

**DID YOU KNOW?**

At a given site, a modern wind turbine annually produces 180 times more electricity and at less than half the cost per kWh than its equivalent 20 years ago.

**PLANNING**

Beyond choosing the right project and project structure, possibly the biggest (and most notorious) aspect of setting up a renewable energy plant is planning. Local and national newspapers today are littered with stories about acrimonious disputes between landowners and local communities over unpopular plans for renewables projects, and navigating the planning process is a key consideration.

"Generally speaking," says Philip, "small-scale projects that landowners are doing for themselves are unlikely to have difficulties with planning; it's the larger commercial scale plants such as wind farms and large biomass and AD plants that are more likely to run into opposition. So getting the community on side as much as possible is vital."

"If a project may be controversial, the last thing you want to do is simply drop it in front of everyone and see what happens," says Nick. "Community engagement at the right time is critical and our planning team is experienced in local community involvement, exhibitions and so on, with a strong track record of delivery. Involving communities, while difficult, is important to do because you might find you've got supporters out there who can help the process."

**GRID CONNECTION**

One factor that can entirely kill off a project, if not properly scoped out, is the need to get it connected to the grid. "As a general rule," says Stuart, "if the nearest connection point to a proposed project is more than one kilometre away, the cost of building a connection is likely to prove prohibitive."

For Nick, the grid connection is so fundamental to the success or otherwise of a

**CASE STUDY**

*R.N. Padfield & Sons is a family-run farming business, currently in its third generation on the 800-acre Hawthorns Estate, Staunton, Gloucestershire (hawthornsestate.co.uk)*

"I installed fixed solar panels to supply the main farmhouse about a year ago and have recently installed two sets of tracking units that follow the sun," says farmer Chris Padfield. "I chose solar panels because we haven't got any water and getting planning permission for wind turbines can be tricky. From the fixed panels I have 4kW coming into my house and the return on the capital invested is a good 9%. I've found fitting the new tracker panels to our rental office units works best, as the majority of the power used there is during daylight hours, when the panels are most effective. I would recommend solar panels – they're my pride and joy, although you need to make sure you have a good quality three-phase line nearby so you can feed back into the grid. The Feed-in Tariffs are likely to decrease in April 2012, so my dilemma is whether to buy more now and get a higher tariff or wait a couple of years to see if the technology improves. I think I'm going to wait, to see which type of panel works best."

project, he says it should be the first step in any new venture. "I wouldn't advise undertaking any planning before ensuring there is a grid connection available. It must be checked out thoroughly, both in terms of ability to connect into the grid, and also in terms of the cost."

**FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS**

Assuming issues such as grid connections, planning and funding can be negotiated, the renewables options open to farmers and landowners are numerous and rewarding, if approached correctly. The options have opened up further following the details of the RHI, revealed in March. This Phase 1 announcement applies to non-domestic installations and to eligible plant installed after 15 July 2009. Phase 2, to be announced next year, will extend the incentive to domestic installations and additional technologies.

In both cases, and like FITs, the RHI offers the producers of heat from renewable sources a guaranteed payment for every kilowatt-hour of useable heat produced. The details of the scheme, which comes into force in June 2011, were recently announced and for Philip will offer still more opportunities for rural landowners.

"It will lead to massive growth in further renewable development, because it will make biomass, CHP and other technologies such as anaerobic digestion much more financially viable," he says. "It's a complicated area, particularly in sizing plants to marry on-site heat and power use with intelligent siting considerations to maximise revenue both from the incentives and from potential third party off-takers. We believe it's definitely going to be big because, within our landowner and farming communities, there is large access to the resources needed to run these plants and we have one of the most innovative and entrepreneurial rural industries in the world."

For Philip, the current and likely growth in renewables is a phenomenon that will turn out to be more than just a market fad, because through FITs and the RHI it now makes economic sense to invest in these technologies. "For the first time they don't just make sense from an environmental point of view, they also make sense financially." ■

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