

# BILL SUHR: SOLAR IS FUELING OUR LOCAL FOOD MOVEMENT

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*Editor's note: This commentary is by Bill Suhr, who is the owner/orchardist of Champlain Orchards in Shoreham.*

**E**ighteen years ago, I bought an apple orchard in Shoreham with the idea that we could grow food with a conscience. Today, Champlain Orchards does just that with our locally grown, ecologically managed apples and other tree fruits. We are committed to selling at least 90 percent of our products in Vermont or within 30 miles of our border, and the local purchase of food is our business and a contributor to our success.

As our business began to grow, I was constantly reminded by how dependent we were on outside energy systems. It takes a lot of electricity to refrigerate, pack and press millions of pounds of apples. Our controlled atmosphere refrigeration and storage facility allows us to sell our products in local stores year-round and reduces our off-season reliance on international apples, but it increases our energy consumption through its constant operation. While it's great to be able to go to the grocery store and see Vermont apples on the shelves, a lot of energy has gone into getting them there.

That energy usage isn't consistent with the principles of ecologically grown local food. That's why we decided to become fully self-sufficient and generate our own energy, so our customers know that when they buy an apple from our farm, even the energy behind the apple is 100 percent local. We want to ensure that, just as we're not burning carbon by sending our apples across the globe, we're also not shipping our electricity in from somewhere else and passing that burden on to others.

Three years ago, we built two new orchards on our land, but rather than planting apple trees, we installed 24 solar panels with the help of AllEarth Renewables. Located on low-lying areas of the land that would only otherwise be used for pasture, these two 60kW orchards now allow us to generate 100 percent of our own electricity. With Vermont-harvested sun, we are now managing 200 acres of fruit trees and storing and processing millions of pounds of apples annually. Our local products are more local than ever.

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That's good for business. Our power generation offsets our usage, allowing us to get through the busy fall season without increasing our costs. And our electrical power budget is more predictable, as we now have stable long-term energy costs.

It's very important to us that our customers see these panels and are able to interact with them. In addition to educating the public about local fruit and its production, we can now welcome folks to learn about solar energy first-hand. Our sun-tracking panels have become an integral part of our working landscape.

Harvesting solar energy is an intuitive process for farmers. We're in the business of using the sun to grow our crops, and harvesting its electricity is a logical extension. Perhaps best of all, it's a far more profitable use of certain farm acreage which isn't suitable for tree fruit production and would otherwise not be used.

The notion of solar energy as part of our local food system is one that I hope lawmakers will keep in mind as they debate renewable energy in Montpelier this year. If we really want to show Vermont's commitment to the local food movement and our local economy, we all should take every step possible to expand opportunities for more businesses to become 100 percent self-sufficient and have access to solar energy. With the help of organizations like AllEarth Renewables, we can make solar an integral part of our local landscape. We're good at harvesting crops; now it's up to citizens and lawmakers to facilitate more opportunities to harvest the sun.