

In solar power, N.J. shines

June 1 2010, By Chelsea Conaboy

If NFI Industries' calculations are right, the three acres of solar panels just installed on the roof of its Cherry Hill, N.J., headquarters will save \$750,000 in energy costs over 15 years and become a green feather in its cap. The 1.32-megawatt project could also be a launchpad.

It is the first renewable development designed and installed by NFI Solar, a new division in the 77-year-old trucking and logistics company, which the Brown family started as a coal-hauling operation in North Jersey.

Still family-owned, NFI expanded to include construction, international shipping, and warehousing. Jordan Brown, the fourth generation, is leading an effort to put large solar power systems on some of the 18 million square feet of commercial buildings it owns or operates nationwide, about a third of them in New Jersey. He and partner Mitch Trellis want to help clients do the same.

Brown said the initiative was critical to keep NFI relevant and reduce the climate impact of its 2,200 trucks on the road.

"We want to make sure there is a fifth, sixth, and seventh generation," he said.

His plans reflect a boom in commercial [solar power](#) in New Jersey.

Because of its successful rebate and incentive programs, the state has more [solar electricity](#) -- 128 megawatts as of December -- than any other

state but California, and was second in installations last year.

Two factors helped. The federal government is offering a 30 percent cash grant for commercial installations through the end of the year, when it will convert to a tax credit. And people are beginning to trust New Jersey's market-driven incentive, said Larry Sherwood, an analyst with the Interstate Renewable Energy Council.

Under a program that started in 2007 but "hit its stride" last year, Sherwood said, owners of solar generation can sell credits at auction -- one for every megawatt produced -- to utilities that are required to invest in renewable energy.

Brown said the credits could provide as much as a 50 percent return on the Cherry Hill project.

With help from the grant and the credits, a 1.7 megawatt rooftop installation under way at a Dietz & Watson distribution center in Delanco, N.J., will be paid for in eight years instead of 32, chief operating officer Chris Eni said.

Absolutely Energized Solar in Millstone Township, N.J., an eight-year industry veteran, is handling the installation there. President Dan Lichtman said he expected to be booked for the year within two weeks, and to install about 6 megawatts this year, nearly twice 2009's total.

Sea Box, a Cinnaminson, N.J., manufacturer of shipping containers, hopes to start construction on 2 megawatts of generation, an investment of up to \$10 million, before the December federal grant deadline.

International Rollforms, a metal manufacturer in Sewell, N.J., already has secured its grant with half a megawatt that came online last fall.

With so much movement in commercial solar, NFI Solar's Trellis last year pitched the new endeavor to Brown, a college friend.

"We're very lucky that his family has the vision and the resources to ramp this up very quickly," said Trellis, who previously worked for New York environmental investment firm RNK Capital.

NFI Solar is now looking to put panels on top of a warehouse owned by an NFI subsidiary in Vineland, N.J., and is pursuing utility-scale projects, too.

The company has submitted bids to provide between 2 and 4 megawatts of power to the Vineland Municipal Electric Utility with panels built on NFI property. And it is seeking local approvals for 8 megawatts on company land in Oldsman Township, N.J., to supply an abutting industrial park.

NFI Solar is focused in New Jersey because of the state's incentives, but with rooftops and commercial land across the country, it is in a position to take advantage of programs as states put them in place, Trellis said.

The company, Brown said, "is in this business for the long haul."

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Distributed by McClatchy-Tribune Information Services.

Citation: In solar power, N.J. shines (2010, June 1) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-06-solar-power-nj.html>

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