



<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2012/11/2012111114366973432.html>

Solar energy sector lights up in California

As US co-operative renewable energy sector grows, proponents await national position on climate change at COP18.

Dave Ron Last Modified: 23 Nov 2012 16:44
[inShare8](#)

Activists say solar photovoltaic installations could displace fossil fuels and reduce greenhouse gas emissions [AFP]

On a cool autumn day in Oakland, California, the sun shines brightly on the south facing façade of Miya Yoshitani's office building.

Yoshitani is the Associate Director for the Asian Pacific Environmental Network, an East Bay organisation promoting sustainable and equitable conditions for Asian and Pacific Islanders. "We have a stake in solar too," Yoshitani said. "But want it to happen in an inclusive way that benefits our communities directly."

As international attention shifts from the US presidential election to the UN climate change conference in Doha, Qatar, known as COP 18, community leaders like Yoshitani are interested to see how the national position on climate change will translate into state and local policy supporting community renewable energy.

Global investment in renewable energy projects is poised to increase to \$395bn by 2020, doubling from the previous decade, according to a Bloomberg New Energy Finance analysis. According to the Solar Energy Industries Association, the United States just underwent its second-best quarter of growth in solar photovoltaic (PV) installations.

The increase is connected to California's lead with PV projects. The state has more panels installed than any other, representing 36 percent of the country's total capacity at the start of 2012. Between 1998 and 2006 alone, the installed capacity of grid-connected PV systems in California grew to almost 200 megawatts from 5.5 megawatts between 1981 and 1997 - a 36-fold increase.

The majority of today's small-scale PV installations in California are turnkey operations provided by private renewable energy (RE) companies. At least three-fourths of the solar residential market opted for solar service and third party-owned systems over private control and operation in a survey of the 13 highest-growth solar cities of California. These findings, from a spring 2012 study by PV Solar Report, also observed a decline from the previous year in the average household

median-income of these PV-propping zones.

Co-operative initiatives

Throughout the country, state incentives and utility rebates are springing up in an effort to promote residential net metering and solar PV installation. These include the California Solar Initiative, the Xcel Colorado Solar Rewards programme, and the Commonwealth Solar II Programme in Massachusetts.

While these programmes have seen their fair share of residential and community uptake, they are not without obstacles.

"Public dollars are reserved for large corporate entities rather than the people and community groups who put those dollars in," says Lynn Benander, the president and CEO of Co-op Power in Massachusetts, a renewable energy cooperative.



Follow our in-depth coverage of Doha COP18 negotiations

Co-op Power drives its initiatives through cooperative member equity, of which it has raised a quarter million dollars. "You need a large group of consumers to achieve a buying pool that has an impact in the energy industry," said Benander. Similar groups have sprung up in California, including the Energy Solidarity Co-operative headquartered in Oakland, and Co-operative Community Energy based in San Rafael.

Research published by the Iowa Policy Project suggests that smaller (20 MW or less) locally owned RE projects keep over five times as much money in the community as compared to larger projects owned by out-of-state companies.

A Spring 2012 McKinsey & Company Report details the benefits of distributed residential and commercial PV in the United States, as electricity prices continue to rise across the country. By the end of the decade, it says, fully installed residential system costs could decline to \$1 per watt peak.

But competitive pricing and the possibility of localised economic boons have taken a back seat to the main thrust for today's international discourse on PV deployment. Activists say that displacing a portion of coal-fired electricity generation with PV could greatly reduce greenhouse gas

emissions, bringing nations closer to climate change targets.

As nations head to the COP 18 talks expecting to push for policies that will try to limit average global warming below a 2 degree Celsius increase from pre-industrial levels, the United States is renegeing on this goal, having announced this September their interest in a more flexible approach.

The question remains of whether the parties can agree to push the first commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol - the only legally binding greenhouse gas emissions treaty - by 5-8 years beyond the original end date of December 31, 2012. Without a viable successor treaty being proposed, or targets that are legally binding, industry in the United States will carry on with business as usual.

local meets global

While diplomats and government officials deliberate over harmonising policies at an international level, a side event to the COP 18, hosted by the REN Alliance, explores "how communities play a key role in attaining...[a] 100 percent renewable energy future".

One of the event's organising partners, the International Solar Energy Society headquartered in Germany, expects the side-event to highlight the potential of local or small-scale projects that can have a large impact collectively.

Globally, Europe has led the way with a strong co-operative energy sector. More than 50 percent of RE generation in Denmark and Germany is categorised as community-owned and cooperative-based. Incentive programmes and policies such as the feed-in tariff have been a major driver for this growth in renewable energy co-operatives.

Back in the Northeast US, members of Co-op Power took the floor during their annual meeting last week to reaffirm the impact the Co-op has had in their lives. "We need to talk and work together in our local communities. We almost forgot to talk to each other. We have to take our power back", said one member.

Meanwhile, California's energy advocates and green jobs campaigners are celebrating the recent victory for Proposition 39. The legislation effectively closes a corporate tax loophole and redirects half a billion dollars into energy efficiency and renewable energy development for public buildings and schools.

How that windfall will be distributed and who benefits most, however, are yet to be seen.

"We need our communities to not only be the beneficiaries of these policies, but also actively at the table with the other stakeholders crafting this policy," said Yoshitani.

"They are excited about the potential of renewable energy for their neighbourhoods and grandchildren, but we need to find a way to build more powerful, equitable partnerships for that to happen."

