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South Florida can be a true Sunshine State with solar energy

April 24, 2008

By Ben Bentley

For decades, through agriculture, tourism and development, Florida has always relied on its abundant, year-round sunshine as its chief natural resource.

Today, as fuel prices rise and the economy struggles, Florida must continue to harness the power of the sun to create jobs, grow the economy and power the 21st Century through solar energy technology.

Solar energy infrastructure is an investment that will not only save residents money on their power bills and reduce the release of greenhouse gases, but it would help nurture an industry that can provide tens of thousands of jobs across our state.

Florida has already taken steps toward truly embracing this energy future. Last year lawmakers set aside \$3.5 million in solar energy incentives that provided rebates to residents and businesses for the purchase of solar energy equipment. Public demand for solar equipment proved so overwhelming that the money was exhausted in just six-months time. Today, a waiting list of more than 1,400 solar systems is petitioning for new rebates totaling another \$2.4 million.

To capitalize on this success it's critical for the state to continue to move ahead with this effective program. Gov. Charlie Crist asked state lawmakers this year to expand the incentive program from \$3.5 million to \$10 million, with at least \$50 million more for economic development grants and rebates to those pursuing alternative energy technology.

According to a recent poll, Floridians overwhelmingly agree with the governor's position. Fully 85 percent agree that the Legislature should act to encourage investment in solar energy, and 81 percent say they would support additional investment even if it cost more on their electric bill each month.

That's because solar energy isn't simply a catchphrase for politicians or a fanciful dream for environmentalists; it's a solid source of power that is creating jobs, generating a larger share of electric power and becoming more and more cost effective. As the price of traditional fuels such as coal, oil and gas continues to rise, and as the environmental cost of fossil fuels becomes more and more apparent, solar power isn't the choice of dreamers but the energy source of common sense.

To date, Florida's solar rebate program has already saved enough energy to power nearly 31,000 homes for an entire month, while offsetting more than 80.8 million pounds of greenhouse gases. Economists estimate the program has already saved consumers \$6.1 million on their power bills.

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By offering consumers the opportunity to achieve such energy savings, Florida can create jobs manufacturing, marketing and installing solar systems — while putting more money in the pockets of our state's consumers — while safeguarding our environment for future generations.

Florida's solar energy rebate program is one of the state's primary tools in helping more and more consumers adopt this economically viable energy source. If the Legislature commits to funding the rebate program and financing incentives for the solar energy, it will bring a financial boom to our state.

Another tool by which the Legislature can aid this effort is to enact a renewable portfolio standard that would require utilities to invest in renewable energy solutions to speed the diversification of Florida's energy supply.

By equipping more homes and businesses with solar water heating systems and solar electricity systems, Florida can create thousands of jobs, reduce power bills and put money back in the pockets of working families. We will reduce pollution and protect our planet — all by harnessing the simple resource upon which we've so long depended — Florida sunshine.

Ben Bentley is the CEO of The LeverEdge, a Tampa-based manufacturer and distributor of solar water heating systems.

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