

Company turning a sealed toxic dump into a solar-energy development

September 20 2010, By Kevin Riordan

Atop a sealed mound of industrial waste on a historically toxic swath of Gloucester County, N.J., Bill Geary sees a sunny future.

His company awaits delivery of about 6,500 solar panels for the former Rollins Environmental facility, where six people died and at least 30 were injured after a massive explosion on Dec. 8, 1977.

This notoriously wounded place looks far from hellacious; in fact, it's sort of scenic. Geary and I climb the slope of the defunct landfill that rises above the marshy grass in the heart of the site.

With maps and renderings, Geary indicates where "an array" of 6-by-3-foot solar panels will be connected "like Legos." Covering six of 90 acres of the landfill's grassy surface, it will generate 1.5 megawatts of electricity, potentially enough for 1,100 homes.

"This is our very first [solar array](#), and we'd like to have it energized by the end of January at the latest," says Geary, an affable Bostonian who's president of Clean Harbors Environmental Services.

Founded in 1980, the Massachusetts-based firm is among the largest hazardous-waste cleanup companies in the Northern Hemisphere (it's been working on the [Gulf of Mexico](#) oil spill). Clean Harbors obtained the 480-acre Logan Township property in 2002, and maintains crews and equipment there for response to regional environmental emergencies.

In the unregulated era before the 1970s, industrial waste of all sorts was transported to, and stored and incinerated at, Rollins. The facility operated in stunning proximity to the Raccoon Creek, the Delaware River, and farms and homes. It closed in 2001 after its owner at the time, a company called Safety-Kleen, went bankrupt.

Although the landfill was sealed before 2002, Clean Harbors has since spent \$7.7 million to remediate other environmental damage on the property. The new \$7.2 million solar panels will offset the use of commercial power on the site.

"The remediation itself will be powered by renewable energy," Geary says.

Noting that the New Jersey township has installed solar panels on the municipal building, Logan Mayor Frank Minor is enthusiastic.

"It's wonderful," says the mayor, who hopes the project will generate jobs as well as electricity.

Surplus power could well be an incentive for adjacent development, Geary says. "We can also sell it back" to the utility grid, he adds.

"Turning brown into green," agrees Robert W. Bucknam Jr., the Haddonfield, N.J., lawyer who helped Clean Harbors obtain the approvals required for the project.

The chair of the land use and environmental permitting group at Archer & Greiner, Bucknam praises the state's innovative and aggressive incentives for solar development.

No wonder private firms are rushing to install [solar panels](#) atop the vast warehouses along the turnpike; closed landfills are likewise attractive.

Arrays are already in place on two former landfills, and 15 more are in development elsewhere in the state.

"We looked at 20 other locations in other states, but we decided on this one because of New Jersey's incentives," says Geary, citing in particular the state's Solar Renewable Energy Certificates (SRECs).

Funded by utility ratepayers, SRECs are bought and sold like commodities and are currently valued at \$605.97 each, according to the state Board of Public Utilities.

The Logan project also "allows us to reuse a landfill that otherwise would have no use," Geary says, taking pains to add, "The landfill is closed; it's capped; it's never going to be opened again."

The Sierra Club of New Jersey has come out in favor of landfill solar projects. And solar support crosses party lines, says Bucknam, noting that federal and state incentives have continued despite political changes in Washington and Trenton, N.J.

"Everyone understands this is good for the environment and the economy, and that's among the reasons they're doing it," Geary says. "It's why we're here. It's a win-win situation."

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