



More than 50 sheep act as "living lawnmowers" at KDC Solar in Vineland. The sheep moved to the field on May 20.

STAFF PHOTO/JOE LAMBERTI

# Sheep are watts up at solar farm

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VINELAND — Fifty sheep walking into a solar power field is no joke to Rob Simalchik, who counts the savings since the fenced-in facility started doubling as pasture.

The sheep roam freely, grazing on red clover and rye. On sunny days, they stay under the solar panels to eat and snooze.

The sheep, a domestic type called "Katahdin hair," are too short — and too disinterested — to interfere with the hundreds of automated solar panels. The flock's arrival about two months ago meant the end of using a lawn service contractor.

"I couldn't be happier the way it's working out," Simalchik said during a tour last week. "I'm not ever going to cut this site again. Plus, now it's like stuff is naturally growing and germinating. Hopefully, we can keep this replenished pasture type of deal. This exceeded my

expectations."

The sheep belong to Julie Bishop, a Franklin Township resident who otherwise keeps them on her farm about 4 miles away. The sheep moved to the field on May 20, originally as a flock of 70. The herd was reduced when it became clear fewer could do the job.

"To me, it's kind of cool," Bishop said. "The combination of old and new. Technology and agriculture. I've been really, really into the environment, and recycling, and things like that. So to me, it seemed wasteful to mow it."

KDC Solar ACF, a firm based in Bedminster, built the facility at 315 W. Garden Road to power the adjacent Atlantic Coast Freezers building. The 2.2-megawatt field went online in early 2012 and KDC Solar continues to operate it.

The site is the first in South Jersey to use sheep, though a pharmaceutical firm uses a much smaller flock at a proper-

ty in Titusville. Based on the Vineland experience, KDC Solar started using sheep at a field next to a school in Lawrenceville.

Simalchik is vice president for operations and construction for the company.

He had looked, without success, for someone to try the Vineland site as pasture before linking up with Bishop last year. The concept is popular in Europe and in Texas, he said.

Bishop lifted a contact phone number off a sign at the property.

"I saw this site and I just knew it was going to be perfect — I knew," Bishop said. "Otherwise, I wouldn't have bothered."

The solar panels are mounted on rails more than 5 feet off the ground. Regularly, a timer rotates the panels to stay aimed at the sun. It makes an odd, if brief, noise.

"The first day when it made that noise, they were a little skitty," Bishop said. "Now, it's just

their home. That's how they treat it. When it gets good and hot, on a good sunny day, they sleep or graze in the shaded strips."

Bishop's sheep are living up to a goal their creator had almost a half-century ago. The breed was developed in Maine, among other reasons, to be used to graze under power lines as an option to mowing and spraying.

"Mandy," a 6-year-old Australian cattle dog that Bishop owns, does the actual herding.

"She's in charge of moving sheep," she said. "I can't get them ... to do anything without her."

Bishop said she actually bought her first sheep so Mandy could practice her skills for competitions.

"And then it's just gone crazy," Bishop said. "I've had 40 lambs already this year. A bunch of them are around here eating."

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