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Shining Bright: Growing Solar Jobs in Iowa

Report: Solar Investment Would Yield Jobs, More for Iowa Economy

DES MOINES, Iowa — A new report shows Iowa could create thousands of new jobs and economic benefits by developing solar power with state policies that ensure Iowa reaps solar's full rewards.

"Iowa has a choice to make: sit on the sidelines and watch as surrounding states attract the investment and jobs solar will inevitably bring, or aggressively pursue solar energy as it did decades ago with wind and become a national leader," according to the report.

The report included job-impact analysis by Iowa State University researcher David Swenson, who found that during the fifth year of a program to install 300 megawatts of solar power in Iowa, the equivalent of almost 5,000 jobs would be created and over $332 million in value added to Iowa's economy.

"The job creation potential of the solar industry is surprisingly large," said David Osterberg, executive director of the nonpartisan Iowa Policy Project, which produced the report in collaboration with the Iowa Environmental Council, Environmental Law and Policy Center and the Vote Solar Initiative.

A solar industry developer, former Iowa and NFL football star Tim Dwight, said the report confirms what he has seen in the energy marketplace.

"This is the right time for Iowa to strike. Everyone is looking for a way to create jobs, and the solar industry is a good investment here in Iowa where we already rely on the sun to power crop growth," Dwight said.

Iowa had 3,675 MW of wind power in 2010, growing from just 243 MW of capacity in 2000. Three hundred megawatts of solar, Osterberg said, would be larger than the largest wind farm in Iowa.

"It is very doable. But it will take a commitment from policymakers and interest in private industry to make it happen. Iowa would be a big winner," Osterberg said.

"Wind power has created huge benefits for Iowa, and solar can do the same," said Steve Falck, senior policy advocate at the Environmental Law & Policy Center. "Now is the time for the Legislature to step up to the plate and turn this job-creating potential into reality."

The report noted that solar markets are flourishing where good policy has made solar energy accessible and offered reasonable incentives to drive private investment in solar technology. "Taxpayers should demand a return with any investment, and solar offers it," Falck said.

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In his analysis, ISU's Swenson estimated during the five years of installing 300 MW of solar the average annual impact would be:

- $174 million value added to the economy,
- $302 million increased industrial output, and
- $99 million increased labor income.

Those numbers include sizable indirect effects — spinoff economic effects caused by the initial investment.

"Growth in the solar industry means direct jobs for more than just rooftop installers but also for electricians, builders, contractors, engineers, technicians, financiers, lawyers, marketers and salespeople," the report stated.

Osterberg said it was important to turn to Swenson for this analysis because he is very careful about assuring reliable estimates.

"We chose 300 megawatts as a target because it is sufficiently aggressive, yet reasonably could be done if Iowa's leaders got behind it," he said.

Nathaniel Baer of the Iowa Environmental Council noted the finding that various incentives can support a strong solar goal. One bill this year would provide $10 million in solar incentives to encourage Iowa homeowners and businesses to install solar power.

Baer said Iowa has experience and a track record of success in developing clean, renewable sources of energy.

"There are many other options including production based incentives, tax credits and waivers, an expansion of Iowa's first-in–the-nation renewable energy standard, and low-interest financing programs," according to the report. "Iowa already has the essential net metering and interconnection policies in place to help facilitate customers' access to the grid and ensure they receive fair credit for the power they produce."

The report noted at least 25 Iowa businesses and nonprofits and 16 Iowa universities, colleges, community colleges, schools and libraries, as well as many private homes, use solar energy. It focuses on three examples: Allsteel in Muscatine, Marshalltown Public Library, and a home in Spencer.

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