

California has record year for rooftop solar

Dana Hull, Bay Area News Group, 7-6-11

New data shows that 2010 was a record year for California's efforts to encourage homeowners and businesses to install rooftop solar panels.

Californians installed 194 megawatts of new solar electric generating equipment in 2010 -- a 47 percent increase over 2009, according to a report released Tuesday about the California Solar Initiative.

One megawatt is enough to power 750 to 1,000 homes. But since the sun doesn't shine all the time, solar industry experts say that one megawatt of solar can power about 200 households.

In January 2007, California launched an unprecedented \$3.3 billion effort to install 3,000 megawatts of new solar over the next decade and transform the market for solar energy by reducing the cost of solar-generating equipment.

The California Public Utilities Commission's role in the effort is known as the California Solar Initiative, which provides rebates for residential and commercial customers of the state's three large, investor-owned utilities: Pacific Gas & Electric, Southern California Edison and San Diego Gas & Electric.

The California Solar Initiative's road map calls for 1,750 new megawatts of solar power to be installed on residential and commercial roofs in the state by 2016.

Through the end of the first quarter of 2011, California had an estimated 924 megawatts of rooftop solar installed at nearly 95,000 sites -- putting it more than halfway toward meeting the solar initiative's goal. PG&E alone has 47,283 solar customers within its vast Northern California territory.

The aim of the incentives is to help solar achieve what's known in the renewable energy industry as "grid parity" -- the much-awaited point where solar can compete with cheaper sources of electricity such as coal. Data collected by the California Solar Initiative shows that the cost of solar photovoltaic equipment is coming down. For residential systems smaller than 10 kilowatts, inflation-adjusted prices have declined from \$10.45 per watt to \$8.55 per watt since the start of the program, a reduction of 18 percent.

"You have a market that is fueled with different options for homeowners," said Melicia Charles, supervisor of the solar initiative. "You can own your solar system outright, you can lease it, you can make an arrangement with a third party."