



BY JOHANNA LEGGATT

IGSAW Farms principal Mark Wootton is well acquainted with bill shock.

Mr Wootton runs and owns a 3378-hectare mixed-grazing operation outside of Hamilton in the Western District, and three years ago his annual electricity bill was \$50,000. "We're not a dairy operation, so this was a lot of money to be paying," he told *Crop Gear*.

"Back in the day, before electricity became so expensive, we would have been looking at maybe \$30,000 a year.

"I didn't understand the renewable technology back then, or what to do about it at the stage, but I just knew that was a lot of bloody money to be paying."

So Mr Wootton took matters into his own hands, commissioning an energy audit of his farm.

He discovered that 60 to 70 per cent of his energy costs were from the electric pumps that moved water from his dams, and so he turned to solar as a solution.

"I started replacing the old pumps with solar-powered pumps, which have a pay-back period of about four years," Mr Wootton said.

"I also put in solar-powered water heating, which lowered the bills by 25 per cent, and we have recently started adding solar panels to the roofs of the farm buildings."

Mr Wootton has placed 9.8kW of panels on

his house, another 9.8kW on his office, which also powers the feedlot, as well as panels on accommodation quarters for his farm staff.

"I would say that once the pay-back period passes, we will be saving about 50 to 70 per cent on our previous energy costs," Mr Wootton said.

"My next step is to invest in some battery storage because we're producing a lot of solar during the day that could be stored and used later."

Mr Wootton is not the only farmer to embrace solar in a bid to combat soaring electricity prices.

PRODUCERS SEE GREEN
OVER RISING ENERGY PRICES

SOLAR SAVERS

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A survey late last year by Agriculture Victoria and the Victorian Farmers' Federation found that the cost and reliability of power were the main energy concerns on Victorian farms.

Some 40 per cent of farmers generated renewable energy on-farm and more than half kept a back-up energy supply.

"You see, it's not just the cost but the reliability of energy supply that is the issue," broad-acre farmer and Victorian Farmers Federation president David Jochinke, said.

"I am constantly getting told that electricity interruptions have increased in recent times." Clean Energy Council executive general

POWER PLAN

PRODUCERS are being urged to make use of the Victorian Government's free on-farm energy assessment and grants program that subsidises cheaper energy technology for farmers with sky-high bills.

The on-farm assessments, which are being run by Agriculture Victoria as part of its \$30 million Agriculture Energy Investment Plan, are available to eligible primary producers until March 2020 or until the fund runs dry. Jigsaw Farms principal Mark Wootton, who sits on the independent advisory panel that helps implement the program, said he wished the scheme had been available a few years ago when he was investing in solar to cut his own energy bills.

"You have to have an energy bill of more than \$8000 a year to be eligible, but if you meet that requirement, then you can get a free energy assessment," he said.

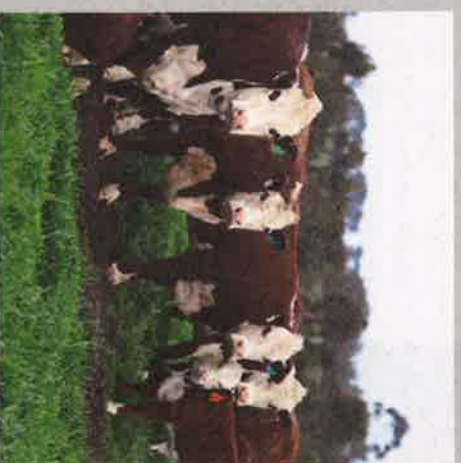
"You will be provided with a report on your energy use, and given a range of no-cost or low-cost options that could make a big difference."

Mr Wootton also pointed out that, post energy-assessment, eligible farmers can apply for grants that will see the Victorian Government match dollar for dollar any capital outlay on technology to help with high energy costs.

"You might only upgrade your hot water to solar, but if you're a dairy farmer that can make a big difference," Mr Wootton said.

"And you effectively get 50 per cent off."

DETAILS: [AGRICULTURE.VIC.GOV.AU/
AGRICULTURE/FARM-MANAGEMENT/
AGRICULTURE-ENERGY-INVESTMENT-PLAN](http://AGRICULTURE.VIC.GOV.AU/AGRICULTURE/FARM-MANAGEMENT/AGRICULTURE-ENERGY-INVESTMENT-PLAN)



manager for industry development, Natalie Collard, said farmers were often leading the way by using renewables to decrease electricity and gas costs.

"Dairy farmers, in particular, have embraced solar power, which works well because a lot of their operations align pretty well with the times when the sun is shining," Ms Collard said.

"Egg producers Pace Fann have invested \$3.2 million across its NSW properties over six months last year, and some pig farmers have also been investing in bioenergy projects.

"Many farmers also enjoy a financial windfall from hosting wind turbines, which helps them

Power pack: Mark Wootton turned to solar power after an audit found his electric pumps were costing up to 70 per cent of his \$50,000 annual electricity bill.

drought-proof their properties and get through the lean years."

Mr Jochinke said while many farmers were supportive of renewables, their main concern was investing in technology that kept rising energy prices in check.

"Ten years ago, power was very cheap and now it's very expensive," Mr Jochinke said.

"Whether we use coal or renewables, getting the price down is our focus.

"We have seen far too many industries be pushed to the wall because of higher energy costs and we can't let it get any more expensive."

