

KCEC touts solar arrays

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In mid-April, Picuris Pueblo and Kit Carson Electric Cooperative officials celebrated a groundbreaking for a 1-megawatt solar array on the pueblo's land in Taos County. It's the first of seven such arrays Kit Carson plans to build around the rural cooperative's three-county service area over the next year. And it's part of an ambitious long-range plan the Kit Carson board has to eventually provide all of its members' electricity from local, renewable sources.

Kit Carson officials will host an event Saturday (May 6) at KTAOS Solar Center to unveil the next six planned solar arrays and answer questions about the project. KCEC has already built seven solar arrays in different locations around Taos County.

The cooperative has worked on its grand solar power scheme for more than a decade. It had to first break a contract with its old power provider, Tri-State Generation and Transmission, which took a protracted legal battle. Kit Carson still has to pay out millions of dollars as part of the separation agreement, the cost of which has been questioned by some of the cooperative's critics.

But Luis Reyes, Kit Carson's longtime chief executive officer, and Kit Carson trustee Bobby Ortega said the cooperative would have been bound

to that money and more under the old contract. He said the Tri-State divorce was necessary to pursue the cooperative's plans to go solar. Tri-State limited the amount of renewable energy its members could tap into. "If Kit Carson hadn't fought to get out of its contract, it would have been limited by the energy providers to old energy sources "in a world that's rapidly changing," Ortega said in a recent interview.

The cooperative inked an agreement with Guzman Renewable Energy Partners, a subsidiary of Florida-based Guzman Energy, in June 2016 to provide power to its 30,000 members. The company is helping Kit Carson with the solar build-out and is responsible for ensuring there is power available for customers when the sun isn't shining on the arrays.

"We made it clear from the beginning that we wanted to be a new type of energy provider and not fight things that are objectively good for the community, like renewable energy," said Chris Riley, who co-founded Guzman Energy.

"This is far and away the most ambitious energy rollout of a rural cooperative anywhere," Riley added in reference to Kit Carson's plans to build 35 solar arrays total in the next five years.

"You almost have to take a step back where Luis and the board took a very courageous step and said, 'We are going to break with the old and we are going to seek out more economical sources of energy.' They are the first and thus far only rural co-op to break with the traditional supplier," added Leopoldo E. Guzman, founder and CEO of the Guzman Energy.

In the last half-dozen years, the cost of solar energy has dropped dramatically, thanks in part to cheap Chinese-built solar panels driving down the costs of the system. The price drop made solar more competitive with the cost of power generated from coal and nuclear.

Ortega and Reyes said there was another reason for the ambitious solar plan. “Our members told us that’s what they wanted years ago,” Reyes said.

Kit Carson will build the arrays on land it leases or owns. At Picuris, for example, the arrays are built on pueblo land, but the power will be purchased by the cooperative for the next 25 years and provide the pueblo with a connection to the grid.

Ortega and Reyes said placing the solar arrays at locations scattered around the service area does several things. Placing the arrays near existing power lines in small communities makes it easier and cheaper to tie into the existing electric grid. In addition, it maximizes the power generated from the arrays overall. “If all the arrays were lumped in one place, then cloud cover would make them all ineffective. This way, if arrays are shaded in one area, they might not be in another,” said Reyes.

In addition, placing the arrays in local communities helps the cooperative’s members feel like participants. “It’s a cooperative. Every community should feel like it has ownership of its own array,” Ortega said.

Finally, building the arrays in various locations will make it easier to eventually add storage facilities for solar energy as those technologies become available, Reyes said. Working with a company such as Guzman instead of Tri-State will allow the cooperative to be nimble and take advantage of new energy technologies in the rapidly changing power industry.

Each solar array will cost about \$2 million, according to Reyes. While that makes the whole project a minimum \$70 million endeavor, Kit Carson officials and Guzman believe it will stabilize electricity prices for customers in the long run.

Ortega and Reyes say the power agreement with Guzman is expected to save co-op members more than \$50 million over the next decade.

Kit Carson’s board recently approved a consortium of local installers – PPC Solar and Sol Luna Solar – to build the arrays. “Our experience has been that when we get local people to build something, they have more ownership,” Ortega said. “They pass it every day. Their kids pass it every day.”



Planned solar arrays to be built in the next year.

Map courtesy of KCEC

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