LIFE HACKS

Sheep Grazing below Minnesota Solar Panels Are Helping Pollinators Thrive

By bestfolkmedicine · 12/07/2021 · 2 min read



Under the solar panels in Minnesota, there are green wildflower-studded pastures where a bunch of sheep graze and there's a chance that biodiversity may recover.

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While the sheep are grazing through the tall prairie grass, butterflies and other insects visit the native flowers growing there.

The pastoral setting isn't a restored prairie, but a solar installation in rural Chisago County. It's one of the 16 in Minnesota run by Enel Green Power, a global company for renewable energy-based in Rome.

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Solar Farms in Minnesota: More than Electricity Production

These solar farms in Minnesota are used for more than electricity production. Rather than turf, bare ground, or gravel, the land beneath these installations was seeded with pollinator-friendly grasses, wildflowers, and sedges.

Now, they've been transformed into rich native habitats for insects, bees, and butterflies in a landscape that's in need of them.

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The state agencies like the Department of Natural Resources and the Board of Soil and Water Resources encourage these plantings at solar sites as a policy.

Rob Davis, the director of the Center for Pollinators in Energy at the St. Paul non-profit Fresh Energy, says that this is one of the quickest growing trends in solar on a national level and better than turfgrass.

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The state pioneered the standards concerning pollinator-friendly vegetation at solar sites. It's similar to the ones for organic products, following legislation in 2016 that averts greenwashing or fake environment-friendly claims.

The Results Are Exciting

The St. Paul Monarch Joint Venture is among the groups that are studying the results.

The national monitoring coordinator, Laura Lukens, has visited several Enel sites and takes inventories of the quality and amount of milkweed and flowering plants, and also tracks the native pollinators that are using them.

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She also explores the difference between the habitats that are growing under the panels vs. the ones growing in between. Until now, Lukens says, what she's seen is exciting.

She actually saw monarchs breeding at every site she went to!

What's more, this vegetation also cools down the solar panels and boosts the electrical output, as the long-rooted perennials help in the soil rebuilding, according to Enel's regional manager, Jacob

Fehlen.

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One of their smaller sites, the array, was built on 25 acres of converted farmland, and 16,632 panels facing the sun were installed. They generate sufficient megawatts to provide power for more than 600 homes nearby.

Like all of Enel sites in Minnesota, this one was seeded with a pollinator-friendly mix by Otsego's MNL.

They also added herds of sheep to help in vegetation management. These are Katahdin sheep-a variety that doesn't need shearing. They control dead material, reduce the risk of fire hazards, and encourage new growth.

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