

Solar installations doubled last year, with California leading the way

March 19 2012, By Dana Hull

The amount of photovoltaic solar panels installed in the United States more than doubled from 2010 to 2011, representing a historic year for the American solar industry.

A year-in-review report jointly released Wednesday by the Solar Energy Industries Association (SEIA) and GTM Research found that 1,855 [megawatts](#) were installed nationwide in 2011, up from 887 megawatts in 2010 - for a growth of 109 percent.

"After a record-breaking 2011, the U.S. has proved itself as a viable market for solar on a global scale," says the executive summary of the report. "In 2011, the U.S. market's share of global (photovoltaic) installations rose from 5 percent to 7 percent and should continue to grow. We forecast U.S. market share to increase steadily over the next five years, ultimately reaching nearly 15 percent in 2016."

Installation figures for photovoltaic, or PV, solar panels, which convert sunlight directly into electricity, include those on homes and businesses as well as much larger, utility-scale [power](#) plants.

One megawatt is enough to power about 750 to 1,000 homes. But because the sun doesn't shine all the time, [solar industry](#) experts typically say that 1 megawatt of solar power capacity is sufficient to power about 200 households.

California continued to lead the nation, installing 542 megawatts,

accounting for 29 percent of all installations in the country. Next came New Jersey, Arizona and New Mexico.

More than 61,000 individual solar projects were completed in 2011, including many large installations serving commercial or utility scale clients.

There were 28 projects larger than 10 megawatts each, up from just two in 2009.

"We're seeing an incredible increase in the number of utility-scale projects," said Rhone Resch, president and CEO of SEIA. "There's technology acceptance of solar by utilities and companies that traditionally built natural [gas power plants](#). Solar is the next great opportunity."

The record number of installations was fueled, in part, by a free-fall in solar panel prices, which dropped more than 50 percent in 2011.

But lower prices put enormous pressure on solar manufacturers like Fremont, Calif.-based Solyndra, which filed for bankruptcy in September.

Solar still counts for less than 1 percent of California's electricity, most of which comes from natural gas, two nuclear power plants and hydropower.

But advocates, including California Gov. Jerry Brown, want solar to play a key role in his state's energy future, in part because [solar projects](#) generate local installation jobs. Brown hopes to add 12,000 megawatts of rooftop solar generation by 2020.

California utilities are also under pressure to meet the state's aggressive

Renewable Portfolio Standard, which calls for 33 percent of electricity to come from renewable sources by 2020. In 2011, San Francisco-based utility PG&E began receiving power from five solar photovoltaic projects built by independent developers, bring 135 megawatts of new capacity online.

TOP 2011 SOLAR INSTALLATIONS

Top 10 states for photovoltaic solar installations in 2011:

1. California, 542 megawatts installed
2. New Jersey, 313 Mw
3. Arizona 273, Mw
4. New Mexico, 116 Mw
5. Colorado, 91 Mw
6. Pennsylvania, 88 Mw
7. New York, 60 Mw
8. North Carolina, 55 Mw
9. Texas, 47 Mw
10. Nevada, 44 Mw

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