

Press Release

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Contact: Noelle Denke
Public Affairs
Fallbrook Public Utility District
(760) 728-1125

Solar panel project complete

FALLBROOK – Today, the Fallbrook Public Utility District dedicated the completion of a cost-saving solar panel project at its wastewater treatment plant. And with the combination of state rebates and government loans, FPUD is only paying half the cost needed to construct the facility.

And just as important: FPUD will be saving around 70 percent of its SDG&E bills.

Once the project is paid off, the district anticipates saving millions of dollars in electricity bills.

For FPUD, the decision to turn sunlight into electricity is a smart choice. The 2,700 panels, spread out over eight acres at the plant, have a capacity of 1 megawatt. Over a year, the panels will generate about 2.4 million kilo-watt hours of energy. That's enough juice to supply the treatment plant with about 70 percent of all its energy needs, even on a partly cloudy day.

A kilowatt-hour is a measure of energy, or how much power a system either uses or produces over time. For example, a heater rated at 1000 watts (1 kilowatt), operating for one hour, uses one kilowatt-hour of energy. Solar panels don't use kilo-watt hours of energy; they produce them.

That saves the district on long-term energy costs. And what's even better – the \$7.2 million project will only cost the district half that amount to build. The state of California is giving FPUD approximately \$3.8 million in rebates, as part of the California Solar Initiative. The rebate comes in the form of 32 cents per kilowatt-hour for the energy it produces during the first five years of operation.

The project is being financed with low-interest loans, at an interest rate of 1.85 percent. As part of the stimulus plan, the federal government allocated money for special tax credits called Qualified Energy Conservation Bonds (QECCB). These QECCB bonds provide the bond holder with one key thing: federal tax credits. These credits are in

addition to the bond interest that will be earned on them. In turn, these credits are passed down to FPUD, allowing the district to get the low-interest loan.

FPUD is the first water district in the state to get QECB funding.

By the time the project is paid off in 17 years, the project will essentially be free, thanks to the rebates and cheap loans. Even before it's paid off, repaying the loan will be cheaper than writing the current monthly checks to SDG&E. After it's paid off, the district will be spending less than a third of what it currently spends on electricity at the plant.

“Our reduced SDG&E bills, plus the bill for loan – the total of those two bills added together will be lower than what we're currently sending SDG&E every month,” said Keith Lewinger, general manager for the district. “So every single year of the 17 years it takes us to pay this off, we'll be spending less money than we would if we'd never installed the panels.”

And on top of that, when it's completely paid off, the solar panels will have been absolutely free to us. Plus, we'll only be buying 30 percent of our electricity instead of 100 percent, and this is savings we'll pass on to customers.”

SunPower, a company based in San Jose, installed the panels. The SunPower T20 Trackers are the most efficient solar panels currently on the market. The trackers rotate to follow the sun's movement. This tracking movement increases the panels' ability to capture the sun by up to 30 percent more than conventional, fixed solar panels. They also take up much less land than conventional panels.

SunPower was formed in 1985 and has worked with more than 20 water agencies in the western United States. FPUD received three proposals for the project and chose SunPower because of its value in guaranteed cost and energy savings.