

House Committee on Agriculture, Food Resiliency, and Forestry
Testimony of Lewis Fox
4/15/2026

Good morning, Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify. My name is Lewis Fox; I farm with my wife, Niko, and our two children in Leicester, Vermont. We are sheep producers and, since 2018, have specialized in solar grazing through our business, Agrivoltaic Solutions LLC. I also serve on the advisory board of the American Solar Grazing Association, an organization Niko and I helped found.

Our farm has been in my family since 1987 when my parents began milking a herd of registered Jerseys. They were early practitioners of rotational grazing and were one of the first certified Organic farms in VT in the 1990s. My wife and I met in New York and bought our first flock of sheep which we eventually moved back to the farm with us in 2021. While our family made the difficult decision to exit the dairy business in 2024, after nearly 40 years of milking cows, solar grazing has allowed us to move forward and remain a viable, multi-generational farm.

Today our flock of 700 Katahdin sheep graze approximately 650 acres of ground mounted solar sites in VT, NH and NY. We produce hay and silage and graze our replacement lambs at the home farm during the summer. Our business is our sole source of family income, as well as supporting two full time local employees and a UVM Summer Intern for the last two years.

Agrivoltaics is a broad term encompassing many different forms of agriculture practiced in and around a solar array. Sheep grazing is most common, but we also see vegetable and hay production at sites in the Northeast, and an increasing implementation of cattle grazing.

Solar grazing in simple terms is paid vegetation management using grazing animals, most commonly sheep. Every solar site has a budget line for vegetation management, and solar grazing can direct that money to the local farmer, while also providing feed, shade, and a secure fence for their flock.

We consider solar sites to be highly productive environments for raising sheep. The main advantages of these over a conventional pasture are the secure perimeter fence and the abundant shade provided by the panels. Predator loss has always been a significant challenge for the sheep industry, and secure perimeter fences on solar sites can ameliorate these risks.

The abundant shade provided by the panels lowers the ambient temperature at ground level and significantly reduces incidence of heat stress in the flock during the summer months. We find in our own experience that the sheep pasturing on

solar sites consume significantly less water than animals in a conventional pasture setting, as they are able to maintain their body temperature much more effectively.

As I noted earlier, I serve on the advisory board of the American Solar Grazing Association (ASGA), a trade organization representing 1,500 members across the United States.

In 2024, ASGA partnered with the National Renewable Energy Laboratory (NREL) to conduct a comprehensive Census of Solar Grazing. Our findings were significant: approximately 130,000 acres of solar across the U.S. are currently being grazed by over 113,000 sheep. Here in the Northeast, about 4,600 acres are managed by 13,000 sheep. To put that in perspective, based on 2025 USDA data, solar grazing already supports roughly 5% of the total sheep flock in the Northeast.

Several states have pioneered effective incentives for solar-agricultural integration. New York utilizes a 'Smart Solar Siting Scorecard' to award power contracts and imposes mitigation penalties on prime farmland (Mineral Soil Groups 1-4) that are waived only if the developer implements and maintains a verified agricultural plan.

Massachusetts provides a direct 'tariff adder' for projects that maintain active farming under the SMART program. Similarly, New Jersey's Dual-Use Pilot Program offers price adders to reach its 200MW goal for integrated sites.

Finally, Illinois uses agrivoltaics as a key scoring criterion for projects to win competitive grid slots. Their 'Illinois Shines' program ensures ongoing ag-use through rigorous reporting standards.

While many of our current customers adopt solar grazing voluntarily, Vermont has a unique opportunity to make agricultural integration a standard component of our state's development pipeline, and we would support the creation of an incentive structure to do this.

We applaud the committee's desire to address land use at these sites in a proactive manner, and we would support seeing the Agency of Agriculture Food and Markets in a role within the §248 process that could drive further adoption of ag use. However, we must be intentional about site scale and design. We encourage the Committee to avoid language that incentivizes sites smaller than five acres. From an agricultural perspective, sites of this size are often unviable; the cost of transporting livestock, water, and equipment to a small parcel far outweighs the grazing benefit. Incentivizing sub-five-acre development could inadvertently lead to the fragmentation of our agricultural landscape, locking those parcels away from meaningful production for the life of the project.

Incentivizing agrivoltaics would allow the state to establish guidelines around site design to ensure compatibility with ag-use. Pitfalls of having no incentive structure are that developers may inadvertently hamper the effectiveness of farming at the sites with design choices made without agriculture in mind. Examples of this are the increasing use of “wildlife friendly fencing,” which leaves a 6-8” gap at the bottom of the perimeter fence for passage of animals. This effectively means that the site is no longer safe from predators. Another example is that absent agricultural goals, many developers may enhance their projects with wildflower heavy seed mixes. While we absolutely support pollinator health, many of these mixes lack the nutritional density required for livestock or prove unpalatable to grazing animals. With the right incentives, we do not have to choose between these goals. We can easily tailor seed mixes to provide both high pollinator value and high-quality forage if there is an incentive to do so.

If not for the availability of solar grazing, supporting a family living on our 200 acre farm without an outside job would be very difficult. With solar, we are able to access highly productive, fenced pastures for our animals and build a service business around this. Our future as farmers is not threatened by solar development in the way that it is from permanent conversion of farmland, i.e. housing or commercial development. We are able to provide long-term stewardship to the soils at these sites through managed rotational grazing, which can maintain their fertility and biological integrity. Our main constraint now is that there are a limited number of solar sites in Vermont currently built. Much of our grazing takes place in New York, and we would like to see more thoughtful solar development close to home.

Solar grazing is a unique model that could be a significant part of Vermont’s agricultural future. It provides opportunities for farmland access to new farmers and existing farmers to increase their land base, which increases their production capacity. Beyond this, the grazing fees provide a revenue that is not dependent on weather or commodity markets. Solar grazing can turn land access, which is perhaps the most difficult and expensive part of scaling a farming business, into a profit center.

Solar grazing is not theoretical, or a pilot program. It’s not a prediction of what could be done; it is being done now, at scale, and it is growing rapidly. We would encourage you to think of how it can be harnessed to benefit VT farming families like ours.

Thank you for your time.