



Good Day, Sunshine

OTEC launches community solar program

By Lisa Jacoby

An opportunity to supplement household electricity with solar-generated power is coming soon to Oregon Trail Electric Cooperative member-owners in Baker, Union, Grant and Harney counties.

After more than a year of planning, OTEC is preparing to build a solar farm late this summer along Highway 30 in La Grande near OTEC's Ladd Substation.

Subscriptions to participate in this community solar project will be available starting this month.

The idea was driven by member survey responses across OTEC's territory, says Director of Engineering Charlie Tracy.

He says about 20% of those surveyed said they would want and support a community solar opportunity.

"We have members who are interested in alternative generation, predominantly solar," Charlie says. "We're constantly looking at new and innovative technology, and this has gained a lot of momentum."

OTEC's power generation is 85% hydro, 10% nuclear and 5% Northwest market mix. These sources are 85% renewable and 95% carbon-free.

Charlie says a community solar project appeals to those who, for various reasons, cannot install solar panels on a roof but are intrigued by the idea of solar energy.

To participate in the voluntary program,

a member can buy a solar subscription for a one-time fee of \$250.

In return, the member is credited for the solar output for the next 20 years.

The estimated cost to build the solar farm is \$500,000. There are 2,000 subscriptions available at \$250 each. A member can buy one or multiple subscriptions, Charlie says.

The approach is similar to a Community Supported Agriculture program. A person pays a certain amount upfront to support the farmer's operation, then receives a weekly supply of fresh vegetables throughout the harvest season.

"You can, in essence, prebuy power," Charlie says.



LEFT: OTEC's community solar field will be on this plot along Highway 30 in Union County, near OTEC's Ladd Substation. PHOTO BY SHAYLA ROLLINS **RIGHT:** OTEC Director of Engineering Charlie Tracy, left, and System Engineer Kelly Jobses hold a solar panel. PHOTO BY JOE HATHAWAY

Unlike rooftop solar panels, this benefit can easily transfer if a member moves within OTEC's territory.

"They can take it if they move within OTEC's service territory, or if they move outside the territory they can gift it to a local charity, family or friend," Charlie says.

How the Program Works

Each solar subscription is estimated to produce 167 kWh for a full year of generation. The actual output will vary depending on weather and season.

Those who subscribe will receive a monthly bill that includes a line for solar output. This will show up as a credit and reduce the overall electric bill.

Solar Power and the Electric Grid

Like wind, solar is an intermittent source of energy. A solar farm generates electricity from the power of the sun. Production

Community Solar Program

Beginning in June, OTEC members have the opportunity to buy a subscription for 20 years of solar output from a new solar farm to be installed near La Grande.

One subscription costs \$250. Each month, a member's OTEC bill will include a line for solar output, which shows up as a negative amount and thus reduces the total bill.

An average home uses 700 kilowatt-hours a month. One subscription is expected to generate an average of 13.9 kWh a month.

peaks midday when the sun is directly overhead.

"It generally starts a little in the morning and peaks at noon," Charlie says.

However, this depends on the weather. Solar panels are less effective on cloudy days and ineffective at night.

"It will generate sometimes, but when it's not, it will have to be backed up by our existing power supply, which is clean and renewable hydropower," Charlie says. "Solar makes up less than 1% of our system."

Having backup power available is crucial.

Generating the most power at noon does not meet the needs of most consumers.

OTEC's system power use peaks around 8 a.m. and again around 5:30 p.m.

Although the solar farm will be in Union County, the benefit of solar power—through subscriptions—will be available across OTEC's territory. Subscriptions are available to both residences and businesses. ■

To learn more, go to otec.coop. Under the tab "Energy Solutions," hover over "Renewable Energy" and then select "Community Solar."