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Users may be able to sell power to FPL

The state is close to agreeing to make utilities pay customers who produce solar power in their homes and businesses.

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BY JOHN DORSCHNER
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In a move that could dramatically expand renewable energy in Florida, state regulators are expected on Tuesday to approve a rule that will require utilities to pay homeowners and businesses for the extra energy they produce from solar panels on their property.

The concept, called "net metering," comes before the Public Service Commission for final approval after a year of discussions and workshops.

"There's clearly a large demand for this," said Bob Reedy at the state-funded Florida Solar Energy Center. "What's been so successful in other states certainly should work in the Sunshine State."

About 40 states already are using the concept, Reedy said.

It works like this:

A homeowner or business installs solar panels, wind turbines or other renewable energy sources. These devices produce energy that's used mostly for the property owner's needs, but on some days they might create excess energy.

Under net metering, this excess gets transferred to the electric grid for the use of others. A meter records that outflow and gives the owner credit, which is likely to be a net deduction from the owner's bill. In rare cases, it might lead to a check.

With soaring oil prices and the threat of global warming likely to produce the equivalent of taxes on fossil fuels, advocates say renewable energy is becoming increasingly attractive from both environmental and financial standpoints.

"If you invest now, you are investing in the future," said Bruce Kershner of the Florida Solar Energy Industries Association, a trade group, which expects demand for solar products to take off with the new rule. "You're locking in what your power will cost," since the sun doesn't come with an inflation index.

The state already has a net-metering rule for homeowners, but it's hardly ever used, said Reedy at the Solar Center, which is part of the University of Central Florida.

Under the current rule, participants get back only 3 cents or 4 cents per kilowatt/hour for the power they provide, said Reedy, far less than the 11 cents or 12 cents per kw/h they pay as the retail price.

Only about 200 customers statewide now participate in the program. That includes about 100 of Florida Power & Light's 4.5 million customers.

Under the proposed change, energy providers would get credit at the same retail rate that they have to pay.

What's more, while the old rule limits service to homeowners and small businesses, the new rule will allow major corporations, such as Wal-Mart or Best Buy, to set up huge fields of panels on their large roofs to produce up to two megawatts of power.

Another change: The current rule applies only to solar. The change would apply to all renewable energy. Attempts to start wind farms in Florida have so far been dismal failures because they need to be put on the shoreline for steady breezes, and neighbors have adamantly opposed them. Because of that, experts expect solar generators to be the main beneficiary of net metering.

The state's investor-owned utilities -- including FPL -- have told the commission repeatedly that they support renewable energy and the concept of net metering, but in the past year, they have pushed hard for certain requirements.



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The utilities wanted even the smaller customers to pay for circuit breakers to protect their solar systems from the grid in case of a problem. That would add about \$1,200 to each homeowner's cost. The utilities also wanted homeowners to take out liability insurance.

Looking to the future, the utilities wanted to retain the renewable energy credits from net metering arrangements.

Assuming at some point that Congress follows the Kyoto Protocol and passes a cap-and-trade program to reduce global warming, these credits would be valuable in off-setting the fossil-fuel-burning plants that spew greenhouse gases into the atmosphere.

After the utilities made these points in workshops over the past year, all their demands were rejected by the PSC staff, who said the history of such projects elsewhere in the country found no problems that required circuit breakers or insurance. The staff thought the credits should be held by homeowners, as another incentive to switch to solar.

At a December hearing, the PSC backed the staff with a unanimous vote. In January, the utilities repeated their objections. The PSC staff again rejected them. And that's why environmental observers expect the PSC to approve the rule Tuesday.

The utilities have argued that net metering will have little effect. FPL expects only about 200 customers a year to start taking advantage of net metering.

Others disagree. Roly Masferrer, who started Energy Concepts in Miami last fall to serve customers who want to develop alternative energy, said, "There's huge interest out there."

A serious home solar photovoltaic system could cost \$40,000 and take about 400 square feet for solar panels to generate 5 KW of power, said Masferrer.

"But the state will give you back up to \$20,000 of that, and the federal government will give you a tax rebate of up to \$2,000," Masferrer said.

And after that, he added, customers get free power from the sun. And if the PSC approves the net metering rule on Tuesday, Florida Power & Light may end up paying them, too.

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