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Vermont's solar registration program expanded

June 28, 2012 - Green Buildings

Vermont's pioneering solar registration program, which caught the attention of the national solar industry and policymakers last year, has been expanded.

The program is providing a national model for reducing costly and time-consuming local solar permitting.

A year after Vermont lawmakers initiated the program, Act 125 doubles the size of projects "from 5kW to 10kW" allowed under the registration program. The simple statewide registration was expanded by lawmakers after a successful initial implementation and to better cover the capacity required of larger residential and small commercial installations.

With the expanded law, solar installations have a simple pre-determined process that reduces paperwork and uncertainty, and prescribes that they can be installed after just 10 days. The new process replaces all permitting for ground or roof-mounted solar systems 10kW and smaller with a single basic registration form outlining the system components, configuration, and compliance with interconnection requirements.

The local utility has 10 days to raise any interconnection issues, otherwise a permit, known as a Certificate of Public Good (CPG), is granted and the project may be installed.

"This new registration process is enormously helpful to local installers like me. It speeds up the installation process allowing us to avoid wasting time with costly delays for smaller scale installations," said Rich Nicol, of Solartech, an installer in northeastern Vermont.

Many in the industry believe that cutting unnecessary "soft costs" of solar installation is a key to future cost-competitiveness.

David Blittersdorf, president and CEO of AllEarth Renewables, the Vermont manufacturer of the AllSun Tracker added, "We need to continue advancing policies that cut unnecessary red tape and costs for small-scale renewables. Doing so will drive down the barriers to solar, making it more competitive and leading to wide-spread adoption."

A study last year by SunRun found that permitting adds an average cost of \$2,500 to each solar installation and that streamlining the processes would provide a \$1 billion stimulus to the solar industry over the next five years. The report finds that the additional installation cost " \$.50 per watt" is due to wide permitting variations not connected to safety, excessive fees, and an unnecessarily slow process.

The U.S. Department of Energy's "SunShot Initiative," which aims to decrease the total costs of solar energy systems by 75% before the end of the decade. The DOE believes reaching this goal will make solar energy cost-competitive with conventional forms of electricity without incentives, enabling widespread solar deployment across the United States.

"We think the Vermont registration process could be a real model to follow nationally," said president and general manager of SMA America Jurgen Krehnke of the program earlier this year. "Reducing

the time and resources that go into solar installations is right in line with the DOE's SunShot initiative and is critical to increasing PV adoption."

Vermont's registration process, which is free, first went into effect at the end of November 2011.

Prior to the new law, before beginning a project, a solar applicant would need to receive a CPG from the state's Public Service Board, a quasi-judicial agency that regulates electric power companies and energy developments. When determining whether to grant the CPG for a proposed project, the board considers whether the project meets statutory criteria, including site-specific environmental criteria, and general issues such as need, reliability, and economic benefit. After the application is filed, there is a 30 day comment period and contested projects are resolved through a public process, beginning with a public hearing.

Vermont's program expansion to 10kW will go into effect this summer. Act 125 also enhances Vermont's highly effective virtual or "group" net metering laws.

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