

Solar photovoltaic array under construction at Garfield County airport

Power will be available to Holy Cross Energy customers

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Glenwood Springs Post Independent

Rifle, Colorado

A large array of solar photovoltaic panels is under construction at the Garfield County Regional Airport near Rifle, part of the county's ongoing entry into the world of clean energy.

When the array is finished, sometime in May, Holy Cross Energy customers will be able to sign up for power from the panels with little more effort than making a phone call and writing a check, thanks to a deal between the county and the Clean Energy Collective (CEC).

The phone call would be to the Garfield County Airport Solar Array (known as G-CASA) — a subsidiary of the CEC and the formal entity in control of the solar facility, which is called a “community-based,” photovoltaic solar facility.

The check, to the same company, would be in the neighborhood of \$750 per solar panel, when certain rebates are applied.

The customer would effectively “buy” a panel, or several panels, although actual ownership stays with the Clean Energy Collective, which is based in Carbondale.

The power generated by a customer's panel, or panels, is to be shipped to the Holy Cross Energy cooperative. Holy Cross would then apply the actual power production from the solar panels against that customer's electric demand, reducing their monthly bill.

Currently, only Holy Cross customers are eligible to “buy” the panels at the airport, although Xcel Energy is expected to sign on to the program in the near future.

This is Clean Energy Collective's second array in this area — the first was built in the mid-Roaring Fork Valley last year and currently is in use.

The \$5.1 million airport array is being built by the Martifer Solar firm of California, according to Paul Spencer, a partner in the Clean Energy Collective.

Spencer said Martifer Solar specializes in alternative energy installations, and is a subsidiary of the Martifer Group, an international, multi-billion-dollar company based in Portugal.

The airport array project will be developed in two phases on about five acres of county-owned land, which is being leased to G-CASA.

Phase one of the airport array is to contain 3,600 panels, Spencer said, while the size of the second phase will not be determined until after the first array has been sold out.

Spencer said a typical home installation of an individual photovoltaic system can cost between \$10,000 and \$15,000, and the systems generally have a life span of 25 years or so.

The up-front cost, he said, puts off many homeowners, as well as renters, who might otherwise be interested in getting some of their energy from alternative sources such as solar panels.

With the CEC model, he said, everything from maintenance of the equipment to billing are taken care of by the companies involved, not the consumer.

And the system cost per customer is considerably reduced, he maintained, depending on how many panels are bought.

To completely power a typical home in this region with solar energy, and zero out electric bills for that home, Spencer said, would involve the purchase of roughly two dozen panels. Buying one panel or several, then, would result in reductions to the monthly electric bills.

For the average Holy Cross customer, he continued, the pay back — how long it takes for monthly utility savings to match the cost of buying the panels — is just under 13 years.

And the system, he said, has a 50-year warranty, meaning the power from the panels would be essentially free for the remaining 37 years or so.

The CEC installed its first array in the region in the El Jebel area, on property owned by the Mid-Valley Metro District, where it went operational last year.

In addition, according to Spencer, the company has other arrays in the works, including one in Eagle County.

It also is involved in biomass projects with landfills in Eagle and Pitkin counties — involving the idea of burning construction waste to generate electricity — and is working on micro-hydroelectric power generators in 34 potential locations in the Roaring Fork and Eagle river valleys.

Spencer said his firm is working with roughly two dozen utilities around Colorado, in addition to Holy Cross.

Another of the utilities serving Garfield County, Xcel Energy, is working on getting approval from the Public Utilities Commission to offer the solar option to its customers, Spencer said.