

MicroFIT: Who's in Charge?

By Don McCabe, Vice President of the Ontario Federation of Agriculture

Since it launched last year, Ontario's vision for a microFIT energy program has generated a significant amount of attention from thousands of farm families eager to participate in Ontario's green energy platform with 25,000 applications in to date. It was a chance for farmers to earn a sustainable income on their farm year-round and would generate much needed renewable energy to feed Ontario's energy grid.

That vision has since become a fragmented program with a lack of follow through from those in charge.

Many farmers participating in the microFIT program were recently contacted by Hydro One only to learn their approved projects could not be connected to the grid because of capacity concerns. But is that the full scope of the problem? The answer is still unclear.

The Minister of Energy, the Honourable Brad Duguid, indicated in a recent article that the problems lie more with the number of applications outpacing upgrades to the system in certain areas. While the province is working diligently to address it, it's quickly becoming a serious concern for more than 20,000 applicants with only 3,700 currently attached. The issue extends from those just starting the application process, to those receiving a site visit from the Hydro One saying "Yes, everything is in order," only to receive an email a few days later saying "No, it's not."

The OFA applauds Minister Duguid for commenting on the issue in a responsible manner and for his commitment to upgrade the electricity transmission and distribution system. But why it has taken this long to address it? One would expect the Ministry of Energy, Ontario Power Authority and Hydro One would have been aware of the available transmission capacity even before the microFIT program was launched. The thought that this wasn't a red flag during the development stage is a major concern.

It must be noted that a 10kW installation provides energy easily consumed by six average households. You can buy a generator at the local hardware store equal in power. So how can a provincial infrastructure be so overwhelmed?

The OFA is committed to thoroughly investigating the root causes and will ask the tough questions needed in order to find out the real issues behind it. Once complete, we will recommend fair solutions to repairing the microFIT program for the benefit of our members and all farm families that are waiting for answers. We will also look for reassurances from the government that future programs will undergo rigorous feasibility studies and effective consultation processes to avoid this kind of poorly-planned and poorly-managed problem in the future.

A clear statement of timing is needed to ensure that each farm family waiting for next steps has a better understanding of what to expect. Nobody likes staying home for a service person who never shows up while costs keep rising on an investment.

Farmers are ready to get connected to an effective program that can help supply renewable power for the entire province. Doing so would invest in much needed infrastructure, reduce the incidence of power interruptions and may address some stray voltage issues in the process. We need viable, and more importantly, predictable opportunities for those farmers who want to become involved in Ontario's power generation. An effective program that includes an upgraded transmission and distribution system is long overdue for all.