

# Harvesting the sun

## Iowa County farm's solar systems producing electricity

By Jim Massey

Editor

**RIDGEWAY** — Penny Koerner said she thinks it's ironic when people pull into her driveway in a \$40,000 sport utility vehicle and ask what the payback is on the solar systems they have installed on their farm.

"The first question is always, 'What's the payback?'" Penny said. "You don't drive that SUV out of the (car dealership) lot and ask what the payback is. We're paying ahead for the kids, we're not paying back."

Penny and Jerry Koerner operate Sun Harvest Farm near Ridgeway in Iowa County.



Penny Koerner



Jerry Koerner

In the past five years they have installed two solar photovoltaic systems, a solar hot water system, improved the efficiency of their 100-year-old farmhouse and built and installed a hot air collector to provide heat in their barn workshop.

Sun Harvest Farm was the last of four stops on a Nov. 13 southwestern Wisconsin Homegrown Renewable Energy Bus Tour. Other stops were the Montfort Wind Farm, where wind energy and the low-carbon fuel standard were the topics of conversation; Meister Cheese in Muscoda, where the plant burns 27 tons of locally sourced wood chips a day to heat and power its plant; and Cardinal Glass in Mazomanie, where 54 employees were recently hired to make photovoltaic solar panels.

Margaret Krome, policy program director at the Michael Fields Agricultural Institute in East Troy, has been pushing policies to promote homegrown renewable energy production. Some of the policies are being considered by the state Legislature as part of the Clean Energy Jobs Act. "We see examples all around the state of how



Photo by Jim Massey

Homegrown Renewable Energy bus tour participants examined one of the solar panels last week at Jerry and Penny Koerner's farm near Ridgeway in Iowa County.

renewable energy is good for the environment and helps businesses and creates jobs," Krome said. "It's really important that as we come up with (policy) strategies, that they are strategies which enrich the state, not impoverish the state."

Krome said she spent time at Farm Technology Days this summer talking with farmers who were interested in installing renewable energy projects on their farms. Unfortunately, the financial incentives don't always work for farmers.

"Some of the farmers we talked to understood what

it's going to take, but they said 'How are we going to finance it?'" she said. "They said if they had a predictable payback, they would be completely interested in going forward."

Krome said the state needs a "renewable energy payback policy" that is predictable and makes sense for those interested in making the investments.

"It's the policy that's going to help our state help individual businesses, communities and residents actually generate the electricity to move ourselves forward faster," she said. "And isn't that what our

**The Koerners welcome people to visit their farm to view their renewable-energy systems. For more information, call 608-924-3091.**

state really needs?"

Krome told tour participants that she and others might be calling on them when the Clean Energy Jobs Act is debated in the state Capitol.

"When that happens, we would like you to write letters and make phone calls," Krome said. "This is appropriate, good for ratepayers and it's good for the state budget. But it's going to take pushing."

The Koerners, who are in their mid 60s, retired three years ago and began working earnestly on their renewable energy projects. Jerry, a U.S. Navy veteran, said he spent six years in the Navy's nuclear power program, so he was familiar with the kind of mechanisms it would take to make solar projects work on their farm.

He said he did some of

the work himself — such as digging trenches and pouring cement — to save money. The out-of-pocket cost of the solar hot water system — after a \$3,000 Focus on Energy grant and a \$2,000 federal tax credit — was \$15,000, while each of the solar electric systems cost about \$14,000 after grants and tax credits.

Between the two solar-electric systems, they generate a little more electricity than they use. The excess is sold back to Alliant Energy.

The second photovoltaic system — with a guaranteed return of 25 cents per kilowatt hour on the excess electricity they generate — has the potential to produce about an 11 percent annual rate of return.

"We lost a big chunk of money in our (retirement accounts) this year," Jerry said. "Our thought was what we lost in a couple of months, we could have put in several (solar) systems. Once you put a system in, the (electricity) rates are going to go up and the payback will increase."

"It's not for everybody. But if you think you're going to live 20 or 30 years,

this is not a bad thing to do with a little of your retirement funds."

Penny said that when they got married five years ago, their philosophies about what to do on their farm meshed well.

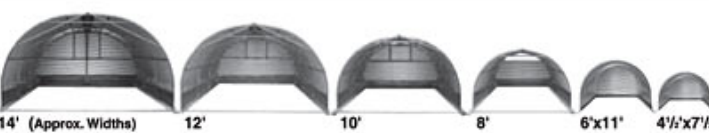
"We both had this belief system to not pollute the planet any more than it already was," she said. "This is reducing our footprint. That's a huge thing for us."

The Homegrown Renewable Energy campaign has four main initiatives: creation of a statewide Biomass Energy Crop Reserve Program; formation of a program to encourage more renewable fuel use in schools and other institutions; establishment of a low-carbon fuels standard; and creation of a renewable energy buyback program that would reward energy producers, including farmers, for putting power on the grid.

The campaign grew out of the Governor's Global Warming Task Force created a couple of years ago.

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