



Three more solar farms set to be built in Ontario

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Ontario is getting three more massive solar farms, on top of four announced last month, and the companies behind the multi-million-dollar projects say more are on the way as long as the government keeps paying a premium for the clean power.

Toronto-based SkyPower Corp. and joint-venture partner SunEdison LLC of Baltimore are expected to announce today they are building a 9.12-megawatt solar farm in Norfolk County, about 90 minutes southwest of Toronto.

The emission-free power will be sold into the provincial grid under a 20-year electricity purchase contract with the Ontario Power Authority, which pays 42 cents per kilowatt-hour for solar electricity under the province's standard-offer program.

SkyPower president Kerry Adler said the project is expected to create 50 jobs during the construction phase, which begins this fall, and will likely be complete and generating power by early 2008.

"This is the first of many projects we are going to announce," said Adler, adding that the plan is to build solar farms able to generate at least 50 megawatts.

Meanwhile, California start-up OptiSolar Inc., which captured headlines last month after announcing plans to build four 10-megawatt solar farms at Sarnia, told more than 70 citizens from the neighbouring community of Petrolia last Thursday night that two 10-megawatt farms are planned for their community as well.

Petrolia, located about half an hour from Sarnia, is considered the "cradle of the oil industry" for being home to the first commercial oil well in North America. Mayor John McCharles hinted at the irony of the town becoming a leader in solar.

"We were at the leading edge years ago with the oil industry, now we're going to be leading edge for solar in Canada," he said.

The Petrolia farms will be located on 60 to 100 hectares of industrial and agricultural land being purchased by OptiSolar. More than 600,000 solar panels, which convert sunlight directly into electricity, will be used in the construction of the two energy farms.

Peter Carrie, vice-president of OptiSolar's Canadian subsidiary, told the *Toronto Star* that another 10-megawatt project is being planned for Sarnia and a similar project at another location in Ontario could be announced within the next month.

Asked how many farms in total OptiSolar plans to build, Carrie said 100 megawatts would be a "ballpark" estimate. SkyPower's Adler said earlier that his company has 120 megawatts of potential solar projects in the pipeline.

Together, the projects represent hundreds of millions of dollars of investment in Ontario and, if they were all built, would have the potential of generating as much power during peak operation as the Atikokan coal-fired generating station near Thunder Bay – the equivalent of supplying electricity to more than 30,000 homes.

"Announcements are one thing, but putting a shovel in the ground is another," cautioned Adler, pointing out that reaching power purchase contracts is the first step but doesn't guarantee that all projects will go ahead.

Still, with 69 megawatts already announced, another 20 megawatts to come, and several projects in the pipeline, Ontario has put Canada on the map as a hot spot for solar development, following the path of jurisdictions such as California, Germany and Spain.

The power authority, in its power planning forecasts, estimated that the capacity of solar technology in the province would reach only 40 megawatts over the next 20 years. Based on current announcements, that target will be surpassed sometime in 2009 or 2010.

Consider that in 2004, only 0.11 megawatts of solar power capacity was added to the grid in all of Canada.

The projects have their critics. Many have complained that the government is paying too much of a premium for the power – nearly four times as much as the premium for wind – and that the companies supplying the technology and all solar panel manufacturing are based in the United States.

As for the 42-cent premium OptiSolar and SkyPower will get from the provincial government, Carrie estimated that each 10-megawatt solar farm would add 2.5 cents to the average Ontario consumer's monthly bill. If 100 megawatts were to be built, it would mean a 25-cent increase each month.