



# Hey You! Get Off of My Grid!

A revolutionary new system brings community-based solar power to Colorado

BY BRENDAN HARRINGTON

## Good news for anyone

looking to go — and save — green. Out of the Roaring Fork Valley comes the first-ever community solar power array, a system developed by local Paul Spencer that is sure to revolutionize clean energy consumption nationwide. His team, Clean Energy Collective (CEC), has made solar energy easy, inviting and financially viable for any homeowner.

## Making Hay

The idea is simple: Put a large solar array on vacant land, run the power directly to the local utility company and allow area homeowners to buy a portion of it — as many panels as they need. The homeowners then see a credit back on their normal utility bill, relative to the amount of solar power produced by their purchase. Homeowners never have to think about it: they save money every month and actually power their homes with clean energy. Brilliant.

“Owners can own anything from a single panel to enough panels to wipe out their entire utility bill,” explains Spencer. “The average home around here would require up to 21 panels to completely run the utility bill to zero.”

Customers pay a one-time fee to purchase their panels, and that’s it. According to Spencer, a single panel will save \$45 to \$50 per year, and if you purchase enough panels to completely power your home, you never pay a utility bill again. The system is guaranteed for 50 years and, according to Spencer, will average approximately a 10 percent return on investment over time. Because CEC purchases the solar panels in bulk, customers get them at a great discount as compared to traditional home systems. Currently, a 230-watt panel runs \$725.

The company’s first installment sold out before it was built. Located outside of El Jebel, the Mid Valley Solar Array went active in August 2010. It consists of 338 panels, owned by 19 clients. The next array, located at the Garfield County Airport, will be 11 times larger, with 4,700 panels producing one megawatt of energy. These two installments only serve Holy Cross Energy’s territory and customers. But CEC has four more

locations planned and is pursuing utility companies around the state and country. They anticipate launching the system for Xcel Energy customers in late 2011, accounting for 55 percent of Colorado residents.

“It’s very aggressive growth,” Spencer states. With the Mid Valley Solar Array, the CEC simply wanted to establish the model and work out the kinks. Now, they have grander designs.

“My goal was to create a vehicle to spur wide scale use of clean energy, nationwide,” he states.

## Where Do I Sign Up?

“It’s as simple as you can imagine,” says Spencer. “David will walk you through how much power you need, how much you should buy and what your rate of return will be.”

By analyzing past utility bills, Wiedinmyer can discern how many panels a customer would need and offer different price structures and scenarios. “Homeowners start seeing credits on their next bill, and for the rest of time,” says Spencer. “It’s a 10- to 15-minute phone call.”

**Clean Energy Collective**  
www.easycleanenergy.com  
(800) 646-0323

## A Homegrown Program

Spencer, who lives off-grid with home-based solar power in the Roaring Fork Valley, is quick to deflect credit for the community solar project. "None of this would be a reality without the rest of the team," he says. That founding team consists of Lauren Martindale, working on community outreach and legislation; Mark Boyer, the "financial wizard" and Spencer's lifelong friend; David Wiedinmyer, in business development and sales; and a local group of angel investors.

"My goal was to create a vehicle to spur wide-scale use of clean energy, nationwide." Spencer is also eager to credit Holy Cross Energy. "They were absolutely instrumental in our ability to make this happen," he says. The longstanding utility company was very involved and positive with thorough attention to detail and protection of their customer, Spencer explains. "Holy Cross

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is tremendously forward-thinking when it comes to clean energy."

The clean energy model that Spencer and his team have established is not only poised for tremendous growth in the solar arena, but also suits all kinds of clean energy technologies. "We are already looking into several possibilities for micro-hydro and biomass in the Roaring Fork and Eagle valleys," he states.

While the concept seems simple on the surface, there was quite the maze of technological, legal, tax and utilitarian issues to navigate. "We're not the first ones to think of this: we're just the first ones to figure out how to do it," he says.

"It goes beyond my wildest dreams, how quickly this has garnered attention nationally. Something about it really clicks with people," he muses. "It is really exciting to see your hard work come to fruition and make an actual difference."



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