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Daily dose of solar news and Q&As

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[Did foreign oil exacerbate the mortgage crisis?](#)

September 8, 2010 [Add a comment](#)

If you send \$500 billion a year overseas to pay for foreign oil, and some of that money comes back as investment capital, does it distort the mortgage market and thus the entire U.S. economy?

North Carolina investment adviser Lewis Reynolds says it does.

Reynolds has just published a book, [America the Prisoner](#), arguing that about 44 cents on every dollar Americans have spent on foreign oil has been used to buy U.S. assets. A big chunk of that money was invested in mortgage-backed securities, helping to drive down interest rates and helping to create the sub-prime market.

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[Solar conferences in the United States](#)

September 2, 2010 [Add a comment](#)

By Joseph McCabe
Chair, ASES Solar Electric Division

Have you noticed lots of new conferences in the solar space? Some new conferences are concentrating on finance, others on specific applications like concentrating solar, thin film or building integrated solar. There have been other solar engineering community-specific conferences like IEEE or ASME that focus on electrical or mechanical engineering respectively. But there have been a few solar conferences that have been around for many years.

Solar Electric Power Association (previously Utility PhotoVoltaic Group or UPVG) holds Solar Power International (previously Utility Photovoltaic Expo or UPEX).

The American Solar Energy Society holds the longest running conference, now in its 40th year, the [National Solar Conference](#).

And Intersolar, originating in Germany, for the last few years has had a North American component.

These conferences are staggered through the year with ASES in spring, Intersolar beginning of summer and SEPA in the fall.

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[Feds should boost solar demand](#)

August 30, 2010 [Add a comment](#)

By Liz Merry

[SOLAR TODAY](#) "Ask Liz" Columnist

My friend and photovoltaic (PV) training specialist Brian Hurd (with [Hands on Solar](#)) says it feels like the training part of workforce development in the solar industry is on the fast track. But in many areas of the country, program graduates don't have solar jobs available once they are trained.

Community colleges and for-profit training organizations are rolling out hundreds of new PV installation training programs this fall. (See the [Interstate Renewable Energy Council's database of training providers](#).)

This is great news for the regions where there is strong consumer demand and few trained installers. But what about the other 95 percent of the country?

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[California OKs 250-MW CSP plant](#)

August 27, 2010 [Add a comment](#)

By Seth Masia

[SOLAR TODAY](#) deputy editor

The California Energy Commission on Wednesday [approved construction of a 250-MW solar power plant in Kern County](#), after a 29-month permitting process.

The Beacon Solar Energy Project will be the first large CSP plant built in California since SEGS 9 was completed at Harper Lake, 20 years ago. But several more are in queue for approval this year. That's because developers need to meet a Dec. 31 deadline to break ground, or lose ARRA stimulus funds. In addition, California's large public utilities are obligated under the renewable electricity standard to produce 20% of their power from renewables by the close of this year, and they're still several hundred megawatts short of that goal.

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[Coal ash dumps contaminate water](#)

August 26, 2010 [Add a comment](#)

WASHINGTON, D.C. (press release) -- Days before the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) kicks off a series of regional hearings across the United States on whether and how to regulate toxic coal ash waste from coal-fired power plants, a major new study identifies 39 additional coal-ash dump sites in 21 states that are contaminating drinking water or surface water with arsenic and other heavy metals. The report by the Environmental Integrity Project (EIP), Earthjustice and the Sierra Club documents the fact that state governments are not adequately monitoring the coal combustion waste (CCW) disposal sites and that the USEPA needs to enact strong new regulations to protect the public.

The new EIP/Earthjustice/Sierra Club report shows that, at every one of the coal ash dump sites equipped with groundwater monitoring wells, concentrations of heavy metals such as arsenic or lead exceed federal health-based standards for drinking water, with concentrations at Hatfield's Ferry site in Pennsylvania reaching as high as 341 times the federal standard for arsenic. (See study highlights below.) The new report is available online at <http://www.environmentalintegrity.org>.

A February 2010 EIP/Earthjustice report documented 31 coal ash dump sites in 14 states. The 39 additional sites in today's report along with the 67 already identified by the USEPA bring the total number of known toxic contamination sites from coal ash pollution to 137 in 34 states. Together, the independent reports and USEPA's own findings make clear the growing number of waters known to be poisoned by poor management of the toxic ash left over after coal is burned for electricity.

The 21 states containing the 39 damage sites identified in the new report are: Arkansas (2 sites, Independence and Flint Creek); Connecticut (1 site, Montville); Florida (1 site, McIntosh); Illinois (3 sites, Joliet 9, Venice, and Marion); Iowa (3 sites, Lansing, Neal North, and Neal South); Kentucky (3 sites, Spurlock, Mill Creek, and TVA Shawnee); Louisiana (3 sites, Dolet Hills, Big Cajun, and Rodemacher); Michigan (1 site, Whiting); Nebraska (1 site, Sheldon); New York (1 site, Cayuga); North Carolina (1 site, Dan River); North Dakota (2 sites, Leland Olds, and Antelope Valley); Ohio (4 sites, Uniontown aka Industrial Excess Landfill, Cardinal, Gavin, and Muskingum); Oklahoma (1 site, Northeastern); Oregon (1 site, Boardman); Pennsylvania (2 sites, Hatfield's Ferry and Bruce Mansfield aka Little Blue); South Dakota (1 site, Big Stone); Tennessee (3 sites, TVA Johnsonville, TVA Cumberland, and TVA Gallatin); Texas (1 site, LCRA Fayette Power Project); Virginia (2 sites, Glen Lyn and Clinch River); and Wisconsin (2 sites, Oak Creek aka Caledonia and Columbia).

