

Can solar work help save jobs at space center

June 2 2009, By Kevin Spear

NASA and Florida Power & Light Co. took a big step last week toward building a pair of clean-electricity plants at Kennedy Space Center.

Others hope the space agency and energy giant are taking even bigger strides toward creating new, green jobs for thousands of KSC workers who will be out of work when space shuttles stop flying as soon as next year.

During a ceremonial announcement at the KSC visitors center, FP&L officials laid out plans to install [solar panels](#) at two sites that will produce enough [power](#) for about 1,200 homes.

The \$80 million venture is part of a trio of FP&L solar projects in Florida that will cost about \$700 million and generate about 110 megawatts of electricity. That amounts to roughly the output of a small coal-fired power plant, but it's also enough to vault Florida into second place among states, behind California, for solar energy output.

U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson, D-Fla., praised FP&L, the state's biggest utility, for installing the pair of solar plants at the space center, with work to start next week and be done in about a year.

The larger of the two will cover former citrus groves a few miles south of the visitor's center and generate 10 megawatts for utility customers. The smaller plant will provide KSC with 1 megawatt of power as a form of rent payment for the combined 50 acres that will be covered with 36,000 solar panels.

"Let's talk about expanding this 10-megawatt plant to much more, and therefore provide those jobs two years down the road when we desperately need them here," said Nelson, adding that Congress could soon approve tax incentives for such renewable-energy investments.

As it stands, the KSC project will signal to industry watchers that Brevard County is serious about using the sun to generate electricity, said Bob Reedy, a director at the Florida Solar Energy Center in Cocoa. That, in turn, could lure big companies to set up operations in the area, he said.

FP&L President Armando Olivera said his company would already be looking at installing more solar panels at KSC and elsewhere in the state. But he said he was disappointed the state Legislature earlier this year failed to adopt a standard for the amount of green energy utilities must use.

That left FP&L without the legal clarity it needs to push forward with more solar, Olivera said.

"We could site a solar-manufacturing facility in [Florida](#) to build solar panels, if we could show there would be enough work for the next three to five years," Olivera said. "We felt we could easily do another 300 megawatts."

KSC Director Bob Cabana said green-energy jobs could help hold a talented work force in place while [NASA](#) brings on the Constellation program for the agency's next series of manned space flights.

"Once the shuttle stops flying, there's going to be a decrease in the total number of jobs here at KSC," Cabana said. "We're looking at ways to make that transition and find jobs."

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