

More solar farms coming to San Diego County

Panels for three East County solar farms are to be made in local factory

Onell R. Soto, San Diego Union Tribune, 4-13-11

San Diego Gas & Electric says a local factory will provide solar panels to three new solar farms in the East County.

The solar farms will use solar panels that turn to face the sun to provide 30 megawatts of electricity throughout the day.

They are to be developed by Soitec, a French company that has announced plans to build a \$100 million solar-panel factory in San Diego.

"East County is where the direct sunlight is," said Clark Crawford, who oversees local operations for Soitec. "Our technology, being concentrating, relies on direct sunlight."

Soitec's Concentrix panels use lenses to focus sunlight on tiny silicon chips. They follow the sun around the sky and make power more efficiently than traditional stationary panels. And they make power earlier, and more importantly, later in the day.

One of the projects will provide 20 megawatts, the others 5 megawatts each.

By contrast, a typical natural-gas power plant makes about 600 megawatts, and the San Onofre nuclear plant about 2,200.

Each megawatt can power about 650 homes.

It takes about 5 or 6 acres of land to produce a megawatt, so the farms will range in size from 30 to 120 acres.

The company wouldn't say exactly where they will be located because negotiations and evaluations are ongoing.

Big solar projects in the desert have faced opposition from conservationists because of impact on public lands and Indian sites.

These are smaller, on private land, and will be compatible with other uses.

"In Spain, they still graze sheep underneath the solar systems," he said.

The San Diego factory, location still undetermined, is supposed to supply these projects, a 150-megawatt farm in Imperial County, and other facilities in the Southwest.

Soitec decided to get into developing projects as well as building panels because it wants to be involved in solar from the beginning to the end, Crawford said.

"We are interested in being a vertically integrated company and driving the demand of our own product," he said.

A law signed by Gov. Jerry Brown Tuesday requires a third of the power sold by utilities in the state to be

renewable, which includes solar, wind and geothermal power.

SDG&E says it has signed contracts for more than 1,100 megawatts of such power in the last year.

Some 11.9 percent of the power the company sold last year came from renewable sources.

That's not a violation of the state law that requires 20 percent by last year, because SDG&E can count power it bought earlier towards that goal, company president Michael Niggli said.

"We're allowed to use flexible compliance to get to 20 percent," he said. "We ended up applying some of that overproduction."

The power from these farms will go directly into SDG&E's distribution system, feeding communities nearby. That's the same concept behind a series of deals the utility announced Monday to build 23 solar farms around the county.

The California Public Utilities Commission will have to approve the power purchase contracts. SDG&E doesn't say how much it pays for electricity from particular projects.