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[Solar for condos?](#)

August 24, 2010 [Add a comment](#)

By Rosana Francescato

We live in one of the sunnier areas of San Francisco, and from my roof I can see ten solar arrays on neighboring blocks. For anyone with an electric bill of \$75 a month or more, solar makes financial sense. In this town, the combination of federal, state and city incentives can cut installation costs by a third or more.

It certainly made sense for our Sierra Heights condominium complex, so I started a Green

Committee and began looking into getting solar panels installed. We have three large buildings with plenty of roof area, though it's probably not area to provide power for both the individual units and the common electricity. That's a challenge for any tall building. But we spend about \$1,500 a month on the common electricity, so even if we concentrate on that, depending on the system, we could save an estimated \$500 to \$1,000 a month over 25 years - that's \$150,000 to \$450,000 total.

I had representatives from four solar companies assess our site, and they all confirmed that we have enough roof space for a system that would provide energy for the common electricity. Three of the companies submitted preliminary proposals for systems that would cost between \$74,000 and \$450,000, before incentives and rebates.

Our main challenge would be financing. Since our HOA is a nonprofit, we don't qualify for some tax incentives. The upfront costs are too high for our 4-year-old complex, which doesn't have large reserves built up yet, so we looked into ways to make it affordable.

As part of my research, I attended a "solar mixer" hosted by 1 Block Off the Grid (1BOG), a community-based program that helps people buy solar panels. By negotiating group discounts, they reduce costs. They also help to sort out all the confusing details that homeowners face in buying a solar system.

The mixer was intended to share information with people interested in going solar. In addition to representatives from 1BOG and their local solar installer, attendees included residents who had already installed solar panels in their San Francisco homes. I was grateful for the opportunity to talk to people with experience installing solar systems, and it's inspiring to see this kind of work being done. 1BOG is a small local company, but they've facilitated installations all over the country. And the 1BOG website contains all kinds of useful information, from an interactive tool that lets you check if solar would work on your house to general information on how solar works to a video showing how solar panels add value to your property.

Most installations go onto buildings with a single owner, and that's what the 1BOG website focuses on. Information on installing systems for condo complexes is sparse. As a condo, we needed to determine which incentives we could qualify for, and how we would finance the system. For a while, we thought our answer could be a program sponsored by the San Francisco Mayor's Office, GreenFinanceSF. They offered PACE loans, a way to finance sustainable building improvements with 20-year loans that are paid back as part of property taxes, which are tax-deductible. That makes payments affordable: often the payment is less than the amount saved by the solar system.

The Mayor's Office had not yet applied this program to condominiums, so they were eager to work with us to help encourage others to follow suit. But then Fannie Mae, Freddie Mac and the lenders they work with said that they will not support loans under the GreenFinanceSF or PACE programs. Because of that, GreenFinanceSF and many similar programs have been suspended. The Mayor's Office and other local governments around the country are working with Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac to encourage them to reconsider their position.

We were left with a lot to work out. Even if the GreenFinanceSF program was resumed and we

adopted it, we couldn't force all residents to opt in. So the HOA board researched our options. Are we allowed to reduce HOA dues for those who do opt in, and raise them for those who don't? That would be necessary for this program to be financially feasible. The good thing was that this would cover more than solar panels. We're also looking into electric-car plug-ins, tankless water heaters, LED lights and energy-efficient windows. However, our HOA board finally decided it would be too complicated, legally, to implement this program.

So now we're looking at leasing the panels. That could allow us to get the system installed, though it won't give us the advantage of ownership and increased property values. A lease-to-own option would be even more attractive. I'm waiting now to hear about leasing options from a couple of third-party companies. Many don't work with condos or don't lease solar systems, so that's narrowed down our list of potential vendors.

This process has made me wonder about the many condos around our country. Though I know a few condos exist with solar systems, they're rare, and it seems that we're pioneers in this area. I'm hoping that I'll learn enough through this process to share some information with others. I welcome any insights or stories about others' experiences condoizing solar.

