

Unlikely allies fight for solar energy in Florida

March 11 2015, by Kerry Sheridan



Workers install solar panels on a rooftop on February 20, 2015 at a home in Palmetto Bay, Florida

Florida is widely known as the Sunshine State but when it comes to harnessing solar power, lots of customers find it just doesn't pay because electricity is already cheap and there is little incentive to make the change from fossil fuels.

Anger over the situation has whipped up an unusual coalition of hardline conservatives, evangelical Christians and liberal environmentalists who want to break down what they describe as a "monopoly" held by big power companies.

Those involved include the Sierra Club, the Christian Coalition, the Libertarian Party, the Evangelical Environment Network, Greenpeace USA and Physicians for Social Responsibility.

The problem, they say, is that Florida is one of only five states that explicitly prohibits anyone other than the big utilities from selling power. Individuals with solar panels can't sell the extra power they produce and solar companies are barred from selling any power that they generate—unless they sell it back to the utility company.

"We are basically outlawing commerce when it involves solar," said Tory Perfetti, chairman of Floridians for Solar Choice and Florida director of Conservatives for Energy Freedom.

"That's what this is ballot initiative is for," he said during a recent drive to collect petition signatures in St. Petersburg.

"It is to open up Florida's energy market, to give people a choice."

The movement needs 700,000 signatures, and organizers say they gathered more than 100,000 in the first month of their drive to allow voters to decide in 2016 whether or not to allow solar providers to sell power directly to consumers.

For environmentalists like David Cullen of the Sierra Club Florida, global warming is the key reason to move away from [fossil fuels](#), which spew greenhouse gases into the atmosphere.

"Some may think this is an unusual group of people to be working together, but what we share is common sense," Cullen said.

Few incentives

California leads the way in solar in the United States, while Florida lags behind at 13th nationwide for installed solar capacity, even trailing small northern states like New Jersey and Massachusetts, according to the Solar Energy Industries Association.



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Most of Florida's electricity is generated from natural gas (62 percent)

and coal (21 percent), according to the US Energy Information Administration.

Another 12 percent comes from nuclear, 2.2 percent comes from solar, and the rest is from other renewables.

"There is a reason why here in Florida solar is not that popular," said Joe Spector, vice president of operations at Ygrene, a company that helps finance solar panels by arranging for homeowners to pay higher property tax for 10 or 20 years instead of paying up front.

"Because our energy costs are actually very low, comparatively speaking."

Ygrene is available to homeowners in 17 cities in Florida—a tiny portion of the state's 20 million population.

For most people in Florida, solar panels require tens of thousands of dollars in cash. Then, they can see their meter move backward when the sun is shining, and move forward at night when they use electricity from the grid.

If a solar user in the Miami area produces more energy than he or she uses, Florida Power and Light (FPL), will send a reimbursement check at the end of the year.

But FPL only pays for any extra solar produced at a rate of three to five cents per kilowatt, while it sells customers electricity at 10 cents per kilowatt.

"FPL is dictating the rates," said Raul Vergara, president of Cutler Bay Solar Solutions.

"In the states where the legislation has changed, the average rate is 11 and 12 cents a kilowatt."



Raul Vergara, president of Cutler Bay Solar Solutions, stands near his latest solar installation on February 20, 2015 at a mansion in Palmetto Bay, Florida

Mark Heise, a lawyer who recently installed [solar panels](#) on his house in a southern suburb of Miami, paid \$40,000, or \$28,000 after getting a 30 percent federal tax break. The panels have lowered his bill, but not eliminated it.

"It was definitely still worth it," he said.

"I am realizing the financial advantages each month and my kids see it is important to take care of the environment."

'Gangbusters'

The new political movement hopes to make power-purchasing agreements (PPAs) legal in Florida, whereby a solar company can install panels on a person's roof for no upfront cash and then sell the energy to the customer. Any extra [solar power](#) could be sold to neighbors, tenants, or private companies.



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"In other states where this type of arrangement is allowed, solar development has gone wild. It has gone gangbusters," said George Cavros of the Southern Alliance for Clean Energy.

FPL, the biggest utility in Florida, declined an AFP request for comment.

Duke Energy, the second largest utility in the state, said solar "will be an important part of Florida's energy future," but pointed out that obstacles remain. Unlike natural gas which can provide power 24 hours a day, solar doesn't work at night. It cannot be stored cost-effectively, and creates power swings on the grid, a spokesman told AFP.

"Even though solar costs have decreased significantly in recent years, right now, solar still costs more than traditional electricity resources," he said.

The conservative group Americans for Prosperity, funded by the billionaire Koch brothers, has begun to push back against the drive for solar choice. The group sent a letter to supporters warning of higher electricity costs if the ballot measure is passed.

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Citation: Unlikely allies fight for solar energy in Florida (2015, March 11) retrieved 20 September 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-03-allies-solar-energy-florida.html>

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