

Cornwall approval puts potential solar farms in the spotlight - act now to avoid the log-jam as planning applications peak to take advantage of best Feed-in Tariffs, warns energy consultancy

News of Cornwall's approval of a 6,000 panel solar farm on the site of an old tin mine works at Wheal Jane is alerting landowners to the idea that the next 'big thing' in renewable energy is going to be large-scale PV panel installations. Owners of agricultural and redundant industrial land can benefit from substantial guaranteed income over the next 25 years under the government's Feed-in Tariff scheme.

However, solar farms will probably average 15 hectares, or around 25,000 panels, predicts energy and environmental specialists Atmos Consultants. At this scale of development proposals will generally be subject to planning permission. With the most attractive Feed-in Tariffs available to those who are connected to the National Grid before the tariffs are reviewed in 2013, there is likely to be a surge of applications over the next 18 months for which local authorities are ill-prepared. A planning log-jam can be expected.

Large-scale photo-voltaic panel arrays are not expressly listed in the EIA (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations 1999, and a scaled-back Natural England may prove to be of little assistance to planners seeking objective guidance. The best guess, in the view of North Cornwall District Council, is that they can be treated in a similar way to greenhouses. Cornwall expects to bear the brunt of the pressure to process applications for these large arrays because it receives most sunlight, but Atmos Consulting expects solar farms to become sound economic propositions across a much wider area.

"It's not having 'most' but 'enough' solar irradiation that counts," said Atmos managing director Stewart Lowther.

"Any open area of flat or broadly south facing land in the region of 10 to 60 acres (4 to 24Ha) could be suitable for a sun farm, and interested landowners should get in touch with us soon,"

he added.

Atmos Consulting has noted with interest North Cornwall's proposal to levy five-figure Planning Application Fees for these arrays, with the suggestion of the provision of additional Community Gain. Perhaps this is going to be the way forward, but it means that more landowners will need to draw on expert advice from consultants to ameliorate the risk of planning refusals and be able to take advantage of Feed-in Tariffs.