Tennessee solar study says need to stay aggressive

BILL POOVEY - Associated Press - Associated Press

Tennessee's solar and related industries provide more than 6,400 jobs in a growing green economic sector, but the state needs to stay aggressive in supporting and pursuing the ventures, a report released Thursday shows.

The report released by the Tennessee Solar Institute shows the state has more than 200 organizations involved in solar power, including 174 for-profit entities.

The institute is part of a Volunteer State Solar Initiative that focuses on job creation, education, renewable power production and technology commercialization as a partnership that includes the University of Tennessee and Oak Ridge National Laboratory. The institute said its grant programs have generated more than $40 million in private investments, with a total benefit of about $64 million to the state's economy.

There have been 33 new ventures since 2008 and 15 in 2010 alone, with more than 6,400 jobs in solar and related industries, the report shows.

Wampler's Farm Sausage President and CEO Ted Wampler Jr. told reporters in a telephone news conference on the report that two solar systems installed at his facility in Lenoir City are environmentally friendly and saving him money.

Other participants included representatives of Sharp Electronics in Memphis, Shoals Technology Group in Portland and Diversified Power International in Piney Flats.

The report also refers to a Middle Tennessee State University study earlier this year that showed six major green businesses and initiatives, such as a the Hemlock Semiconductor plant in Clarksville, will directly or indirectly create more than 16,500 permanent jobs.

The new report shows that in 2008, Tennessee had less than 1.3 kW of installed solar power capacity, enough to power 20 percent of one average home. At the end of 2011, solar capacity grew to about 17 MW, enough to power about 1,300 average homes. By the end of 20112, solar power capacity is expected to exceed 23 MW, the report shows.

Institute programs director John Sanseverino said the report that includes survey responses from more than 70 Tennessee companies also shows that if Tennessee fails to capitalize on its solar energy efforts there is a risk of losing investment and jobs to North Carolina, Georgia and other states with "aggressively growing solar sectors."

Wampler said his business has "benefitted greatly" from using solar power and has used other Tennessee companies that make and install the equipment.

"From a community standpoint, solar panels are the right thing to do," Wampler said. "From an economic standpoint it is the smart thing."

The report said fully implementing initiatives such as Gov. Bill Haslam's Jobs4TN plan "would further strengthen the solar manufacturing sector."

Sanseverino said Haslam's Republican administration has been no less aggressive about supporting and pursuing solar energy ventures than his Democratic predecessor, Gov. Phil Bredesen.

Bredesen helped recruit two companies that make polysilicon, a material used to make solar cells and semiconductor devices. Hemlock Semiconductor Corp. is building a plant in Clarksville and Wacker Chemie AG is building one near Cleveland.

Stephen Smith, executive director of the Southern Alliance for Clean Energy, has pushed for more conservation and use of alternative energy. He said in a separate telephone interview that he is not sure about Haslam's support of pursuing solar power ventures.

Smith said Tennessee is a regional leader in solar power and "what is unclear is whether the current administration maintains the same level of commitment to this sector."

Haslam spokesman David Smith did not return a telephone message seeking comment.

Dean Solon, president and CEO of Shoals Technologies Group, said in the institute news conference that the solar industry currently has too many suppliers and "not enough customer base."

He also said the technology is quickly changing and a solar field installed right now is the "equivalent of that first desk top computer you put on your desk."

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