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Brave New World: Solar Farming

Aurora family harvesting new crop from the sky

By: Ray Hughey

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Photo By: Ray Hughey

Joanna Lever and son Dan with the solar array on their Canby area farm.

The Lever clan has a new crop on its family farm on S. Meridian Road near Aurora. It's not something scratched from the earth. It comes from the sky — sunshine.

The Lever farm is the site of the newest and largest ground-mounted solar array in Clackamas County.

The Levers leased about two acres of their 88-acre farm to 3CSolar, solar financing specialists out of Portland. The array, developed, installed and operated by NW Photon Energy of Lake Oswego, is made of 2,128 4-by-3 foot solar panels.

The fixed-tilt array will produce about 575,000 kilowatt hours annually, enough energy to power 53 homes a year.

It went on line June 24 and was commissioned in a program Thursday. The power it produces is sold to PGE under a 15-year contract and goes into the grid.

But turning part of their farm into a solar farm didn't come easily for the Levers. It was a difficult decision, said family matriarch Joanna Lever, 73, retired after teaching elementary school 25 years in Newberg.

"Family farms are having a difficult time sustaining themselves and not damaging the environment," she said.

Her son Dan first mentioned the idea and the family learned its farm would make an ideal site, she said. It would generate income for the farm and be good for the environment as well.

"This is new for everybody," she said. "I had to think for a long time. I didn't want to do anything to damage the farm or its potential."

She made all the children sit down — daughter, Carrie Jo Vincent and sons, Dan and John — and agree on what they were doing.

"We tried to be as careful and careful as we could," Joanna Lever said. "I didn't want it to negatively impact the neighborhood or impact Don (Next-door neighbor Don Deetering.)

But Deetering was already up to speed on solar energy, she said. "He's very into all of this. He's very onboard with what needs to be done."

"It was hard to decide, but I am proud of it," she said.

She and her husband, Dan Lever, bought their farm in 1972.

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"We built our house in 1973 and set out to own it, which we did," she said.

Her husband of 52 years, Dan Lever, died in 2009. He taught U.S. history just like his son Dan who teaches at Canby High School.

At one time, they maintained a large cow-calf operation with sometimes as many as 100 animals, said son Dan Lever, who manages the farm.

Since then they have turned to grow crops, including beans, cucumbers, leeks, corn, squash and alfalfa. Solar farms are another way family farms can diversify, said Kirk Cameron, president of NW Photon Energy.

"They don't have to worry about weather or irrigation and they get x amount of dollars a month for a long time."

3CSolar co-owner Chris Copp said the firm was pleased to be part of growing solar in Oregon and helping meet the state's renewable energy standard of providing 25 percent renewable energy by 2025.

"Our investment in this project is an investment in Oregon's clean energy future," he said.

The Lever farm was chosen because Clackamas County has 5 percent more annual sunlight than Multnomah County, Copp said.

"As you go south, you keep picking up more light," he said. "Even the south end of Marion County has more light than the north end."

Susan Zilolko, supervisor of the Office of Sustainability for Clackamas County, said the Lever solar farm was a great source of energy for the community.

"We are excited about this system because it demonstrates that Clackamas County can be a strong market for future solar projects."

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That used to be good farmland. Now it is not usable to help maintain our food supply. Energy production is great but food production, in the long run, is more important. Sad that projects like this are using up our farms.

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