

Regulators give green light to largest Minnesota solar energy project

Large arrays of solar panels that track the sun's daily movement were approved at 21 sites across Minnesota to serve Xcel Energy electric customers.

By David Shaffer (<http://www.startribune.com/David-Shaffer/10645931/>) Star Tribune |

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The largest solar power project in Minnesota won approval Thursday from state regulators.

Geronimo Energy, an Edina-based renewable energy developer, is authorized to build large solar parks at 21 locations across the state for a combined output of 100 million watts, or the equivalent of a small traditional generating station.

All but one of the solar sites will be bigger than the state's largest existing solar array in Slayton, Minn., which generates 2 million watts. The largest of the new solar sites, near Paynesville, will generate five times more than that — and cover an area the size of Lake of the Isles in Minneapolis.

The state Public Utilities Commission voted 3-0 to approve a permit for the \$250 million project, known as the Aurora Distributed Solar Project, which Geronimo intends to complete next year. The power will be sold to Xcel Energy, the Minneapolis-based power company serving 1.2 million electric customers in the state. Enel Green Power, a global energy company, will own the solar generators.

In response to local concerns, the commission rejected Geronimo's plan to construct solar parks at Pipestone, Zumbrota and Wyoming. The Pipestone project was considered too close to nearby homes, and the Zumbrota and Wyoming projects were in areas that city governments have planned for future development.

It is the first time the PUC has approved a large solar project. More solar development is planned in Minnesota to meet the state's new solar energy mandate, requiring investor-owned utilities to get 1.5 percent of their electricity from the sun. A solar project proposed by another company near North Branch would be 10 times larger than any of the Aurora sites.

"Because this is the first facility that we are siting, we are particularly sensitive in having it go as smoothly with local units of government as possible," said PUC Chairwoman Beverly Jones Heydinger.

State law gives the PUC sole authority to approve or reject large energy projects — trumping local zoning laws — although regulators must consider local concerns. Some local governments and residents near proposed solar sites raised various objections. The PUC ordered Geronimo to address issues with six of the 21 sites.

Heydinger said the goal was "to get the first project off on the best possible footing and hopefully that will create more interest and willingness on the parts of other local units of government to allow future siting. It is a balance we are trying to strike here."



(http://stmedia.startribune.com/images/ows_1398216900374; BRUCE BISPING)

St. Johns University solar installation in fields next to the campus were installed by Geronimo



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