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Contact: Kayla Koether

Organization: Winneshiek Energy District

Phone: (563)-880-6873

Email: kayla@energydistrict.org

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Farm Solar Workshop Draws Farmers, Shares Insights

A farmer's schedule often depends on the weather, but farmers flocked to the Farm Solar Workshop at Iowa's Dairy Center on April 10th despite the sunny, mild forecast. Perhaps the sun fueled exceptional attendance at the event, which focused on farm solar applications.

"The interest far exceeded my expectations," said Kayla Koether, Ag Energy Coordinator with the Winneshiek Energy District, "We initially planned on 50 attendees, but we surpassed 100!" The workshop was standing-room only and filled with farmers, while organization representatives, local solar installers, and interested media rounded out attendance.

Hosted by the Iowa's Dairy Center, Northeast Iowa Community College, and the Winneshiek Energy District, the workshop gave a comprehensive overview of solar on farms. Andy Johnson, Winneshiek Energy District's Director, shared the logistics of installing solar and explained the basics of solar PV (solar electric) and solar thermal (solar hot water) technologies. Johnson also emphasized the financial importance of pursuing energy efficiency measures in conjunction with installing renewables, and talked about the Farm Energy Planning Program available with the district. Kelly Brickley, CPA of Hacker, Nelson & Co., P.C., then followed with an explanation of the tax incentives available through 2016 and farm depreciation schedules.

A farmer panel and extensive Q&A was the highlight of the workshop, and included Carlton Kjos of Decorah, Roger Egeland of Ossian, and Lyle Luzum of Calmar. Carlton and Lyle discussed their solar PV panels, which generate electricity for their facilities, and Roger shared his experiences with his solar thermal installation, which heats water for his dairy. Carlton said he had multiple reasons for putting in solar, which included, "wanting to use a clean source of energy...that doesn't emit carbons" and "to save some money in the long run." Additional producers in attendance added more personal experience with on-farm renewable energy and energy efficiency options.

With the plummeting price of solar, versatile farm applications, and other incentives, presenters emphasized that solar installations are not only a good way to lower CO2 emissions, they are a smart farm investment. "The time is now, and the benefits to farmers' pocketbooks and the local economy are tangible," said Johnson.

The workshop was followed by an expo of local solar installers, many of whom received training through continuing education opportunities at NICC. Kyra Bellrichard, Business and Community Solutions Program Manager at NICC, commented, "Having provided training for many local solar PV installers over the years, we're proud to be part of this transition to local clean energy and witness its positive impact on our rural economy."

Exhibitors included Massman Construction, Go Solar, Perry Novak Electric, Decorah Electric, Blake Electric, Twin Oak Energy Solutions, Vick's Plumbing and Heating, and Iowa Wind and Solar.

Given the high interest and attendance at this workshop, Koether says the Winneshiek Energy District will be working with partners to arrange more learning opportunities for farmers and ag businesses, including field days and workshops. "If today was any indication, farmers are engaged. They want to see if solar will work for their operation, and want to learn more, come rain or shine."

Those interested in further information can find a video recording of the workshop at <http://energydistrict.org/projects/farm-solar-workshop/>, or contact Kayla Koether at (563)-382-4207 or kayla@energydistrict.org.