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OTHER VOICES

Conserve ag resources with solar energy

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The U.S. Department of Agriculture recently announced it will discourage the use of federal funding for solar installations on farmland, stating, "Farmland should be for agricultural production, not solar production." That implies a divide between agriculture and clean energy — a divide that simply doesn't exist.

As a lifelong Iowa farmer, I see it differently. Solar energy isn't a threat to agriculture. It's the next evolution of it.

For generations, farming has fueled our communities — feeding families, supporting livestock, and supplying raw materials for energy. Agriculture was our first energy economy, producing biofuels like ethanol and biodiesel to help power the nation. Today, that legacy continues — not just through liquid fuels, but by hosting clean, renewable energy sources like solar.

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Ray Graesser is a lifelong farmer from Corning, Iowa.

This isn't a break from tradition; it's a continuation of agriculture's essential role in powering our future.

Iowa now ranks 1st in the nation for energy competitiveness, according to a recent report from the Common Sense Institute. The state's clean energy growth has boosted reliability and affordability, while supporting rural communities. Iowa's transition to clean energy has been smart and sustainable, giving the state a competitive advantage and making it stronger.

Farming has always been about resourcefulness — using our land in the most efficient and sustainable way possible. But today's farmers face major challenges: climate extremes, volatile markets, and rising input costs. A solar lease on marginal or less-productive acres offers a reliable source of income that helps keep the rest of the farm in food and feed production. It doesn't replace crops — it reinforces the farm's economic foundation.

That stable income can mean the difference between handing down a family farm or selling it off. In that sense, solar isn't an alternative to agriculture — it's a lifeline that helps preserve it.

The USDA's policy also overlooks a more serious and permanent threat: the irreversible loss of farmland to development. In 2022 alone, the U.S. lost about 1.9 million acres of farmland, mostly to suburban sprawl, according to the USDA. Since 2015, that loss has averaged 1.8 million acres a year. Roads, homes, and warehouses pave over land that will never grow food again. Solar, on the other hand, is temporary and reversible. Panels can be removed, and the land returned to agriculture. In the meantime, it can support grazing, pollinator habitats, or soil-restoring cover crops.

We should be looking at ways to expand the value of our farmland — not restrict it. Clean energy on farms is an extension of our stewardship — a way to conserve land, support farm families, and contribute to a broader energy transition without sacrificing our core mission of feeding people.

No farmer I know wants to cover Iowa's topsoil with solar panels. What we want is flexibility — the ability to make smart, balanced decisions that keep our farms viable, our land productive, and our families on the land.

Solar energy is not a departure from farming. It's part of the path forward.

Ray Gaesser is a lifelong farmer from Corning and chair of the Iowa Conservative Energy Forum, a nonprofit organization that advocates for clean, affordable and reliable energy statewide.