THE TAOS NEWS

Solar array a quick economic boost for Amalia area

Prospects for future solar projects in northern Taos County unclear

By J.R. Logan

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On a sun-parched, windswept mesa about two miles south of the Colorado border, electrician Todd Parsons hides beneath the hood of his gray sweatshirt to escape the gale-force gusts Friday afternoon (May 25).

“I’m surprised they went with solar up here,” jokes Parsons, who is affable in spite the vicious elements. “They could have done a lot with this wind.”

Parsons, an employee with PPC solar, is nearing the end of a five-month stint at the site of a 1.5-megawatt solar array close to Amalia.

Once complete, 5,280 solar panels mounted on motorized racks will track the sun each day as it rises over the Sangre de Cristos in the east, hits its zenith in the normally cloudless New Mexican sky,

and sets over the extinct volcano field of the Taos Plateau in the west. If all goes well, the array will be finished and online in the next few days.

With this array and another 1-megawatt array operating on the Chevron Mining brownfield, Kit Carson Electric Cooperative says the 2,000 homes and businesses between Questa and the Colorado border will be solarpowered on a sunny day.

PPC Solar is managing the instillation of the Amalia array for Maryland-based Standard Solar. Once completed it will be owned by Washington Gas Energy Systems in Virginia. The co-op has agreed to buy all of the electricity produced at the array for the next 25 years.

Not only will the array be an anchor in the co-op’s goal of integrating solar power into its grid, it has provided residents in a lonely corner of Taos County with temporary — but much appreciated — jobs. “I think this is truly a community project that has been a win-win for everyone involved,” Kit Carson Electric CEO Luis Reyes said.

For solar speculators, the Amalia location is ideal. With nearly 300 sunny days each year, there’s plenty of sunlight to tap. At 9,200 feet, the thin atmosphere maximizes the solar radiation reaching the moving panels. The relatively cool mountain temperatures mean the panels operate more efficiently.

The 15-acre array site is being leased by the 182 members of the Rio Costilla Cooperative Livestock Association — a group of local Hispanic residents who've been intimately tied to the land and water for generations. The organization, formed in 1942, manages 80,000 acres east of Costilla. Its business model has long relied on commercial timer harvesting, milling, livestock grazing and big game hunting. It also oversees fishing and camping in its R'o Costilla Park.

Using the land to harness the sun's energy potential is a new venture. "We see it as the right thing to do," says Billy E. Vigil Jr., board president of the Rio Costilla Cooperative Livestock Association. "We support the efforts of clean energy because they go hand-in-hand with our park, and we believe it's a benefit to everyone."

For the Rio Costilla Cooperative Livestock Association, the benefits are immediate. Standard Solar started leasing the site for $8,250 a year in November 2011. That fee goes up 3 percent per year for the next 25 years, reaching about $16,000 a year by the end of the contract term.

While the payments add a nice bonus to the organization's budget, they are a fraction of what it makes on hunting permits alone each year. "It's something that we have extra," says Geraldine Tafoya, financial officer for the association.

The organization is happy to be part of the renewable market, but they're waiting to see if future projects materialize. They're still catering to hunters and fishermen. A herd of cows still grazes outside the fence protecting the new array.

While the Amalia array is a welcome sign of economic activity for residents of Costilla and Amalia, it's still far from the kind of economic boom needed to put residents back to work long-term.

Across a dirt road from the shimmering array are the abandoned warehouses of the Amalia Lumber Company. The rusting buildings, used this winter to store solar panels, are a relic of a previous economic driver in this otherwise sleepy backwater.

Amalia Lumber was once the second largest employer in the county, with 171 people working at the mill in 1977. By 1984, the price of lumber dropped so much that the mill laid off all its employees and locked its gates.

In 2000, the lifts at the now defunct Ski Rio stopped running after 20 years of business. The ski area was small, but it drew visitors through town and provided jobs to locals.

According to the companies involved, the Amalia solar project brought $3.2 million into New Mexico and created between 25 and 30 temporary jobs. Crews from Amalia and Costilla caught a lot of that windfall.

"We did everything we could to keep the locals in on the project as much as possible," says Dan Weinman, owner of PPC Solar.

Leroy's Electric in Costilla was brought in to do some electric work, and Amalia Construction did the dirt work and set up the racks on which the solar panels are placed.

"This was a boost to the economy, a little bit of help," says Larry Salazar, owner of Amalia Construction.

Salazar says he's like most other construction companies: slow and looking for work. He's thankful for the solar array job, but it only kept him busy for a few months. "It was a good thing this was going on, but I have nothing after this. There's nothing going on."

Leroy Lucero, owner of Leroy's Electric, says he's not sure what's next for him and his crew. Lucero hasn't got anything lined up once he's done in Amalia, and he'd be happy to stay busy.

"You know how it is, you want to work," Lucero says. "If there's nothing else going on, it might was well be solar."

When the array is operational, it will sustain two full-time jobs.

PPC Solar is already onto its next array — another 1.5 megawatt project near the Taos Regional Airport being developed by Blue Sky Energy. Weinman says he has "put the feelers out" to see if Lucero's electrician crew wants to be part of that project, but nothing has been decided.

It would be easier to bring them in than train new people, Weinman says, but the timing is tough. The Blue Sky array has a swift construction schedule and Lucero is still finishing things in Amalia.

It's one of many obstacles to making the construction of solar arrays a viable economic model. Jobs like the one in Amalia come and go quickly, and it's unclear how many can be expected in the future.

Arrays have been installed all over Taos County recently. But the co-op is nearing its contractual ceiling with Tri-State on how much renewable energy it can create on its own. Once it hits that limit (5 percent of the co-op's total energy consumption), the flood of projects will likely ebb.

CEO Reyes says the co-op is working on creative ways to continue pursuing solar, but those ideas are subject to political whims at the state and federal levels. To keep people working and keep Taos County at the vanguard of solar energy, Reyes says the Legislature and regulators need to step up.

"There has to be a change in state policy that encourages these kinds of projects," Reyes says. "If you buy local products or hire local labor, there should be a premium on that and the state can do it. That's how you spur economic development."

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The 1.5-megawatt solar array near Amalia was built on 15 acres owned by the Rio Costilla Cooperative Livestock Association.

Thomas Durán of Costilla works at a nearly complete norther Taos County solar array, which was largely built with the help of local labor. Kit Carson Electric Co-op says the array will help to power every home and business between Questa and Costilla on a sunny day.