

by Darryl Holiday



On the roof of United Displaycraft in Des Plaines is a 650-panel solar photovoltaic array that, with a grant from the state and federal tax incentives, will deliver over 25 years of electricity at less than seven cents per kilowatt hour.

Solar energy systems shine on dim industry

Environmental groups say changes in policy would create jobs in growing field

Though jobs in the solar energy industry are on the rise, Illinois is lagging behind other Midwestern states in solar industry development, according to a new report from The Solar Foundation. According to the National Solar Jobs Census 2010, the solar industry employed an estimated 93,000 workers as of August, though only 533 are employed in the state, according to Environment Illinois.

Sixteen of those jobs are located at Solar Service Inc., based in Niles, Ill, which began installing solar equipment in 1977 and, according to Brandon Leavitt, president of the company, installed the first solar system in the state. "I got into [solar energy] because it's a less expensive way to do something [and] the fuel is free," said Leavitt. "It's a real simple choice and you can get out there and talk about it, but talking about it doesn't change people's minds. You have to do it and show them how it works."

While other states in the Midwest, including Michigan and Wisconsin, ranked fourth and fifth in the nation, respectively, Illinois did not make the top 20 states employing individuals in the solar industry. The report has identified 16,000 solar employment sites nationwide, which combined, contribute to roughly 1 percent of the country's energy portfolio.

"So many of our issues are linked to energy, [such as] unemployment, health and balanced trade," Leavitt said, remarking on the country's need for energy reform and policy changes in Illinois.

Despite Illinois' shortcomings, many environmental groups are optimistic on the state's solar outlook.

"We have this window of opportunity right now we need to take advantage of in order to create a lot of jobs, which we know are going to be created across the U.S.," said Miranda Carter, field associate for Environment Illinois, a citizen-based advocacy organization. "We just want them to be created here in Illinois."

Despite the poor economy, 50 percent of the national solar industry is expected to add jobs in the next 12 months. According to the report, this comes at a time when the U.S. economy is expected to grow at a rate of 2 percent for the same period. Environmental organizers in the state seem to agree the barrier to solar industry growth in Illinois is largely a result of the state's current policy.

"[The outlook] is positive," said Michelle Hickey, program coordinator at the Illinois Solar Energy Association. "We're really at a precipice of a great opportunity and now it's really a matter of policy helping us pave the way for a lot of jobs and growth."

According to the ISEA and Environment Illinois, there are several policy changes that could help Illinois achieve a more robust solar industry. The state's net metering program is one of the policies most closely related to individual residents.

Net metering allows homeowners to install renewable energy generators in their homes—at least a portion of the unused energy can then be sold back to the energy grid for retail credit. Under the state's current law regarding solar equipment, net metering is limited to small installations.

According to Carter, 16 states currently have limits more than 25 times higher than Illinois—allowing more installations to be built by big box stores and communities, among others. She proposes the state raise its limit.

The two groups also agree the state should authorize the financing of Property Accessed Clean Energy, which would allow residents to install solar panels with no out-of-pocket costs. Instead, it would be paid for with savings on their energy bill throughout time. "In a lot of other states around the country, solar has had a lot of help getting off the ground, so that's why we've seen growth in other states and why Illinois is kind of lagging," Carter said. "We haven't had all of those policies that would help it move forward."

Though solar currently makes up less than 1 percent of the state's energy output, all three organizations are hopeful of Illinois' solar future. "If we're able to make these steps then solar will do great in Illinois and we'll get a lot of benefits like job creation and less pollution," Carter said.