

China Wants Largest Solar Project

The 100-megawatt project could be the world's largest for a few months, but others are also eyeing the title.

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The race to build the world's largest solar-electric power plant took an unexpected twist Tuesday when China announced plans to build a 100-megawatt facility in Dunhuang, a city in the northwestern Gansu province.

The plant—which could lay claim to being the world's largest solar power generator for at least a few months--will take five years and cost an estimated 6.03 billion yuan (about \$766 million) to build, according to the state-run Xinhua news agency.

The plant would be small by conventional standards, which have capacities in the hundreds, if not thousands, of megawatts, but the announcement was significant because it suggests China is finally getting into the solar power business, said Joel Serface, director of the Austin Clean Energy Incubator.

"This represents the fastest-growing nation on earth making a commitment to renewable energy," he said David Saltman, CEO of solar company Open Energy Corporation "China is going to capture a big part of the market. They have to, because right now they're relying so much on coal and just killing their environment."

Most solar announcements coming from China in the last couple of years have been about production increases for solar equipment to be exported to other countries, Mr. Serface said.

The Rise of 'World's Largest'

The world's largest photovoltaic facility today is panel producer Solon's 12-megawatt Solarpark Gut Erlasee, dedicated in September near Arnstein in Bavaria, Germany. That park out-sunned the 10-megawatt Bavaria Solarpark in Muehlhausen, Guenching, as well as the Minihof, Germany, plant that that began operation in January last year.

Plants in Spain, Israel and Australia are all expected to outdo Solon's plant. The Australian government in October announced that Melbourne-based Solar Systems will build a 154-megawatt plant in the state of Victoria. The plant is expected to begin operations in 2008 and reach full capacity by 2013.

"There's a war going on right now to come up with the biggest solar plant, which is a good war to fight," Mr. Serface said. "Installing one large plant is easier than having a whole set of installers figure out how to put a whole bunch of photovoltaic modules on rooftops. Larger is easier, and it brings the cost down."

But others say distributed systems make more sense because they eliminate the need for transmission lines. Open Energy, for instance, is pursuing solar power systems that are integrated into building materials, Mr. Saltman said. "I don't want to see solar commoditized," he said.

Still, the news from China—and about large plants in general—is good for the industry and the world, he said.

Contact the Writer: jkho@redherring.com