Asia's Largest Solar Field Switched On In India

Katy Daigle, Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — The west Indian state of Gujarat is flipping the switch on Asia's largest solar power field as part of its 600 megawatt solar energy addition to India's power grid.

The Gujarat Solar Park, spread across a desolate 3,000-acre (1,200-hectare) swath of desert, can supply 214 megawatts of electricity, making it larger than China's 200-megawatt Golmud Solar Park.

The project gives a serious boost to energy-hungry India's renewable energy ambitions. Overall, India wants renewables to account for at least 15 percent of its energy capacity by 2020, up from 6 percent of today's 185 gigawatt capacity.

The new solar park is unique in having 21 companies involved in its management and development, including four from the United States.

U.S. Consul General Peter Haas said at an inauguration ceremony Thursday that America's involvement shows its commitment both to clean energy and to helping India meet its growing energy needs.

"The development of clean energy sources is crucial not only to development, it is also crucial to addressing climate change and energy security," he said in a statement.

India is still plagued with frequent power cuts nationwide, and 400 million people — a third of the population — still have no access to electricity at all.

Despite uncertainty over future coal sourcing and surging prices, the country has planned dozens of new coal-fired plants. But its reliance on coal for more than 55 percent of its needs has helped make India the world's fourth-largest carbon emitter.

To help wean itself from fossil fuels, India launched a national solar mission in 2009 with $19 billion pledged in credits, consumer subsidies and industry tax breaks to encourage investment.

With a wealth of sunshine and land, especially in the desert states of Gujarat and Rajasthan, India is aiming for solar to account for 3 percent of its capacity within eight years.

Industry experts say it will likely surpass that.

"We expect a lot more, actually, maybe 5-6 percent," said Sanjay Varghese, operations chief at Lanco Solar, which has a total of 56 megawatts of capacity in

Gujarat, including 15 megawatts within the new field.

But reluctant financing and a reliance on imported parts has held up investment.

Gujarat — which provides 66 percent of India's solar generating capacity today — has led the solar drive by setting up an incentive program and energy policy early and establishing infrastructure including roads and power connections to the grid. Other states like Karnataka and Tamil Nadu are catching up.

Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi said the state is showing a world mired in climate change problems how to move forward.

"This achievement is not merely a step in the direction of power conservation, but it provides the world with a vision of how the power needs of future generations can be solved in an environment-friendly manner," he said.

Gujarat has budgeted another $400 million for developing renewable energy, and plans to encourage rooftop solar panels on homes, he said.

Gujarat first announced plans in 2009 for establishing solar parks, including Gujarat Solar Park in the northern desert of Patan district.

"Setting this up was easy because this desert land was available," with just 1,000 people living in nearby villages, said S.K. Nanda, the environment chief in Gujarat's government.

The government has trained more than 100 people to look after the panels and the park's security, bringing employment to a desolate area. "They didn't have any economic activity before, but now lots of people will come" and side-businesses like restaurants will appear, Nanda said.

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