Army's largest solar array dedicated in New Mexico

SUSAN MONTOYA BRYAN - Associated Press - Associated Press

The U.S. Army dedicated its largest solar energy-producing system on Wednesday at White Sands Missile Range in southern New Mexico.

The $16.8 million array includes nearly 15,500 sun-tracking solar panels spread across 42 acres. It will be capable of producing 10 million kilowatt-hours of electricity each year — enough to meet about 10 percent of the need of the missile range.

With abundant sunshine, New Mexico made an ideal site for the project, said Garrison Commander Col. Leo Pullar, one of the officials who attended the ceremony.

"This project illustrates the U.S. Army's commitment to going green, our focus on operating on net zero energy, and doing what we can to help protect the environment," Pullar said in a statement.

Other electricity generating stations fueled by renewable resources have been developed on a handful of Army installations around the country. The projects included solar and wind systems at Arizona's Fort Huachuca and biomass systems at Fort Stewart in Georgia and the Red River Army Depot in Texas.

Federal law currently requires at least 7.5 percent of an installation's total electricity consumption to include energy produced by renewable resources. The Defense Department has set a voluntary goal of 25 percent by 2025.

The Army has been focusing on purchasing electricity generated from solar, wind, geothermal and biomass sources to meet the benchmarks. In August, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers issued requests for proposals for purchasing $7 billion of electricity over 30 years from renewable energy plants built and operated by contractors using private financing.

At White Sands, Siemens Industry Inc. will be operating the new solar array and selling the electricity to the missile range.

Officials said the Army will own the renewable energy credits associated with the solar plant and will use them toward meeting federal renewable energy mandates.

Construction of the 4.1 megawatt array took about eight months. Work was completed in December, and officials expect the system to save White Sands more than $930,000 a year.

California-based technology company Solaria Corp. designed the array's trackers.

"The productivity is amazing," Solaria CEO Dan Shugar said in an interview. "You get about 30 percent more energy than you do out of a stationary array."

Shugar said the Defense Department, which is by far the federal government's largest energy consumer, is interested in renewable energy for cutting operating costs and enhancing security.

"The U.S. is one of the fastest growing solar markets in the world, and the government sector is one strong component of that," he said.

The U.S. now has more than 6.4 gigawatts of installed solar electric capacity, according to the Solar Energy Industries Association. That's enough power for more than 1 million households.

During the third quarter last year, 684 megawatts of solar capacity was installed in the U.S. That's nearly double what was installed during the same period in 2011, and experts said the growth is expected to continue as prices drop and state and federal mandates require higher percentages of renewable energy.

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