

Solar irrigation upgrades: Don't let certificate funding go unclaimed

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It's usually a timing problem, not an eligibility problem. Farms often plan and complete a diesel-to-solar pump conversion with sound engineering, but certificate eligibility isn't checked until afterwards - by which point the design can no longer be adjusted to maximise what it qualifies for, and the project may even be ineligible if left too late. Raising funding and measurement questions while the project is still being scoped preserves evidence and funding options. Once binding commitments like equipment purchases occur, certain schemes assess 'newness' rules that can affect eligibility retroactively.

Publication context: This article reflects its publication date. Market prices, program rules, reporting duties and deadlines may have changed. Confirm current official guidance before making a decision.

Irrigation pumps are one of the biggest hidden costs on an Australian farm. In particular, if they run on diesel, they're exposed to fuel price swings, need constant maintenance, and add to your emissions footprint - all to move water you can't run the farm without.

Solar-based pumping is one of the fastest-payback renewable upgrades available to Australian irrigators, and it also comes with government funding attached. But that funding is easy to miss - and it's usually a timing problem, not an eligibility problem. The funding decision needs to be made alongside the engineering decision, not after it.

Why the funding gets missed

A farm plans a diesel-to-solar electric pump conversion. The engineering is sound: the installer sizes the system, orders the system, and the project goes ahead. Certificate eligibility isn't checked until afterwards, if it's checked at all - by which point you can no longer adjust the design to maximise what it qualifies for. You may also be ineligible if you leave it too late.

The upgrade still happens and still cuts running costs. But funding that could have reduced the upfront cost, or been reinvested elsewhere, is left on the table. That's not a failure of engineering. It's a failure to connect the engineering decision to the funding decision before the project is locked in.

State energy schemes can help fund your conversion

Two states and territories - New South Wales and Victoria - run the best market-based schemes that turn eligible energy upgrades into certificates or credits with real value. Other states don't run an equivalent scheme, though federal schemes still apply nationwide. Wherever you farm, it's worth checking what you can access.

Captured properly, that value can mean:

Lower upfront capital costs

A shorter payback period

Better return on investment

A stronger case in grant and funding applications

Faster progress against decarbonisation targets

In NSW, for example, the ESS covers a broad range of pumping upgrades under its Energy Savings Certificates (ESCs), not just full solar conversions:

Diesel-to-solar irrigation pumping conversions

Diesel-to-electric pumping upgrades

Solar-assisted pumping systems

Variable speed drive (VSD) upgrades

Pumping system optimisation and controls

Eligible activities and certificate values differ from scheme to scheme. That's exactly why it pays to check what applies in your state before the project scope is finalised, not after.

Who this is relevant to

It's relevant well beyond the farm gate, wherever you're located:

Farmers and agribusiness looking to cut input costs

Solar installers and EPCs (engineering, procurement and construction firms) scoping irrigation projects

Irrigation providers and agricultural project developers

Water and irrigation corporations planning infrastructure upgrades

Closing the gap between what's available and what gets claimed

Northmore Gordon's role is to connect the engineering decision to the funding decision, wherever you farm, so the two are never made apart:

Assessment - validate what the project qualifies for before the design is locked in

Business case - combine the engineering findings with the certificate value so the investment case is complete, not partial

Environmental certificates - originate, verify and register certificates across Australia's state and federal schemes , so the value is properly captured rather than assumed, including

Energy Savings Certificates (ESCs) in NSW,

Victorian Energy Efficiency Certificates (VEECs),

Peak Reduction Certificates for batteries in NSW (PRCs), and

Australian Carbon Credit Units (ACCUs) for everywhere else.

Northmore Gordon has created more than 7 million environmental certificates and returned over \$300 million to clients, with specialist experience across electrification, fuel switching and agricultural energy projects.

Check eligibility before you finalise the design

If you're weighing up a solar or electrification pumping upgrade - or you're already partway through planning one - check eligibility before the scope is finalised, wherever you're located. Once the design is locked in, some of that value is harder to recover. Northmore Gordon offers a free eligibility check: Call 1300 854 561 .

Scheme and certificate context

Before using a certificate or grant figure, confirm the current scheme method, eligible activity, effective date, evidence requirements, price date and registration or application process.

Related guidance

Certificate services

Government schemes

Contact us

Read the original article for the source publication and its full context.

Why do Australian farmers often miss out on certificate funding when upgrading irrigation pumps to solar?

It's usually a timing problem, not an eligibility problem. Farms often plan and complete a diesel-to-solar pump conversion with sound engineering, but certificate eligibility isn't checked until afterwards—by which point the design can no longer be adjusted to maximise what it qualifies for, and the project may even be ineligible if left too late. Raising funding and measurement questions while the project is still being scoped preserves evidence and funding options. Once binding commitments like equipment purchases occur, certain schemes assess 'newness' rules that can affect eligibility retroactively.

Which Australian states run the best market-based certificate schemes for solar irrigation upgrades?

