
West Texas Looks to Chase the Sun

By Odessa Admin

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For years, West Texans have seen answers blowing in the wind and bubbling out of the ground. But if there's one thing more common than wind and oil in the Permian Basin, it's sunshine.

Now the region would like to make money off that, too.

"It's a great area for solar," said Monique Hanis, spokeswoman for the Washington, D.C.-based Solar Energy Industries Association. "West Texas is excellent."

But, despite Texas soaking up the sun, it doesn't even rank among the top 10 states in solar installations tied into a power grid, according to 2007 statistics from the Interstate Renewable Energy Council.

"New Jersey is ahead of you," Hanis said.

States that lead in solar energy offer companies incentive plans, Hanis said.

"The state needs to make it a priority," she said.

CATCHING UP

Russel Smith, executive director of the Texas Renewable Energy Industries Association, said the Texas Legislature would need to pass a Renewable Portfolio Standard that will benefit solar energy providers during its upcoming session. Previous portfolio standards, which require increased production of renewable energy, have primarily benefited wind energy in Texas.

"It did nothing to provide for solar, biomass, hydroelectric or geothermal energy," he said.

"Portfolio standards for non-wind resources would go a long way toward filling in the potential in the gap."

With the right legislation, Smith said Texas would put a big dent into California's control of the solar market, which has been aided by a 2006 solar initiative that enacted the largest solar program outside Germany. It calls for the installation of 3,000 megawatts of solar capacity over 10 years, funding it with \$3.35 billion.

Smith is looking for laws to be passed in Texas that would require similar amounts of non-wind related renewable energy.

"You would have the same type of activity with solar that you have with wind," he said.

But Smith adds that it's important for Texas to get in on the manufacturing end of solar, something it hasn't done a good job with in wind energy. Though the state leads the nation in wind energy production, it holds relatively little of the market of wind energy manufacturing.

"That's unfortunate," he said. "We'd like to see, not just the panels built here, but we would like to see the equipment built here in Texas."

He claims that luring solar companies would benefit both economic development and the environment.

"We have to be aggressive and do it because a lot of the rest of the country is doing it," he said.

AREA PLANS

But some solar companies are already interested in Texas.

Odessa was slow to get into the market for wind energy, said Gary Vest, economic development director for the Odessa Chamber of Commerce. While wind farms popped up all around the Abilene and San Angelo areas, Ector County only recently approved incentives for its first 11 wind turbines.

Vest is hoping to beat others to the punch with solar.

While the economic development department isn't in formal negotiations with any company, Odessa did receive a request from the governor's office for information on the possibility of building a 400,000 square foot solar products manufacturing facility that could add up to 900 jobs over three years.

Along with solar collecting sites, Vest said it makes sense to have manufacturing facilities in the area. Making equipment close to where sunshine is could reduce transportation costs.

While solar energy is a priority for the department, Vest said it's still an emerging business and a tough one to keep up with.

"One of the things we have in the solar industry is the technology is changing so fast the manufacturers can't keep up with it," he said.

And with desert to the west of Odessa, there could be interest all over the area.

In Pecos County, which sees even more sunlight than Odessa, five different groups are considering putting projects in the area, Fort Stockton Economic Development Director Doug May said.

GETTING TRANSMISSION

Like with wind and clean coal, one obstruction for solar in Texas remains transmission capacity. The Texas Public Utility Commission approved a \$4.93 billion plan last year to add more than 18,000 megawatts of capacity for lines connecting West Texas to the state's metropolitan centers.

But PUC spokesman Terry Hadley said the commission is still in the process of approving the companies to build the transmission lines. Though a decision on that could come within the next month, he said it would take six months to a year to approve routes for the project.

So the soonest construction could start is in late 2009 or early 2010. Hadley said that once construction starts, it could take two to five years to complete - and that's assuming the companies aren't adversely affected by the national recession.

Wind and solar would go nicely together in West Texas, since solar would be produced during the day and the wind

blows hardest during the evening and night, Smith said.

And even if the state doesn't give the go-ahead in luring more solar energy to the area, Hanis said individuals could start by installing solar panels in their own homes.

"Solar works," she said. "It works now through off-the-shelf technology you can install."