NJ gov touts solar's benefits at groundbreaking

ANGELA DELLI SANTI - Associated Press - Associated Press

Gov. Chris Christie helped break ground Tuesday on a 6-acre solar farm, pledging the administration's continued commitment to develop renewable energy as environmentalists cited the Republican governor's record on clean energy.

The Public Service Electric & Gas project is being built on a long-vacated site that once held a gas manufacturing plant and has since been remediated. PSE&G Chairman Ralph Izzo said reclaiming brownfields and landfills has been a centerpiece of the company's solar-energy efforts. The project, which will generate 1 megawatt of electricity, or enough to power 800 to 1,000 homes, is receiving no direct state subsidies, PSE&G spokesman Mike Jennings said.

PSE&G is part of Public Service Enterprise Group Inc.

Christie said such projects create jobs and are good for the environment. This one will employ 65 union workers.

"Solar investment projects like the Hackensack Solar Farm are an integral part of our state's renewable energy portfolio, increasing New Jersey's solar capacity, creating jobs and securing the protection of our precious environmental resources," Christie said.

Izzo said the utility plans to seek approval from the Board of Public Utilities to invest up to $883 million to expand the company's Solar 4 All and solar loan programs to develop an additional 233 megawatts of solar capacity.

Christie signed legislation a week ago to stabilize the country's second largest solar market, which had faltered.

The measure, which had bipartisan support in the Legislature, increases the percentage of total power utilities must derive from solar energy to 2 percent in 2014, from about half a percent now. The stepped-up requirement should help increase prices for the solar credits that utilities buy from solar producers. Prices had plummeted because more solar energy was being produced than the utilities needed.

Some environmentalists blame Christie for the solar industry's troubles. They say the governor's decisions to pull New Jersey out of a multistate greenhouse-gas reduction pact, reduce clean energy goals and siphon $600 million in clean energy funds to balance the state budget pushed the solar industry to near collapse.

They say Christie is more interested in how his policies play nationally than in supporting clean energy projects. And they insist New Jersey's potential for solar energy production is not being maximized.

Christie has said the regional anti-pollution pact was unsuccessful at reducing carbon emissions.

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