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WILLIMANTIC--Richard Berger and Nancy Roman were on a reconnaissance mission last week for White Flower Farm, the nationally known nursery in Litchfield where they work.

"We're here because of the rising energy costs," said Berger, White Flower's facilities engineer. "And the rising costs to heat our greenhouses"--26 of them, about two acres worth.

Berger's tried the little tricks like insulation and plant cycles that minimize heat needs. But he and Roman--she's the controller--traveled across the state on one of the hottest days of the year to Eastern Connecticut State University to learn about big-ticket fixes like solar and geothermal, and how to find money to pay for them.

"We would consider solar if could get funding," Berger said.

He was in the right place--a fair presented by the little-known, two-year-old Connecticut Farm Energy Program. An indirect function of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, it helps farms and agriculture-related rural small businesses learn about energy efficiency and renewable energy options and assists in obtaining grants and loans to fund them.

"They call saying 'We want to stay in business. We need assistance, especially in the form of energy,'" said Amanda Fargo-Johnson, Farm Energy's program coordinator and the fair's organizer.

Statewide, Farm Energy provides general information including a comprehensive Energy Best Management Practices Guide. In the eastern half of the state (there is a plan to expand it to the entire state later this year) Farm Energy will literally write the grants for a federal program known as REAP - Rural Energy for America Program, widely regarded as a behemoth of an application.

"I went through eight years of college and I looked at this thing -- there's no logic to it whatsoever,"

said Geoffrey Westfall, owner of Brooklyn Veterinary Hospital.

Westfall was turned down the first time he applied for a REAP grant, which he did on his own. The second time, as Farm Energy's first applicant and with Fargo-Johnson filling out the forms, he was approved for a ground-mounted solar tracking system that rotates and tilts to catch continual sun.

"I think the fact that they had somebody to come and help is enormously beneficial," he said.

Since REAP and other federal grants only cover up to 25 percent of a project, Farm Energy also helps applicants pair federal grants with loans, incentives, tax credits and state grants - mainly from the Agriculture Viability program, though applicants have to fill out those forms on their own. Which is exactly what Nick Smith, the founder and owner of Stonington Vineyards did to fund energy efficient refrigeration systems and insulation for his wine tanks

"Without her I wouldn't have know what the hell to do," he said. "It is unbelievable the amount of paperwork I had to go through."

Smith is getting about \$20,000 from REAP, another \$43,000 from agriculture viability and possibly some funding from the Connecticut Energy Efficiency Fund that together will cover most of the \$100,000 estimated cost.

"To be able to get the kind of support I'm going to get from three different sources, that's a deal-maker," he said. "Without it, it would be a deal-breaker."

State agriculture commissioner Steven K. Reviczky, who stopped by the fair, said programs like Farm Energy in effect do more than just help individual farmers reduce energy costs.

"It's the generation plant you don't have to build," he said. "It's a thousand little pieces that make the big picture go."

Qualifying projects can run the gamut from expensive renewables like solar, biomass systems, wind and hydro to smaller energy efficiency measures such as insulating curtains for greenhouses or something industry-specific like a reverse osmosis machine that takes about 75 percent of the water out of maple sap to dramatically reduce the amount of time and fuel needed to then turn it into maple syrup.

In most case, applicants must first have energy audits to insure retrofits aren't wasted.

For notoriously time- and cash-strapped farmers in particular, whose income typically waxes and wanes with the annual growing cycle, navigating the morass of grants and loans and then doing the

paperwork is only part of the hurdle. The other is up-front money that might be needed.

"Most of Connecticut's farmers simply don't have the disposable income or the cash to take advantage of even a good deal on renewable energy," said Dave Ljungquist, associate director of project development for the state's Clean Energy Finance and Investment Authority, who also presented information at the fair. "One of our big thrusts is to develop creative financing that will help people overcome this upfront hit they have to take right now."

But the Farm Energy Program has its own financial concerns in the face of federal budget cuts and dwindling grant funds. The program came into existence as a pilot project in May 2009, modeled on a similar one in western Massachusetts. It operates through the Eastern Connecticut Resource Conservation and Development Council (RC&D), one of about 375 councils nationwide that fall under the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service. Farm Energy is also a partner with Rural Development, another USDA program.

The programs those councils run are funded through grants, but NRCS provides funding for a coordinator and office space. That funding was cut in half in the fiscal 2011 budget cuts enacted midway through the year, effectively eliminating the council coordinators and leaving those remaining scrambling for homes.

The national RC&D office has mounted an intense effort, mainly directed at the Senate, to get funding restored. Farm Energy has been able to maintain its office at the UConn Cooperative Extension in Haddam through another program, but is still waiting to hear about its own funding through a Rural Business Enterprise Grant from USDA's Rural Development. The current grant runs out on Sept. 30 and if the new one is not approved, that means not only no expansion into the states' western RC&D, known as Kings Mark, it also means Farm Energy is out of business.

For people like Walter and Susan MacDonald of Old MacDonald's Farm in Plymouth who came to the Farm Energy Fair as their first step in looking for ways to save energy, that scenario would mean figuring everything out themselves.

"We learned there's a lot of things we need to look into," said Susan after hearing presentations on geothermal, solar, energy efficiency and about various funding programs.

"Finding out who to ask is the important thing," added Walter.

As for the folks from White Flower Farm -- before the fair had even ended they learned from Ljungquist about local funding available in Litchfield County. And Berger was wasting no time.

I'm going talk to him," he said "and find out who that is exactly."

Environment

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