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Small-scale solar's big potential goes untapped

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Gerald Freeman is reflected in panels of the small solar plant that provides 70 kilowatts to the town of Nipton, Calif., which is about 80% of the power required by Nipton's 60 residents, its general store and motel. (Mark Boster, Los Angeles Times / December 29, 2012)

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Are small-scale power projects the way to go?

Yes

No



Photos: Solar power in Nipton, Calif.



Graphic: Solar power to the people



NIPTON, Calif. — Gerald Freeman unlocks the gate to the small power plant and goes inside. Three rows of solar collectors, elevated on troughs that track the sun's are like sunflowers, afford a glimpse of California's possible energy future.

This facility and a smaller version across the road produce some 70 kilowatts of electricity, about 80% of the power required by Nipton's 60 residents, its general store and motel.

Freeman, a Caltech-trained geologist and one-time gold mine owner, understood when he bought this former ghost town near the Nevada border that being off the grid didn't have to mean going without power.

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PHOTOS: Solar power in Nipton, Calif.

He contracted with a Bay Area company to install solar arrays on two plots of land. The town has a 20-year agreement to buy its power at a below-market rate.

Projects like these make do with scant financing opportunities and little support from the federal government.

The Obama administration's solar-power initiative has fast-tracked large-scale plants, fueled by low-interest, government-guaranteed loans that cover up to 80% of construction costs. In all, the federal government has paid out more than \$16 billion for renewable-energy projects.

Those large-scale projects are financially efficient for developers, but their size creates transmission inefficiencies and higher costs for ratepayers.

Smaller alternatives, from rooftop solar to small- and medium-sized plants, can do the opposite.

Collectively, modest-sized projects could provide an enormous electricity boost — and do so for less cost to consumers and less environmental damage to the desert areas where most are located, say advocates of small-scale solar power.

Recent studies project that California could derive a substantial percentage of its energy needs from rooftop solar installations, whether on suburban homes or city roofs or atop big-box stores.

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Janine Blaeloch, director of the nonprofit Western Lands Project, said smaller plants were never on the table when the federal solar policy was conceived early in President Obama's first term.

Utilities and solar developers wanted big plants, so that's what's sprouting in Western deserts, she said.

"There was a pivot point when they could have gone to the less-damaging alternative," Blaeloch said, referring to both federal officials and environmental groups that have supported large-scale solar projects.

"There's no question that it was a matter of choice, and it was the wrong choice."

Built in far-flung locations where there is plenty of open land, large-scale plants require utilities to put up extensive transmission lines to connect to the grid.

Utilities charge ratepayers for every dollar spent building transmission lines, for which the state of California guarantees utilities an annual return of 11% for 40 years.

By comparison, small-scale plants can be built near population centers and provide power directly to consumers, reducing the demand for electricity from the grid.

Rooftop solar goes one step further.

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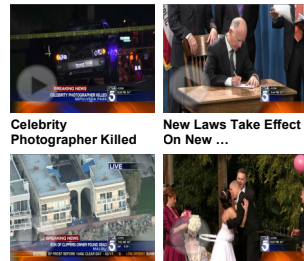
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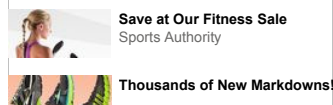
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NatureLover2012 at 12:17 AM December 30, 2012

Big oil still has plenty of influence over Republicans and many Democrats. You are dreaming if you think wind and solar have the ability to buy a huge amount of influence with many Democrats. Democrats are trying to roll out wind and solar to decrease the number of fossil fuel power plants built, rather than to get campaign contributions. Compared to wind and solar, oil companies spend much more on lobbying and campaign contributions.

Fossil fuels still receive more subsidies than wind and solar. It is easy to point a finger at some early large-scale solar projects as being destructive of desert habitat. Hopefully, others will be planned and sited in a less environmentally manner, in areas already disturbed.

It would be very interesting to see actual numbers comparing the cost of rooftop solar compared to large-scale desert solar. Perhaps Julie Cart can write an article on that topic, although she does not seem to write articles with actual numbers. Perhaps that would be an article for the Business section.

In order to end our addiction to fossil fuels and the resultant global warming, we will need to install a significant amount of renewable energy, unless we want to use nuclear energy. Uncontrolled global warming would damage habitat for the entire desert, not just parts of it. In some desert areas, wildlife has already been impacted by global warming.


RobiethCat_1 at 11:53 PM December 29, 2012

One thing we should add to the mix is SURVIVABILITY. Like the original design of the internet, one critical requirement for commercial and home electrical availability. It should by design become more de-centralized. Therefore any major hit to any major part of the system will not affect all parties. Support RoofTop Generation.

Charles Lin at 10:10 PM December 29, 2012

Does anyone else see a eerie similarity to the iorporate influence of the wind/solar industry over the democratic party and (particulary) President Obama and the historical influence of big oil over the Republicans and EPA? Sounds like their working from the same playbook; big projects, big money, federal subsidies, and huge profits ahead of a responsible, efficient, inexpensive and ecologically sensitive approach. Not to sound fatalistic, but the fat cats will win and the last open, pristine land of the American deserts are about to get plowed under....Here comes the new boss, same as the old boss, just different corporate backers.

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