TN Volkswagen Plant Powers Up Solar Park

Erik Schelzig, Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — German automaker Volkswagen on Wednesday flipped the on switch for a new solar park at its Tennessee assembly plant.

The 33-acre installation next to the Chattanooga plant has a capacity to produce more than 13 gigawatt hours of electricity per year. That's the equivalent of the amount of energy used by 1,200 area homes each year, according to Volkswagen.

"We are proud to power up the biggest solar park of any car manufacturer in North America today," Frank Fischer, the chairman and CEO of VW's Chattanooga operations, plant said in a release.

The new solar park will meet about 12.5 percent of the plant's electricity needs during full production, and will power all of its operations during off-peak periods. Volkswagen will consume all of the electricity produced by the park, unlike a more common arrangement where electricity is sold back to utilities.

The Chattanooga plant in 2011 became the first auto plant in the world to receive certification for Platinum Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design by the U.S. Green Building Council. The LEED certification process looks at factors including sustainable sites, water efficiency, energy and atmosphere, materials and resources, indoor environmental quality and innovation in operations.

The solar park is owned and operated by Silicon Ranch, a company run by aids to former Democratic Gov. Phil Bredesen, who played a key role in persuading Volkswagen to select the site for the assembly plant. VW will buy the power under a 20-year purchasing agreement.

Bredesen raised some eyebrows when he decided to invest in the venture founded by Matt Kisber and Reagan Farr, his former economic development and revenue commissioners before the Democrat left office in 2011.

Kisber, the president and CEO of Silicon Ranch, said the park signals "a new era in manufacturing."

"The scope of this solar park and the breadth of how much of the sun's energy will be harnessed here will most certainly have a powerful and lasting positive impact on both our environment and our economy," he said.

Persuading Volkswagen to build the $1 billion auto plant in Chattanooga was the crowning achievement of the Bredesen administration's economic development strategy. A subsequent focus on the green energy sector has been far more bumpy, as two companies building Tennessee plants to make a compound used in solar energy panels have recently put the brakes on production.

Hemlock Semiconductor announced last week that it was laying off 300 of 400 employees at its $1.2 billion plant in Clarksville, while Wacker Chemie announced it was delaying completion of its $1.5 billion Bradley County plant by 18 months because of high inventory and weak demand pushing down prices for silicon wafers.

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