

Sunnica Energy Farm

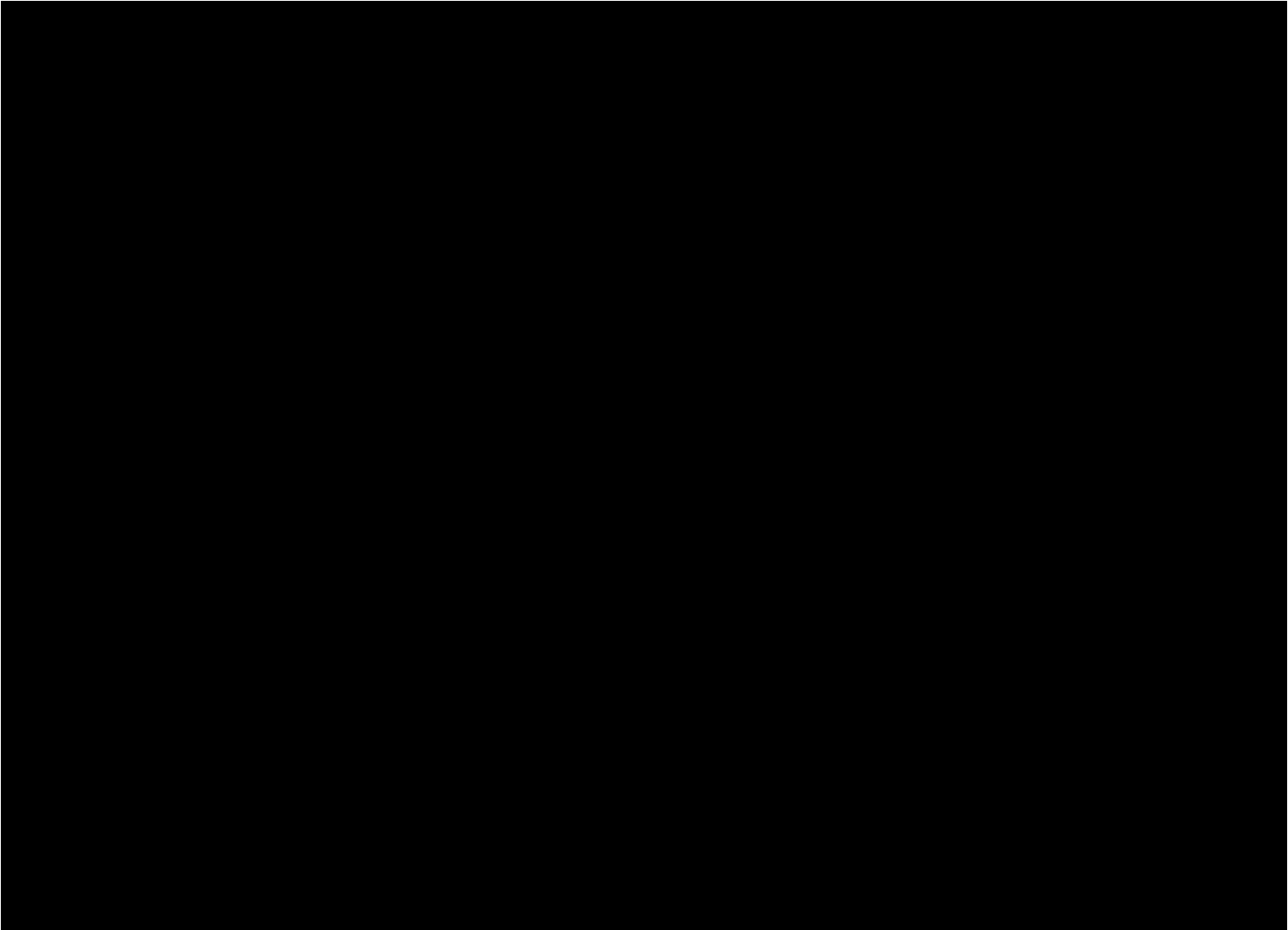
Planning Inspectorate Reference: EN010106

Written Representation – Jack Smith

Introduction

My name is Jack Smith and I am the [REDACTED]. AGW are a primarily cereal and potato production business based across South Cambridgeshire farming land from St Neots to Red Lodge with the majority of our operations on Fenland around Ely and on the Breckland edge soils around Newmarket many of which neighbour the site of the proposed Sunnica Energy Farm. We are involved in the management of around 1900ha of farmland and grow in excess of 11,000t of potatoes and 7,000t of combinable crops. We employ up to fifteen skilled operators at any one time and take great pride in our environmental stewardship work which sits alongside our productive agricultural operations.

I am fundamentally against the proposed Sunnica Energy Farm on the basis that it is very poor use of extremely productive agricultural land. Having farmed land directly neighbouring the proposed sites for several years now I can assure you that it is productive agricultural and horticultural land ideally suited to ensuring the food security of the United Kingdom.



