Small business gets big boost from solar power

PAM SOHNAssociated Press

A small manufacturer in Pikeville became a state star this month when its owner, Lester Burks, switched on one of the largest solar electric systems in the Volunteer State - and the first sun power producer in Bledsoe County.

Life Line Foods, the county's largest manufacturer, has installed 128 solar panels on the roof of the family owned liquid dietary supplements factory.

Burks said the system, largely paid for with grants from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and tax credits, is expected to generate half of the company's electric power. The grid-tied system will feed into the utility lines of Volunteer Energy Cooperative, and the Tennessee Valley Authority.

"Our commitment here is to motivate and inspire as many people as possible to get healthy, and this is just a continuation to do that," Burks said recently at a ribbon cutting ceremony. "By using the solar system to reduce the pollutants put into the air made by gas-fired or coal-fired plants, we have cleaner air to breathe for all of us. So its just the right thing to do at this time."

Life Line Foods, maker of Buried Treasure liquid dietary supplements, received a 25 percent incentive grant from the USDA Rural Energy for America Program incentive, as well as other helps that ultimately paid for about 75 percent of the $200,000 solar system's purchase and installation, he said.

To defray the cost of buying and installing the solar panels, the company also received a 40 percent grant from the Tennessee Clean Energy Technology program, plus 30 percent federal tax credits and a one-time $1,000 grant from TVA.

The 40-year-old Life Line Foods employs 19 people in addition to several Burks family members and more than 30 salespeople across the country. Life Line Foods' products are marketed in upscale and organic food and vitamin stores, Burks said.

LightWave Solar Electric's Steve Johnson, the project's solar engineer and designer from Nashville, said the solar array is expected to produce electricity for the next 40 to 50 years.

"The panels have a 25-year warranty, and there are no moving parts, so they just sit there knocking out energy," Johnson said.

Susan Ross, TVA's senior manager of Generation Partners, said TVA now has 145 solar generation partners.

Life Line's system is the largest in the state to receive partial funding from the USDA energy incentive fund, which is available to any farm or rural business.

"Renewable energy can lower the cost of doing business, and that's good for jobs in rural communities," said USDA State Director Bobby Goode.

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Information from: Chattanooga Times Free Press, http://www.timesfreepress.com

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