

# Larry Bettencourt: Solar benefits Valley farms

By Larry  
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As we all know in the Valley, our region is a nationwide leader in agriculture, producing much of the nation's produce, dairy products and wine.

The drought in California isn't just making our showers shorter and our lawns brown. It's also costing our farmers billions of dollars. A study from UC Davis found that in 2015 alone, the drought will cost state farmers an additional \$2.7 billion and more than 18,000 jobs on top of the \$2.2 billion lost to our state's economy last year. Energy used for irrigation and pumping water accounts for a significant portion of farmers' operating costs. Sustainability and cutting costs is going to remain vital to the future of farming and sustaining a growing population as we recover from this record drought.

While we all are well aware of the drought and how important agriculture is to the overall economy, what many in the Valley may not know is that we are leaders in terms of rooftop solar. Many of us in agriculture are setting the standard for forward-thinking energy policy, which is also good for our collective wallets.

Farmers can make use of the sun for more than simply growing our crops. Solar systems are increasingly popular on farms across the state. On our farm in Kings County, for example, we installed a solar system to reduce our reliance on grid electricity, to modernize increasing our sustainability and to do our part for the environment.

The solar project will save our family 93 percent on the cost of power over the next 25 years. What's more, our small solar system will offset 857,385 tons of carbon over 25 years. This is the equivalent of almost 1.4 million miles not driven. In an era where every drop, watt and energy-saving tactic counts, making use of distributed solar on the farm can make a huge impact for farmers, consumers, ratepayers and the environment.

The promise offered by solar means it is vital that we uphold the very policy that makes such modernization possible and allows our farms to save money: net energy metering. Net energy metering allows farms that generate their own electricity from solar panels to sell that energy back to the grid. Utilities get paid for that extra energy and farms, homeowners, schools and business owners get credit for contributing to their local energy supply. Ratepayers and the environment win because utilities don't have to build as many large-scale power plants and power lines.

This week, the California Public Utilities Commission will consider several different plans that will alter net metering. Some proposals include rates that will be incomprehensible to the vast majority of residential solar customers. These changes include high fixed charges and fees that would greatly reduce the value that rooftop solar customers, such as farmers, get from their systems.

Net metering is a policy that has enabled the California solar industry to boom; particularly for those of us in agriculture. To alter net metering would discourage sustainability, be a job killer and curtail incentives to install rooftop solar. Why would we try to fix what isn't broken?

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