Productivity of the surrounding farmland to the proposed Sunnica Energy Farm

Having farmed neighbouring land for AGW and similar land five miles away for Elveden Farms Ltd I know that these soil types are extremely productive. The table below of our 2022 potato yields, grown in one of the most challenging seasons in recent years, illustrates just that.

2022 Potato yields

Field	Variety	Final Planted Area	Est Yield (t/ha)	Yield (T)
The Heath	Maris Piper	9.11	64	581
Turners 22	Maris Piper	6.37	80	512
Havacre 1	Maris Piper	13.84	71	985

2022 Cereal yields

On neighbouring land to the proposed Energy farm we achieved an average of 7.6t/ha of full milling spec Zyatt winter wheat in 2022. This was despite one of the driest years on record. The farm can routinely grow more than 8t/ha in an average rainfall season.

Our farm also supports onions, maize and stubble turnips for sheep, as well as significant areas of countryside stewardship, in particular AB9 Winter Bird Food mixes which provide much needed food resources during the winter months for native farmland birds.

In my agricultural career so I have farmed many soil types ranging from heavy clays in Leicestershire, silt and organic fens in Cambridgeshire and light sandy loams in Suffolk. The huge advantage provided by the soils that the Sunnica Energy Farm is proposed on is their flexibility. They have many more working opportunities throughout the year allowing for a wider variety of crops that can be harvested throughout the year. Any structural issues can be easily addressed through mechanical or plant/rooting options. These soils tend not to have any great structure because of their high sand content but as a result they can be easily worked and damage can be easily rectified. They may not have the nutritional reservoirs of other soils with higher clay or silt content but as a result their nutritional status can be managed and tailored to specific crops. Organic manures can be applied in the spring to benefit crops because the land will dry sufficiently to allow early applications and therefore reduce the reliance on organic fertilisers. Fertiliser inputs are typically 15-20% lower per ton than on heavy fenland soils.

Weed burdens will be specific to individual farms but they are far less likely to suffer from blackgrass and ryegrass problems, two of the major UK weed problems that are threatening arable production on many soil types. I would plan on using at least 30% less herbicide on this soil type compared to fen soils for example.

Production challenges on neighbouring lowland peat soils

The significance of the soils in and around the Sunnica Energy Farm site for food production is further proven by the challenges that nearby lowland peat soils are facing due to the carbon reduction targets of government.

The UK's Government is committed to rewetting peatlands in order to help reduce carbon emissions but as a major producer of fresh produce where should this production go if the UK is to maintain or hopefully improve its self sufficiency in food production. One challenge laid to the producers is that production can be relocated to mineral soils that don't release the same levels of carbon when cultivated. Taking productive mineral soils out of production is not going to help the UK reduce its carbon footprint and it certainly wont help our industry move production toward mineral soils to help protect our lowland peats.

Daniel Baird Environmental Statement

This 17 page report is insufficient to back up the argument that the land is of poor agricultural quality and therefore not of high food productive value.

In particular I would argue with points:

5.4.1. If farmed well then a soil with sufficient root structures and organic matter shouldn't suffer persistent structural damage when wet. A growing crop will ensure the land does not suffer structural damage

5.4.2 Soil droughtiness can be overcome by crop and variety choice and good farming techniques. Point 5.4.3 agrees with this particularly if irrigation is used to mitigate droughtiness. As stated in the report winter fill reservoirs can also be used to 'reduce the risk of an irrigation shortfall'.

5.9.1. In my opinion if this land is taken out of productive agriculture, then it will not return resulting in permanent loss of productive land and high value, high quality vegetable crops. Point 5.9.6 itself highlights the extreme wastage that this Energy Farm will lead to. Large stores left unused, they will not be rented to other growers, irrigation infrastructure left redundant, it will not be used to transfer water elsewhere, irrigation licenses left unused, the Environment Agency are extremely unlikely to allow water to be traded.

Summary

Having studied Agriculture to a 1st Class Degree and gained 13 years of experience in the agricultural industry across a range of soil types and business ventures I feel I am well placed to offer an informed opinion on the productivity of the land that the Sunnica Energy Farm is proposed upon.

In my opinion, backed up by years of experience on adjacent land, this is productive agricultural land that warrants a minimum grading of 3a irrelevant of irrigation. With the addition of irrigation this land becomes some of the most versatile and productive in the UK allowing for all year round production of high yielding and high quality produce to contribute significantly to the UK's food self-sufficiency requirements.

I live and work in and around this proposed scheme and if successful it would be devastating for myself, my family and the communities around us. Prime agricultural land lost, food production reduced, jobs destroyed and industrial landscapes created out of natural countryside, countryside that future generations will have had taken away from them. This cumulative impact benefits no one but the financial investors behind the scheme.