

A Little Bit of Sunshine

Solar and wind energy help power the state of Texas.

by CRYSTAL MEDLER

Sunset over the Guadalupe Mountains
Photo by Heather Overman

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“As other finite resources will eventually be depleted and may be polluting and contributing to global warming and climate change, renewable energies become more prominent and essential for the future of our energy and our planet.”

— Hala Ballouz, president of the Texas Renewable Energy Industries Alliance (TREIA)

Texas and oil may be synonymous, but there's another energy sector where the state excels: renewables.

The land of oil rigs has a rich resource in renewables. Clean resources for economic development, sustainability, climate change control, resiliency, as well as the potential for energy security independence, are jewels that are being chiseled, polished and brought to the surface.

As one of the largest renewable energy states, Texas leads the nation in the amount of wind energy produced. There are more than 14,000 megawatts of wind energy capacity in Texas already.

“Reliance on fuel-dependent sources of energy can threaten energy security and expose our economy to price volatility,” says

Hala Ballouz, president of the Texas Renewable Energy Industries Alliance (TREIA). “Diversification helps make energy in Texas more robust and dependable, and it provides more independence from changing global economies and geopolitical conditions.”

TREIA provides support to new and existing businesses with networking support through conferences and workshops, and by staging their new business models and technologies. In addition, the state offers several incentives for companies looking to make the switch to solar energy. The Property Assess Clean Energy program allows commercial properties to get loans for energy efficiency upgrades or renewable energy devices. In Austin and San Antonio, municipalities offer rebates for companies that install solar.



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— Charlie Hemmeline, executive director of the Texas Solar Power Association (TSPA)

As the prices of renewable energy technologies drop and new cutting-edge technologies emerge, Texas will continue to see more renewable energy development. With more advanced technologies such as smarter inverters and energy storage, the industry may be looking at a future energy market that is completely sustainable, and that will likely shift toward smaller self-sufficient grid systems that are more clean, secure and resilient.

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Vast Resources

But the environment isn't the only thing that renewable energy is improving. The solar industry provides 7,000 jobs in the state and grew almost 68 percent since last year. Wind, solar, biomass and biofuels all contribute to the Texas economy. The leading industry is wind power, with solar energy following closely behind.

“Demand for solar in Texas is not a result of a procurement obligation,” says Charlie Hemmeline, executive director of the Texas Solar Power Association (TSPA). “Cities like Austin, San Antonio and Georgetown have customers who want affordable, clean, reliable

power, and they are making procurement decisions accordingly.”

These new developments are largely due to the cost of solar-generated electricity falling 78 percent in the past five years. Solar is now the cheapest on-peak electricity resource generated in Texas.

Power providers are seeing solar as a meaningful cost-competitive contribution to their portfolios.

Residential and commercial customers are also looking to solar to save money and better manage their electricity costs.

“Solar is an inherently Texas-based energy resource and our great state has more total solar power potential than any other state in the country, owing to our intense sunshine and large land area,” says Hemmeline. “Turning that vast underutilized resource into valuable electricity keeps more of our energy dollars in Texas and provides tremendous economic development, for both urban and rural communities throughout the state.”

The industry builds a path for new business opportunities as well. O3 Energy Solutions is a renewable energy developer and construction firm, whose focus is solar and wind energy projects for commercial and small utility clients.

“We decided to locate our business in Texas because of the favorable tax treatment that Texas shows to business,” says Brad Stutzman, managing director of O3 Energy Solutions, “specifically to companies that focus on renewable energy.”

More companies and residents are adopting solar energy, as the industry anticipates adding another 2,100 jobs in the state this year. “Solar is contagious,” says Lucy Stolzenberg, executive director of the Texas Solar Energy Society. “We knew all along if you put people who

don't know about solar with people who have solar, adoption happens a lot quicker.”

Many in the industry are convinced that it's only a matter of time before the majority of us are either putting solar panels on our roofs or powering our

electronics with gusts of wind. Texas may be known for oil, but its renewable energy that has helped lower electricity prices for the end consumer.

As long as the wind blows and the sun shines, there will be energy in Texas. ★