill to swallow. But to keep his bog from turning into housing or a condominium complex he needs to find a way to stay in business when

prices are down.

He has considered growing other crops but says that growing a different fruit or vegetable is an entirely new occupation and can take years to perfect, making it an unattractive, and incredibly time-consuming option.

"Family farms anywhere from 5 to 30 acres would maybe need to say 'I need to substitute some money in to help my income.' We spent our lives trying to live here, we love it here and we are lucky, it just so happens when we came along at a time when we could own 50 acres," he said. "How many kids are going to be able to do that? It's a rental deal, if I got \$1,500 an acre on 5 acres that would give me \$7,500 and pay all the taxes and part of the mortgage which could allow me to continue to live in this house and the cranberries would still be there."

What is important for Paduch is that the solar array would not compromise the bog in a big way. Since cranberry vines only need 35 percent of available light for photosynthesis, the vines below the array will still grow strong and could be brought back to life shortly after the array is removed.

"All the structures are temporary they are not being put on a concrete foundation that is going to be here forever," he said. "They are put in as 20-year projects, some 25, and if they don't work, they will be gone and the land will go back to what it was. If they took this apart and left, I would still have my bog."

In Carver, at least, the jury is still out on solar arrays in agriculturally zoned areas. Opponents look to establish a bylaw that will limit arrays on agriculturally zoned land while cranberry growers fight to keep their options open.

"I do love my town and I wouldn't want to put something here that would degrade the quality of life," Ward said. "If you fly over Carver there are huge open areas, uplands near bogs and around bogs that could have a sizeable solar farm that would put electricity into the grid and isn't that a positive thing?"

Though he doesn't think that a large number of growers will enter into the world of solar, Paduch says that for some it could become a reality.

"I really like the fact that our tax money isn't going to go to the other side of the world to buy energy from people who do not like us. We can make our own electricity here. The sun is the only energy source that is going to be around for at least another 5 billion years," he said. "I am looking forward to seeing how this develops. I am excited and ambivalent. I started this bog 20 years ago it is like my baby. But the idea that I can still grow the vine and still work the bog as a dual use is intriguing for me." ■