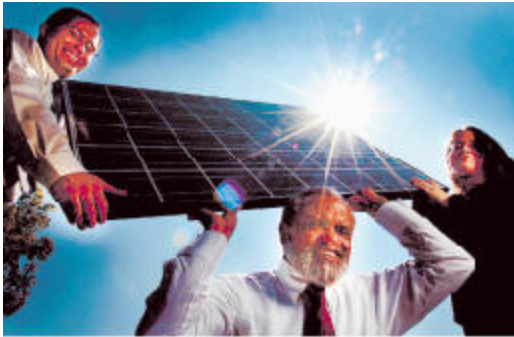


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A renewed look at solar power

Amid concerns about energy costs, sales of alternative systems soar

KERRY HALL AND MIKE DRUMMOND / Staff Writers



With higher heating costs coming this winter and a national debate swirling over tight fuel supplies, solar power is getting a new day in the sun.

At SC Solar in Lancaster County, S.C., the company is so inundated with requests for solar-powered systems that calls might not be returned for three days, said general manager Dan Whigham.

Sales of Whigham's systems, such as solar-powered parking lot lights, rose more than 550 percent last year. They've jumped an additional 300 percent in 2005, Whigham said, adding "We're placing orders now for all of next year."

Worldwide, sales of solar systems are expected to reach \$11 billion this year, up from \$7 billion last year, according to the Solar Energy Industries Association, a Washington, D.C., trade group. Industry revenues have grown an average 35 percent a year since 2001, the group said.

Just last month, shipping giant FedEx installed solar-power panels at its Oakland, Calif., hub in part because of volatile energy prices, a spokesman said.

An additional lure: Federal tax breaks for solar systems kick in Jan. 1 -- coinciding with predicted record-high natural gas bills across much of the country, including the Carolinas. Some states, including North Carolina, offer additional incentives.

Of the total electricity generated in the U.S. each year, solar power accounts for less than 1 percent. But that is growing, said Solar Energy trade group spokesman Noah Kaye.

"Solar has become a compelling investment," Kaye said.

Jeff and Bronwen Martin built their Lake Norman home three years ago and equipped it with an array of solar power and other energy-saving devices. The Martins can sell surplus electricity generated from the home's photovoltaic solar system back to Duke Power. And the home's solar water-heating system is so efficient Jeff Martin says he even uses hot water to clean his garbage cans.

The house is among those featured on the N.C. Sustainable Energy Association's Solar and Green Home Tour on Saturday, part of the state's recognition of Energy Month.

Martin says his house is as much a political statement as it is an environmental one.

"I'm trying to say we're tired of being dependent on others who don't have our best interest in mind," he said. "I hate the fact we're slaves to oil-rich countries."

The number of solar energy users in North Carolina is hard to determine. Steve Kalland, deputy director of N.C. Solar Center, said generous Carter-era tax credits jolted solar installations throughout the country and Carolinas. But shoddy installation gave the industry a black eye. President Reagan ended the tax credits, and the industry atrophied.

Cheap fuel and consumers' set-in-their-ways frame of mind have contributed to slow adoption of solar energy in the Carolinas, despite a favorable position in the Sun Belt, Kalland said.

Businesses are more likely to use photovoltaic systems, which convert sunlight into electricity. Homeowners gravitate to thermal heating systems, which use sunlight to heat water.

The N.C. Solar Center's most recent data from the Department of Revenue date to 2002, when 233 individuals and businesses qualified for a renewable- energy tax credit.

South Carolina is home to 108 commercial and residential solar power users, according to the state's energy office.

S.C. Solar's Whigham says solar power, which delivers a fixed energy price for decades, is about corporate survival.

"It's not about hippies anymore," he said. "The price of oil is not coming down anytime soon, and that is going to put businesses out of business."

S.C. Solar designs and manufactures systems in a nondescript warehouse it shares with another company. Whigham's firm specializes in photovoltaic systems. Businesses and the military make up the bulk of customers, scattered worldwide. On Tuesday, company executives met with the vice president of El Salvador, who was visiting South Carolina, to talk about exporting their product.

"The sun's not going away," Whigham said.