Solar Industry Pushes for More Use in Ga.

RAY HENRY, Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — The solar industry in Georgia is pushing a power monopoly to expand its use of solar energy as it plans to meet the state's electricity needs over the next two decades.

State utility regulators heard testimony Tuesday on the energy plans from Southern Co. subsidiary Georgia Power, which must submit new plans every three years. Advocates for the state's solar power industry and tea party leaders fault Georgia Power for not including new forms of solar energy in its planning.

"We think solar is the way to go," Debbie Dooley, a coordinator for the Tea Party Patriots, told the elected members of the Public Service Commission. "The sun is free, it's there. Understand Georgia Power is not being as aggressive on solar power and solar energy as they should be because they're trying to protect their monopoly."

The utility is currently building two nuclear reactors at Plant Vogtle, southeast of Augusta. It also is retiring 15 fossil fuel plants viewed as economically obsolete, in some cases because it would be too expensive to equip them to comply with more stringent environmental rules. After rolling out a new program, Georgia Power officials expect they will have agreements to buy 270 megawatts of solar energy in the state.

But the electric utility remains cautious on a more widespread use of renewable energy, an attitude that extends to the company's top leaders. Southern Co. CEO Tom Fanning has repeatedly said he views renewable energy as a niche energy source, not a main source.

A consultant for the Georgia Solar Energy Industries Association, Karl Rabago, said traditional utilities historically underestimate the value of solar power systems. In Georgia, electric monopolies are guaranteed a profit under law when they spend money to build, maintain and run the infrastructure that creates electricity. A significant expansion of solar power could threaten that business model.

"These projects, if successful, tend to maximize profits at the expense of the lowest cost for customers," Rabago said in written testimony, referring to traditional power plants.

While the utility does use solar energy, its programs are limited.

"Despite the economic benefit, the company's plan apparently proposes to cap renewables at current levels — which are very small," Rabago said.

Robert Green, the president and CEO of Georgia Solar Utilities, which tried

unsuccessfully to start a solar utility, asked regulators to force Georgia Power to add 500 megawatts of solar capacity to its system.

Georgia Power's plan, "which proposes no new solar capacity for the next 20 years, harms ratepayers and the people of Georgia by ignoring the new realities of solar energy in our state," Green said in written testimony.

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