

Wycombe Friends of the Earth - Minutes of AGM

Wednesday 4th June 2014, 7.30pm at the Large Hall, Friends Meeting House

1. Welcome and Apologies

Present: 13

Apologies: 4

2. Presentation by representatives of Hive Energy

Tim Purbrick gave an interesting talk supported by a slide show to introduce the benefits of solar farms, with particular reference to a current application for a farm at Forty Green near Bledlow which is being managed by them. Hive Energy build solar roof projects and solar farms. They are a relatively small company (6 employees), and have so far completed 28 roof projects and 17 solar farms as well as others in the pipeline. They are based in Southampton. They believe that solar farms can be a benefit to wildlife especially in comparison to farmed or neglected land. They belong to the Bee Keepers Association and take advice from various wildlife organisations.

A solar farm is a power station producing clean green renewable energy from the sun. It is an alternative to agriculture but doesn't need to stop agriculture. It is not permitted by our government to build solar farms on high yielding agricultural ground, i.e. what is known as Grade 3A or better, so are usually restricted to Grade 4 agricultural land, which is not so productive. A field containing rows of solar panels may look intense, but the panels are usually raised off the ground so that sheep or even cows can graze underneath. The panels are around 2.4 metres high, so can be hidden from view by hedging and it is a policy of this company to surround all the farms with young hedging plants of 1.2 metres in height at initial planting. Inhabitants of houses which overlook a site may find them unattractive though. This is the main drawback. Ecology studies have shown that solar farms encourage higher levels of bees and insects and there is also some indication the grass underneath solar panels is more luscious.

Forty Green Solar Farm at Bledlow is planned for construction on Grade 4 agricultural land. It would generate 7.2 MgW on 35 Acres with 28000 solar panels. It will take 2 years to earn out the CO₂ used in building it. It will be fenced, as it is an £ 8.5 million investment. Once given the go-ahead, building takes 3 - 4 months and it would power 2100 average homes. There are no particular drawbacks in running the project. The project is due to go before the planning committee on 2nd July.

Solar farms take up relatively little space and are one of the least intrusive energy generating methods. The land is usually contracted for 25 years for solar generation and after this time the land can be returned to its original use if desired as there is very little impact on the land. The panels can be recycled, so no waste. The experience of farms which have been in place for several years is good. If a farm is fallow it will be herbicide free, so can be grazed or left to wildflowers, which is an obvious benefit to wildlife. It is an alternative source of income for farmers, especially sheep farmers and can be a very good investment. A land management plan has to be submitted at the time that planning permission is requested.

Solar farms are possible as a community share ownership scheme and in Germany there are several towns who have supported the construction of a small farm on the edge of their town for the benefit of the community.

There are subsidies at the moment for building such farms, but this could change in 2015 as the government has no more money set aside for this purpose. As the grid is limited as to how much extra electricity it can carry from solar farms, there are already some areas of the country where the capacity is at maximum.

For further information refer to Hive Energy website, or Wiki-Solar.

3. The AGM bit starting with review of the year and financial report

The two reports as already circulated to all members were read out. The chairman explained that it was intended to divide the Co-ordinator role between three members, if approved.

4. Election of Officers

3 members were nominated and confirmed in the shared role of Co-ordinators. One is to be the contact with national Friends of the Earth, and two will share the role of convening the meetings.

The treasurer was re-elected.

5. Other Business

a) South Central Representative,

A member gave a brief resume of the two proposed representatives. We had also previously been sent the link to their statements. It was decided to vote for Chris Church.

b) Marinet

We felt that it would be right for Marinet to do what they feel is in their best interest and if that is to separate from FoE, then we are in favour.

c) Run on Sun Campaign

It was generally felt that we did not wish to take part in a special campaign on 21st June but if some posters are available we could use them at the Hampden School table on 13th June. A member will liaise with FoE on what is available.

d) 13th July stall at Pann Mill

Only 2 members are available so we felt it best not to apply for our own stall this time. WEC will have a stall, so we could help there or maybe display some of our own information.

e) Chiltern Wood Recycling

They are having to move from their current premises which have been re-let. New premises are available at a much higher rent. Although CWR will take these new premises for the time being, it does put their business model at risk. They would welcome help in the removal process this weekend.

The next meeting will be on Wednesday 6th August 2014 at 7.30pm at The Quaker Meeting House in Stuart Road, High Wycombe