

Geothermal experts to tour Imperial Valley, largest geothermal potential in the world

Elizabeth Varin, Imperial Valley Press, 10-22-11

CALIPATRIA — When CalEnergy first drilled a hole thousands of feet into the ground, what surrounded the pipeline was nothing but agriculture land as far as the eye could see.

Now, several years later, clouds of steam rise from pipes throughout the southeast area of the Salton Sea, helping make Imperial County a leading area for geothermal development.

Geothermal industry officials and experts are set to see that development firsthand as worldwide visitors from the Geothermal Energy Expo in San Diego tour through the area today.

The Geothermal Energy Association kicked off its annual expo with a tour of geothermal plants in the Imperial Valley for media from the Valley and San Diego on Friday. The tours that continue today in the Valley are a way to showcase the massive untapped reserves located here, said association Executive Director Karl Gawell.

If all of the untapped potential geothermal power were accessed, it could fill the whole state's renewable energy portfolio standard, he said. But right now the development has barely scratched the surface of that potential.

There are many benefits of geothermal production, Gawell said. Not only does the production in Southern California provide a clean, renewable power to about 1 million households in the state, but also it provides many jobs.

About 4,000 people are expected at the geothermal expo from Sunday to Wednesday at the Town and Country Resort in San Diego, he said. It will include a cross-section of the industry, including researchers, companies, suppliers and government agencies.

The tour that will visit the Valley today consists of a visit to Ormat's facility in Heber and a stop at the world's largest geothermal well, CalEnergy's Vonderahe-1.

CalEnergy produces about 340 megawatts of power, said company President Stephen Larsen. The potential energy source in the Salton Sea area, where many of CalEnergy's facilities are, is probably the biggest in the world.

The Valley as a whole probably has about 600 megawatts of geothermal energy being produced, he said. With the sources near the earthquake fault lines in the area, there's a potential for about 2,300 megawatts.

Every megawatt can produce enough energy to power 750 to 1,000 homes.

The tour is a critical tool in educating the public and policy makers on the importance of geothermal, said Ormat Technologies Director and Geothermal Energy Association Board President Paul Thomsen in a statement.

"The facilities in the Imperial Valley exemplify the vast geothermal potential of Southern California and the nation," he said.