

# First Solar CEO to step down, shares plummet

October 25 2011, By CHRIS KAHN , AP Energy Writer

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(AP) -- The CEO of the nation's largest solar company is out, First Solar announced Tuesday, sending its shares tumbling more than 24 percent.

Rob Gillette, who took over at the company less than three years ago, becomes the latest in a series of high-level departures at First Solar, based in Tempe, Ariz.

First Solar would only say that Gillette was "no longer serving as [chief executive officer](#)."

The timing of the exit, however, comes as some of the most high-profile companies in the sector fall under a congressional microscope.

GOP critics have sought to halt solar loan guarantees since a one-time industry favorite, Solyndra LLC, sought [bankruptcy protection](#) after receiving a half-billion loan guarantee.

And on Sept. 30, First Solar was the recipient of two loan guarantees from the same program just before it was set to expire.

First Solar didn't return calls seeking comment.

Board Chairman and company founder Mike Ahearn will take over as CEO on an interim basis, overseeing an executive team that has seen plenty of change recently.

Bruce Sohn resigned as president of operations in April and utility systems chief Jens Meyerhoff announced that he was leaving in August.

Gillette, a former chief executive at Honeywell Aerospace, was hired to steer the company as the entire industry headed into a tough period. Rising competition from [Chinese manufacturers](#) and a drop in panel prices slashed profits throughout the industry and some say that is what led to Solyndra's downfall.

It was one of three manufacturers to file for bankruptcy in the last two months.

In its latest financial report, First Solar said it sold more panels than the same period last year, but weak pricing cut profits by 62 percent.

Gillette remained outwardly positive, telling investors that better times were ahead for the [solar industry](#). Germany, Italy, and other European countries that make up the biggest market for solar panels appeared to be "bouncing back" from the continent's financial crisis, he said.

"I think we will see some stability in the markets," Gillette said in August. "I think in Europe we are still kind of all bouncing back."

First Solar is expected to release its third-quarter results in the next few weeks.

Shares of First Solar Inc. fell \$14.18 to \$43.77 in afternoon trading.

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