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SOLAR MAKES SENSE

NIGEL HOPKINS

AGL’s investments in renewable energy and its commitment to transition to lower emission fuel sources by 2050 have been influential for environmentally-minded winemakers.

As has the potential of lower-cost electricity at more predictable prices to help enable a more cost-effective business future.

“AGL was founded in 1837 and it’s our corporate history that many winemakers can identify with, since they are often from well-established, long-running family-owned companies,” says Doug Landfear, AGL’s Commercial Solar chief. “In addition, we’ve been one of the leaders in the development of renewable energy projects in Australia, first with hydro and wind, and most recently with two of the largest solar power plants in the country at Nyngan and Broken Hill. Our investments and track record in renewable energy gives us enormous experience and insights in the development of energy solutions for business customers.”

While solar energy is well established in the residential market, it has only recently begun emerging as an attractive option for businesses.

“Until recently, the financial case for businesses to go solar was not very compelling. But now that picture has changed. The cost of solar has fallen at the same time electricity prices have risen and we now find many customers can achieve a simple payback of three-four years on their solar systems,” explains Landfear.

Then there is also increasing awareness of the impact of climate change. As part of its commitment to customers and to a renewable energy future, AGL has established a New Energy division, which Landfear says brings together experts in solar, lighting and energy storage who are focused on innovation and technology to help meet consumers’ energy needs and expectations as the energy landscape transforms. One innovative

project the New Energy team is currently involved with is creating the world’s largest residential solar virtual power plant which, once completed, will include 1000 connected batteries installed in metropolitan Adelaide homes, and will have an output equivalent to a 5MW solar peaking plant.

Landfear says that solar energy is a perfect fit for winemakers: “It all starts with the grapes. Winemakers know that their livelihood depends on good soil, clean water and lots of sunshine. As stewards of the land, wine companies have a vested interest in ensuring the sustainability of their businesses.

“But they are also manufacturing businesses and need a stable power supply, so we take the time to understand their unique energy requirements and develop a solar solution which optimises technical and financial outcomes.”

Aesthetics are also important. “We know that visual element is important to

wineries, so we design our systems not just from a functional aspect, but also for their overall appearance. We work closely with our customers to make sure that we minimise disruption during construction and are mindful of delivering a system that complements the overall aesthetics of the location.

“Commercial solar now stacks up. We’ve seen a real change even just over the past year with people now much more inclined to look to how they can reduce their carbon emissions and display their green credentials to their customers. We’re helping businesses to not only lower their electricity bills but also to become more sustainable,” he says.



Kicking goals with power options

“It pretty well had everything a winemaker could want except for an affordable source of power.”

SPOTLIGHT ON ROB DOLAN

ROB Dolan is no stranger to kicking goals. As a Port Adelaide ruckman the “six-foot-six” tall Dolan once played in two South Australian premiership sides when, as he says, he was “a lot slimmer and trimmer”. He grew up on a vineyard in the Riverland, picking grapes and other fruit as a kid, and after spending a vintage at Rouge Homme in Coonawarra he returned to university and studied winemaking.

He started kicking goals of another kind when he moved to the Yarra Valley, first as senior winemaker at Yarra Ridge and managing Victoria’s Mildara Blass operations, then with two highly successful Yarra Valley brands - Sticks - after his footy nickname - and Punt Road.

In 2011, by now with some 20 years’ experience making wines in the Yarra Valley, he purchased the former Accolade Wines Yarra Burn winery and launched the range of wines bearing his name.

This was regarded as a state of the art winery, reportedly “equipped with every toy a winemaker could possibly hope for” and just 30 minutes from Melbourne’s CBD. Dolan describes it as “100 acres in the middle of suburbia”, a former farm now with just “a couple of acres” of vineyard, a restaurant and organic vegetable garden, cheese making facility, a micro brewery - even, for a while, the home of Four Pillars gin. And, of course, a winery crushing up to 1700 tonnes annually.

It pretty well had everything a winemaker could want except for an affordable source of power.

“After the blackout in South Australia I decided to make a move,” Dolan says. Added to this was the rapidly increasing cost of electricity in Victoria and the realisation it was time to consider becoming more self-sufficient and “doing the right thing by society in general and heading down the green path. It seemed the right time to make some changes.”

He considered three options but chose AGL “because they’re heading down the same path”. At first the figures didn’t add up but “with the changes in the power prices it became much more logical.” Dolan also wanted the ability to add battery storage in the future and liked the prospect of dealing with “a bigger player who had the strength”.

