

Mega Solar Park Planned nearby Fukushima Daiichi

New Scientist

With nuclear power on the ropes in Japan, it could be solar power's time to shine. Minamisoma City in Fukushima prefecture has signed an agreement with Toshiba to build the country's biggest solar park. The deal comes weeks after Japan introduced feed-in tariffs to subsidize renewable energy - a move that could see the nation become one of the world's largest markets for solar power.

Parts of Minamisoma are around 10 kilometers from the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant, and land there has been contaminated by radiation fallout. "Moving away from a dependency on nuclear is of course involved [with the agreement to build the solar park]," a city official said.

Both Minamisoma and neighboring Namie have called for the cancellation of plans to build a nearby nuclear power plant - although Minamisoma has received \$6.4 million over the past 25 years for initially agreeing to host the facility.

A number of Japanese municipalities have started solar projects in recent months. Plans have been drawn up for large-scale solar parks in Hokkaido and Kyushu, while SB Energy began operating two megasolar facilities, in Kyoto and Gunma, on 1 July.

"New solar projects are being generated day by day," says Toshiba's Yuji Shimada.

Solar, wind, biomass and geothermal energy still account for just 1 per cent of Japan's power capacity, however, so Japan has introduced a tariff to encourage investment. Utilities will pay solar energy firms around \$0.5 per kilowatt-hour - triple the standard industrial electricity price. The extra money will come through a rise in electricity prices.

Some estimates suggest the move could help Japan leapfrog Italy and become the second-biggest market for solar power after Germany - although business groups fear that Japan's economic recovery will slow as a result of the electricity price rise.

Meanwhile, Japan's nuclear power industry will continue to provide competition. A reactor at the Oi nuclear facility in Fukui prefecture was brought back online as the tariffs were introduced.

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Published on Chem.Info (<http://www.chem.info>)

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