



There are indications that SDG&E doesn't give a rat's behind about advancing solar-power use.
NEWS TICKER

Solar power vs. SDG&E

Utilities commission soon to rule on measure to end net metering

By Dave Rice, Oct. 1, 2015

A statewide panel convened by the Sierra Club on Wednesday (September 30) took aim at efforts by San Diego Gas & Electric and other utilities statewide that could limit the spread of private solar installations across California. The group also pushed for a bill that would expand solar use in low-income neighborhoods.

Rooftop Revolution

"California is in the midst of a rooftop solar revolution," says Susannah Churchill, West Coast regional director with Vote Solar, a nonprofit solar advocacy group. She notes that the cost of installing a private system has dropped by half since 2009. "Even though a successful rebate program has been largely shut down already, we're still seeing double-digit growth rates even without those incentives." Erica Johnson of San Diego-based Sullivan Solar added that nearly



54,000 workers across the state currently hold jobs in solar and green energy–related fields.

Much of the growth, Churchill says, is in lower- and middle-income households, for whom solar access was previously unaffordable. Still, barriers remain that prevent everyone who would like to go solar from doing so.

Left on the Sidelines

"We're seeing a 'green divide' between communities that can access solar and those that cannot," says California Environmental Justice Alliance co-coordinator Strela Cervas.

Cervas pointed out a handful of problems associated with expanding solar use in lower-income communities, including a lack of education, outreach, and language barriers.

Larger, though, are the initial startup costs, which pose a problem to working-class individuals without credit ratings sufficient to qualify for solar leases.

There's also the issue that many of these consumers live in rented housing, and thus have no incentive to invest in a landlord's property. California's Assembly Bill 693, which has passed both legislative bodies in the state house, aims to boost solar use in rental properties.

"AB 693 will create a 300-megawatt program to put solar on multi-family affordable housing," says Cervas. "It will invest up to \$100 million per year over the next ten years — if signed, it will be the largest investment in solar for the environmental justice community to date."



Preserving Net Metering

"This great solar success story here in California is now at risk," Churchill warns, "because regulators at the CPUC [are] looking to make a decision that could change one of the most important policies that empower people to go solar, called 'net metering.'"

"There are times during the day that a solar system produces more energy than a customer needs at that moment, and it gets sent back into the grid to meet the needs of other customers nearby," explains Churchill. "They then receive a credit on their utility bills for that locally produced clean power that's fed into the grid that the utility sells to other customers."

Churchill says net metering has been "essential for making rooftop solar accessible." But under a proposal being considered by the California Public Utilities Commission, the system could be going away.

Legislation requires the commission, by the end of 2015, to consider changing net-metering rules once a cap of 5 percent of the state's total energy generation is met. That cap is expected to be hit in the first quarter of 2016 by SDG&E's customers, the fastest of the three investor-owned utility regions in the state.

"The reality is that utilities see solar power as a threat to their way of doing business," Churchill asserts. "They're monopolies that make money building big, expensive power plants and transporting it — having customers harness free sunshine directly threatens that business model."

"In August, all three big utilities proposed changes to the rule. The basics are the same — get rid of net metering, credit customers far less for clean energy they feed back into the grid, and to add fees for



customers who want to go solar on top of that."

If the changes are approved, activists fear, it would "slam the brakes on consumer solar investment."

The utilities commission has not announced a date by which it intends to rule on any of the specific proposals.

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