New South Wales and Victoria run the best market-based schemes that turn eligible energy upgrades into certificates with real value. NSW operates the Energy Savings Scheme (ESS) creating tradeable Energy Savings Certificates (ESCs) from eligible pumping and solar upgrades, while Victoria offers Victorian Energy Efficiency Certificates (VEECs) through the Victorian Energy Upgrades scheme. Other Australian states don't run an equivalent scheme, though federal schemes like the ACCU Scheme still apply nationwide.

What pumping-related upgrades are covered under NSW's Energy Savings Scheme?

The NSW Energy Savings Scheme covers a broad range of pumping upgrades under Energy Savings Certificates (ESCs), including diesel-to-solar irrigation pumping conversions, diesel-to-electric pumping upgrades, solar-assisted pumping systems, variable speed drive (VSD) upgrades, and pumping system optimisation and controls. Each activity has specific equipment requirements, baseline conditions and measurement pathways. Assessment should confirm the exact method, rule version and evidence requirements before finalising the design, since eligibility depends on the specific activity, premises, equipment and scheme conditions.

What benefits can farmers capture by properly claiming certificate value from solar irrigation upgrades?

Captured properly, certificate value can mean lower upfront capital costs through immediate certificate revenue, a shorter payback period, better return on investment, a stronger case in grant and funding applications, and faster progress toward decarbonisation targets. Certificate price and quantity are separate commercial variables; a transparent early-stage business case comparing the project with and without conditional support allows management to understand the decision and see what could change the outcome. Keep energy savings, tariff effects and certificate revenue as separate benefit lines.

How should a farmer structure the decision-making process for a solar irrigation upgrade to capture certificate funding?

Describe the project stage precisely using separate dates for feasibility approval, final investment decision, purchase commitments, installation and commissioning. Before any binding commitments, establish eligibility assumptions, identify the relevant jurisdiction and scheme, and confirm required measurement approaches. Our delivery approach starts with assessment (energy-use investigation and opportunity identification), then builds the case (feasibility and investment analysis), captures value (funding pathways), and delivers implementation with measurement verification. Document the actual chronology—this determines which schemes apply and what evidence remains recoverable.

What does a practical business case for a solar irrigation upgrade need to include to justify investment?

A useful investment case allows management to understand the decision and compare alternatives. State the business problem and operational result first. Keep benefit lines separate: energy reduction quantity and boundary, tariff or demand effect, maintenance benefit, and certificate proceeds (with eligibility, quantity, price date and timing clearly stated). Show certificate price and quantity assumptions separately in the analysis. Present the project with and without conditional support so management understands the full decision context. Use the same operating requirements and price assumptions when comparing options to competing uses of funds.

Why should measurement and verification be planned before a solar irrigation project is installed?

Measurement and verification determines what energy use would have been without the upgrade under comparable conditions—savings are the difference. Planning early establishes the project boundary, baseline conditions, operating variables and data needed to explain claimed effects. Two energy bills alone are insufficient evidence since consumption can fall for many reasons unrelated to the upgrade. NSW's PIAM&V; pathway requires an approved independent M&V; professional to deem the baseline measurement procedures appropriate before the implementation date. Measurement decisions affect both certificate eligibility and the credibility of claimed savings.

What is the difference between a preliminary certificate estimate and a verified certificate result?

A preliminary estimate is useful for screening but should be labelled as such until its assumptions and evidence are checked. Keep engineering savings, scheme-recognised savings, created certificates and customer proceeds as separate quantities throughout. A verified result is an outcome established under an agreed measurement and verification approach and period. In NSW, PIAM&V; is a specific ESS pathway; in Victoria, project-based activities have their own rules. An analysis prepared for one purpose should not be assumed to satisfy another scheme's requirements or a certificate claim later.

How can Northmore Gordon assist farmers to connect the engineering decision to the certificate funding decision?

We offer assessment to validate what a project qualifies for before the design is locked in, build investment cases combining engineering findings with certificate value, and originates, verify and register environmental certificates. Services include energy audits identifying pumping opportunities, feasibility studies and measurement planning, funding-pathway assessment, and measurement and verification. Our six-stage delivery approach moves from assessment through case building, value capture, delivery, procurement and ongoing performance—helping farms preserve evidence and funding options by raising scheme eligibility questions during project scoping rather than after installation.

What information should a farmer prepare before requesting a certificate eligibility assessment for a solar irrigation upgrade?

Prepare the site location and premises, existing and proposed equipment with capacities, baseline energy data or consumption estimates, project stage and intended dates, available records distinguishing estimates from measured information, and any prior funding or certificate arrangements. State the business decision needed—audit scope, feasibility, measurement plan or implementation—and the target decision date. An incomplete brief can still support an initial conversation if gaps are visible. We can then establish an appropriate assessment scope; an eligibility check allows early adjustment of the design to maximise scheme qualification before equipment is purchased.