

County's new solar installation gets official launch

Contributed by Elizabeth Larson
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LAKEPORT – Lake County was hailed as a leader in renewable energy on Thursday, when local leaders and North Coast Congressman Mike Thompson gathered to celebrate the completion of the county's new solar arrays. {sidebar id=124}

The 2.2-megawatt solar-electric power system is installed on three sites near the Lake County Jail and two of Lake County Sanitation Districts' wastewater treatment plants. It's estimated to produce 94 percent of the facilities' energy requirements.

The arrays were manufactured and installed by San Jose-based SunPower Corp., and officials have estimated the solar system will save the county between \$1.6 million and \$5 million over the coming 20 years.

Those installations, combined with an existing 1-megawatt solar array, makes Lake County home to the largest public solar power installation in California, and the third largest in the western United States, said Supervisor Denise Rushing.

Rushing welcomed an audience of local and state leaders, dignitaries and citizens, who gathered at the National Guard Armory outside of Lakeport, which is located near the jail and overlooks the arrays, which sit below in a small valley.

"This is an amazing day. It's a great day," said Rushing.

She explained that the solar project had multiple goals, from addressing climate change to the geopolitical realities of energy. Saving energy means saving money, and that saved money stays in the local community, Rushing noted.

By completing the project, Lake County creates for itself a resilient local economy that can survive in the future.

This is just one of the green measures taken by the Lake County Board of Supervisors, which Rushing congratulated for their work.

In 2007, the board voted to be a "cool county," which includes a commitment to reduce the county's carbon footprint.

She said a team effort went into completing the project, with the Lake County Sheriff's Office, Lake County Sanitation, SunPower Corp. and General Electric partnering to bring the project to fruition.

"This project is a symbol of a very hopeful future," she said.

Thompson also lauded the county for completing a beneficial and green project.

"It's such an important time right now to be moving toward a renewable energy economy and a renewable energy society," Thompson said.

The solar installation created 95 jobs, said Thompson, from steel workers to installers.

Thompson said that just as important as moving toward a green economy is breaking the dependence on foreign oil, much of it produced by countries that aren't necessarily friendly toward the United States.

"This is a big day," he said. "It comes at the most opportune time."

That's because the stimulus bill signed earlier this week by President Barack Obama seeks to move the country toward a renewable economy. Thompson said he hoped to see the effects of that effort ripple into local economies all over the state.

The new legislation will provide for selling bonds, the proceeds of which will be loaned to homeowners for solar installations on their homes, said Thompson. The loans would then be repaid over time on a homeowners' property tax bill.

The clear day was punctuated by cold gusts of wind. Thompson joked that a wind turbine might also be in order.

Thompson said he was proud of the county for its efforts, adding that the project was the "poster child" for moving toward green jobs and a future of renewable energy.

Rick Whisman, director of west project sales for SunPower Corp., credited the county for its efforts in making the project happen. He said state and federal leadership has laid the groundwork for such installations.

Ian Caliendo from PG&E's governmental relations office, noted, "It's a very exciting time for renewable energy and solar power."

Caliendo said the average solar system is 60 kilowatts, while Lake County's is more than 1,700 kilowatts in size.

He said the county's solar installation will offset 110 tons of carbon dioxide annually.

Having the largest public solar installation in California underlines Lake County's leadership in renewable energy, said Caliendo.

Caliendo said the county will receive \$3.2 million in rebates on the project. Rushing later told Lake County News that the rebates are saving that are expected to be realized over time.

Thompson and Rushing were then joined by Supervisors Rob Brown, Anthony Farrington and Jeff Smith as Thompson threw the switch to officially active the new facility.

Whisman told Lake County News the county signed a 20-year power purchase agreement with SunPower. The contract calls for the county to pay a certain amount per kilowatt hour, much as it would to PG&E, only for a smaller amount of

money.

Whisman said GE Energy Financial Services financed the project.

Chief Deputy County Administrative Officer Matt Perry said the contract, signed a year and a half ago, starts out with the county paying 11.5 cents per kilowatt hour, just slightly under what it would have paid PG&E.

Over time, the county will be able to more easily budget for energy, since the contract calls for an annual 4-percent increase, rather than the 6-percent increases that are typical with PG&E. The contract also will buffer the county against energy price spikes, said Perry.

Rushing said Lake County is an ideal place for solar power generation, with 300 days of sun during the year.

At the end of the 20-year contract, the county can either have SunPower remove the installation or the county can purchase it, said Rushing.

The county also worked with Pacific Gas and Electric to reduce consumption and increase the energy facility of county facilities, said Rushing. They're also looking at encouraging energy efficiency in local homes.

Reducing energy consumption offers the biggest bang for the buck, Rushing said.

One of the reasons the installations don't cover 100 percent of the facilities' needs is because energy conservation is expected to reduce energy usage, and the county didn't want the solar installations to be oversized, she added.

SunPower officials said Germany leads the world in solar installations, followed by California.

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