He chose a system that would deliver a modest 99.84 kW, resulting in an estimated reduction in grid energy consumption of 28 per cent using AGL’s solar Smart Plan with zero upfront cost and a seven-year power purchase agreement. Taking advantage of the extended services AGL can provide, Dolan’s organisation is now changing all his lighting to LED fittings.

“The savings initially won’t be much,” Dolan says, “but after the third year it will really start to pay back.”



LEADING BY EXAMPLE

SPOTLIGHT ON ZILZIE WINES

“Facing increased consumption and the rising cost of electricity, we wanted to proactively move towards renewable energy resources.”



FOR Zilzie Wines managing director Andrew Forbes going solar was an opportunity to lead by example and build on his winery's well-established environmental credentials.

It made a lot of sense financially: "It is not often these days you get presented with an opportunity that's too good to refuse," he says.

The Forbes family settled near Red Cliffs, 22km south of Mildura in the early 1900s. As sizeable winemakers and grape growers moved into the area in the 1980s the family converted a small portion of their property to vineyards. Today they have one of the largest family-owned holdings of vineyards in Australia.

A brief winemaking foray by Forbes inspired expansion and a change in direction for the family business, with its winery built in 1999 and first vintage the following year.

"Whilst there are the obvious environmental and economic needs for change," Forbes says, "as fourth generation custodians of the land, my brother Steven and I are committed to leaving the property in a healthy and sustainable state for our kids."

"Electricity is one of the major operating costs of running a winery, as temperature

control is crucial to maintaining the quality of our wines, and having just made some large capital investments to increase productivity and improve efficiencies we could see our energy consumption increasing."

As one of Australia's largest winemakers, going solar with a 1.06MW ground and roof-mount system made sense. "Facing increased consumption and the rising cost of electricity, we wanted to proactively move towards renewable energy resources," he says.

Forbes says AGL was fantastic: "In keeping with AGL's commitment to investing in renewable energy, their knowledge of solar was exemplary, and they took the time to understand our business needs. What AGL provided was not an off-the-shelf system and they use reputable brand components that are high quality and reliable."

What sealed the deal, Forbes says, was that his Smart Plan contract is for 10 years, while the system life expectancy is 25 years: "That means 15 years of opportunity for further expansion, perhaps adding battery storage. It has very exciting potential."

COMMITTED TO SUSTAINABILITY



SPOTLIGHT ON YALUMBA

WHEN people at Yalumba talk about sustainability they don't just mean a healthy environment, although that's among their top considerations. It's also about achieving a balance between social, economic and environmental issues, and this is reflected in the values of one of Australia's most prestigious family-owned wineries.

When asked why Yalumba decided to go solar, managing director Nick Waterman said: "There are numerous reasons, but first and foremost is it's based on our philosophy and commitment to sustainability. This is embedded in our culture and goes back to our founder Samuel Smith who named the business Yalumba, which means 'all the land around' in the local indigenous dialect of the day.

"When we plant vineyards we match the footprint with natural vegetation to both improve the biodiversity within, but also to reduce our carbon footprint.

"There is also a compelling commercial case, especially as our electricity costs have increased by more than 80 per cent in the last two years. With more than 5500 panels now installed, we are able to supply approximately 18 per cent of the power requirements of the winery."

The 1.39MW solar system installation at Yalumba's Barossa Valley winery is also one of the largest commercial installations in South Australia. AGL's solar system will generate approximately 2050MWh of renewable energy annually, equivalent to

the electricity consumed in 410 average South Australian homes, and offset approximately 1080 tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions every year for an expected 25 years.

"The process of going solar was quite simple in terms of financial outcomes," Waterman says. "The challenge for us was working out how to connect the large amount of solar to our existing electrical and mechanical infrastructure. Thankfully the AGL solar team had all the right people on board to navigate this task well. They also put a lot of effort into choosing the right sub-contractors so that the processes required on site ran smoothly. We are very happy with the end result."

Waterman says the decision to make the solar move with AGL was partly because of their existing energy contract relationship, but also "because of the hardware they use and their in-depth analysis of our electrical load profile."

"This gave us the confidence in achieving a positive financial outcome with very low risk. AGL being a company more than 160 years old, as we are, also gave us confidence in partnering in solar for the next 10 years or more."



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YALUMBA
AUSTRALIA'S OLDEST FAMILY OWNED WINERY