

Local firm earns contracts for two new solar gardens

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[SCOTT CONDON](#)

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An El Jebel company that added an innovative twist to solar gardens is getting hired to export its concept outside of the Roaring Fork Valley, and it's getting national recognition for its efforts.

Clean Energy Collective was hired this fall to install a 500-kilowatt solar garden as part of an alternative-energy pilot project in Colorado Springs.

"We're building it on a capped landfill, an old landfill," said Paul Spencer, Clean Energy Collective founder and president.

Clean Energy Collective also was selected by the San Miguel Power Association to build a 1-megawatt solar farm near Telluride. The utility requested proposals for solar-energy projects and received 20 bids, according to Spencer. Most of the proposals were for solar gardens that would produce power that would be sold to the utility for use in its mix. Clean Energy Collective stuck with its tried and true formula to win the bid: Its solar gardens are actually owned by customers who buy in. They own solar panels rather than the power produced by them.

That concept was launched when Clean Energy Collective installed a small solar garden near the midvalley Blue Lake subdivision in August 2010. The company also has installed an 858-kilowatt solar garden at the Garfield County Airport near Rifle, and it has the ability to add a second phase of about the same size. Clean Energy Collective also has an approved plan for a 1-megawatt solar garden at the midvalley property of Ace Lane, across state Highway 82 from City Market.

"We've been able to put in a lot of solar in a short amount of time," Spencer said.

In the Roaring Fork Valley, Clean Energy Collective works in conjunction with Holy Cross Energy. The homeowners and business owners that buy into Clean Energy Collective's projects must be Holy Cross members. Holy Cross agreed to buy the produced power from its customers, who are then credited on electricity bills for their portion of the power produced.

The Blue Lake solar garden is sold out. There are still opportunities to buy into the first phase of the airport project. Spencer said he is pleased with the response from property owners in the valley. The "early adopters" — people aware of conservation issues — latched onto the projects. Now Clean Energy Collective is trying to market its clean energy to people who aren't as plugged into the movement.

"The majority of Holy Cross Energy customers aren't aware that we exist," Spencer said.

Clean Energy Collective is broadening its marketing by targeting specific neighborhoods with direct-mail pieces and setting up an information kiosk at Clark's Market in Aspen.

Clean Energy Collective is working on providing financing so that people who buy into its projects won't have "the initial hit to their pocketbook," Spencer said.

Purchasing one panel in a Clean Energy Collective solar array in the Roaring Fork Valley costs \$756. A typical residential customer would require roughly 20 panels, or 4,800 watts of production, to offset all their annual electricity usage. That would require an investment of \$15,120 after discounts and rebates that are currently available, according to information supplied by Clean Energy Collective .

The ownership opportunities for homeowners gave Clean Energy Collective's proposals the edge in Telluride and

Colorado Springs. The Colorado Springs project will be the first using that model on the Front Range, according to Spencer.

He said Clean Energy Collective's model is a "game changer" because it makes clean energy more affordable. Buying into a Clean Energy Collective project is cheaper for homeowners and business owners than installing a private system because the company enjoys economies of scale.

Installation of both of the new solar gardens will begin in December. The Colorado Springs facility will be producing power by early February, Spencer said, while the larger Telluride project will be in operation in March.

Clean Energy Collective's model is opening eyes in the energy industry. The U.S. Department of Energy awarded its Innovative Green Power Program of the Year Award to the El Jebel firm. That award is part of the Energy Department's Green Power Leadership Awards program. Spencer accepted the award at a conference in San Francisco on Nov. 16. He said it was a surprise and a humbling experience for his team.

And it is drawing attention to Clean Energy Collective.

"It creates more awareness that these programs are out there," Spencer said. "We're getting hit with this tidal wave of interest nationally."

As a result, the company has nearly doubled its number of employees since the summer. It now has nine workers, most working in business development.

scondon@aspen.com

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