

## **Change in rate for ground-mounted solar sows seeds of resentment**

*by Ann Slater, National Farmers Union Board Member*

Farmers are risk takers. We are also innovators. Therefore, it is not a surprise that we were quick to look at the risks and the potential benefits of investing in solar photo-voltaic units for our farms, under the microFIT program.

The risks were significant, not the least of which was trusting government to keep its price commitment. For many farmers the potential benefit of 80 cents/kWh made the investment worth pursuing. No longer. With last month's announcement by the Ontario Power Authority that the rate paid for electricity from ground-mounted solar PV projects will be decreased by 27% to 58.8 cents/kWh, the Ontario government showed once again how little it cares about farmers and rural communities when it comes to implementing the Green Energy Act.

The rate paid for roof-top solar PV units will remain at 80 cents. It is not likely a coincidence that roof-top models are the best option in urban areas. On many farms the buildings do not have the structural integrity, the correct orientation or the absence of trees necessary for roof-mounted units. Therefore, for farmers, ground-mounted units are a more realistic option.

When the OPA made its announcement on July 2, they had received 16,000 applications for microFITs since October 2009, with around 80% of these coming from farmers for ground-mounted solar. Only 2,300 of these applicants for ground-mounted solar are grandfathered under the original rate. The other 10,700 applicants for ground-mounted solar in the queue have been abandoned by their government. Among these applicants are farmers who sent in their applications in early February, who have made down-payments and at least some who paid Hydro One for a site inspection and hook-up.

The implementation of the Green Energy Act in Ontario has been dismissive and demeaning to rural Ontario, and the rate cut for ground-mounted solar continues this trend. Just like with industrial wind and solar developments, the consultation process was a sham. In July both the OPA and Minister of Energy and Infrastructure, Brad Duguid, stated that the new price structure would come into place shortly after the end of the one month consultation period. And just like with industrial wind developments, this rate change divides rural communities. A few farmers are grandfathered under the original rate, while our neighbours have been forced out of the microFIT program because the new rate is too low to take the risk of installing solar units.

So why is the Ontario government taking this action? The government says it is concerned about the backlash from energy consumers, as they see increases in their electricity bills from both the implementation of the Green Energy Act and the HST this summer. They no doubt want to be able to say they are doing something to keep the increases to a minimum.

Under the FIT and microFIT programs a wide range of renewable energy producers are signing contracts with OPA that are far above the amount energy users now pay for electricity in Ontario. Most of this money is going to a few large energy corporations, like Samsung and Enbridge. The OPA is not changing the rate paid to these large energy producers. Small solar units are owned by farmers themselves and most of the money that would have been paid to

the thousands of farmers who will now opt out of the program, would have stayed in our rural communities.

Once again it looks like the Ontario Green Energy Act is being implemented for the benefit of multinational energy corporations from outside the province. In addition, by lowering the rate for ground-mounted solar units, but not roof-mounted solar units, the government is creating further division and resentment between rural and urban Ontario. The OPA comment period is over, but there is still time to let MPPs, the Minister of Energy and Infrastructure and the Premier of Ontario know we will not accept their arrogant and divisive approach to implementing the Ontario Green Energy Act.

*Ann Slater is a board member of the National Farmers Union from Ontario. She farms near St. Marys, Ontario.*