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[1.1 MW PV parking structure in New Mexico](#)

August 23, 2010 [Add a comment](#)

Albuquerque -- SCHOTT Solar PV, Inc., VE Group LLC and Affordable Solar Group LLC today unveiled New Mexico's largest solar array (1.1MW) on The Bell Group's headquarters' parking structure in Albuquerque, NM. The project uses over 5000 locally-made solar modules by SCHOTT Solar PV, Inc., a global leader in photovoltaic (PV) module manufacturing, with US headquarters in Albuquerque, New Mexico. The installation covers 5 acres of parking area and will generate over 1,600,000 kWh of clean electricity annually -- enough to meet 80 percent of The Bell Group's electricity needs. This locally generated clean energy will avoid approximately 1,125 tons of CO2 emissions annually, while the solar structures provide shaded parking for employee and visitor vehicles under the hot New Mexico sun. The project involved a significant number of jobs in the Albuquerque region by utilizing local manufacturers, contractors and subcontractors from various trades.

The project implementation team consisted of Affordable Solar Group, Albuquerque-based solar

equipment distributor and project developer; VE Group (Valley Electric), the prime contractor with offices in New Mexico and Colorado; and VE Group's local and regional subcontractors including Coupland-Moran Engineers, US Prefab, National Roofing and others who together carried the project from conception to completion. The Bell Group's facility management team provided support throughout all phases of the project.

SCHOTT Solar employs 340 people at its Albuquerque facility, Affordable Solar Group 35 employees in Albuquerque, and VE Group over 50 employees in New Mexico and Colorado, many of whom were employed by The Bell Group's solar project.

"As a business, we're always looking for ways to reduce our costs, and our new solar installation is lowering our electricity bills with clean, reliable energy generated by a local, high quality product," said Alan Bell, Managing Director of The Bell Group, an Albuquerque-based industrial distributor. "It also helps us to meet our responsibilities as a business committed to environmentally friendly practices and the local economy."

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[**New Plug-in Hybrid Service Van Lands GM Funding**](#)

August 19, 2010 [| Add a comment](#)

By Mike Koshmrl
[SOLAR TODAY](#) editorial intern

A bright idea: Bright Idea. The Bright Idea (I'm stopping), manufactured by [Bright Automotive](#), is the first investment of General Motor's new venture capital branch, [GM Ventures, LLC](#)

. The new \$100 million subsidiary of GM was set up in June to help the company identify and develop innovative, up-and-coming transportation technologies.

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[World's largest tide turbines?](#)

August 19, 2010 [Add a comment](#)

By Seth Masia

[SOLAR TODAY](#) deputy editor

A power struggle of sorts is under way in the waters around northern Britain. [Atlantis Resources](#), based in London, this week unveiled what it called the world's largest tidal-flow turbine, with twin rotors of 18-meter diameter capable of producing a megawatt of grid-tied power. Plans are to test the rig, weighing in at 1,300 metric tons, in the Orkney Islands this summer.

Atlantis may be huge, but the [SeaGen unit in Strangford Lough](#), Northern Ireland, has been generating 1.2 MW of grid power since December, 2008, and it now feeds its full capacity to the local grid, 24-7. Its rotors are only 16 meters across. So which is bigger? I like results, so until Atlantis produces more than 1.2 MW, SeaGen remains the leader.

Meanwhile, American companies are building much smaller units. [Ocean Renewable Power](#) announced a successful test of its 60-kilowatt tide turbine, destined for installation this summer at a Coast Guard station near Eastport, Maine. ORP calls this the largest tide turbine in the U.S., and it does beat the previous record-holder, a 35-kW unit tested by

[Verdant Power](#)

off New York's Roosevelt Island in 2006-2008. ORP plans to deploy a 150 kW unit before the end 2011, feeding the Eastport grid. Verdant has signed a deal to develop a large turbine array

- in China.

Tidal power is the great undersold potential resource in renewable energy. It's absolutely predictable -- a typical installation produces eight hours of inflow power, then a few hours of slack, then eight hours of outflow power, then a few hours of slack, every day and every night forever. The big barrier to entry is the high cost of developing a massive installation that will stand up to the huge forces involved. Water is about 100 times as dense as air so tide turbines have to be far more robust than wind turbines. And they must resist salt corrosion while keeping their electrical systems dry. It's like building a submarine.

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[Straddling bus isn't really a bus](#)

August 18, 2010 [Add a comment](#)

By Seth Masia
[SOLAR TODAY](#) deputy editor

The New York Times yesterday ran a story about the [Chinese "straddling bus" project](#) . The machine straddles two lanes of city traffic and carries hundreds of passengers above cars moving below.

At first glance this doesn't seem to make sense. How would a bus this wide and this long maneuver at intersections? And why not just build a light rail or streetcar system?

Well, it turns out it's not a bus at all. It's an elephantine electric trolley car, running on steel tracks set into the pavement and drawing power from overhead fixtures.

The main advantage over a conventional streetcar is that it doesn't block traffic when it stops at

boarding stations. Clearance beneath is about 2 meters (6.5 feet) so passenger cars, cabs and small vans can pass beneath. Trucks and buses need to go around.

The straddling trolley is cheaper to build than an elevated rail or subway system, and makes sense on a broad boulevard (you need at least three lanes in each direction to let trucks pass).

[Beijing is about to build about 10 miles of track for these beasts](#) , and if it works out, there'll be a 120-mile circuit running soon.

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