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Oregon's first floating solar project now online in Jackson County

New solar project helps lower energy bills for area families, save water for local farms

MEDFORD, Ore. — A first of its kind solar project will soon deliver affordable, locally made renewable energy to families and businesses in Southern Oregon while conserving water and improving water quality for area farmers and ranchers.

On Friday, May 8, leaders from across Oregon celebrated the completion of the state's first floating community solar project. The 1.8-acre project sits on a reservoir at the Medford Irrigation District. It includes more than 1,700 solar panels mounted on water-safe, floating platforms. The panels will supply energy that helps lower costs for the district, the City of Medford, and around 60 homes in Jackson County. The shade these panels create will also save water by reducing evaporation during warmer months.

"The floating solar project is an example of how we can tackle multiple challenges at once—conserving water, lowering energy costs and supporting the farmers and communities that depend on both," said U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley. "As drought and extreme heat put more pressure on our water systems, we need smart and innovative investments like this that help communities make the most of every drop."

Sen. Merkley and Sen. Ron Wyden helped secure more than $1 million in federal funding for the project, which was developed by the Medford Irrigation District and Farmers Conservation Alliance with support from Bonneville Environmental Foundation, Energy Trust of Oregon, Oregon Department of Environmental Quality, Pacific Power, and the U.S. Department of Energy,

"This is a major step forward in preparing our community for the future," said Jack Friend, Medford Irrigation District manager. "We have a responsibility to deliver the resources farmers here in the Rogue Valley need to keep their businesses and families strong. With floating solar panels, we're using existing space to create affordable energy and lower their costs."

How community solar works

Compared to standard rooftop solar, community solar projects are much larger solar installations that can serve hundreds of homes and buildings. Families and businesses can subscribe to community solar projects through the Oregon Community Solar Program and then see credits on their energy bills.

“Community solar is a significant, practical way to connect people who’ve never before had the option of adding solar to affordable, renewable energy,” said Kyle Petrocine, program manager with Energy Trust of Oregon, a nonprofit that supports the development of community solar projects and works closely with communities and organizations including irrigation districts. “And what makes this solar project unique, is that because it’s sitting on this existing reservoir, it’s helping save water for local farms while it creates local, affordable energy.”

In Medford, enclosed underwater cables will move energy created by the floating solar arrays to the electric grid. Jackson County families who are Pacific Power customers can subscribe to the project through the Bonneville Environmental Foundation, a nonprofit that develops and manages community solar projects through the Oregon Community Solar Program. Anyone interested in subscribing can find information here.

A smart water, energy future

Along with creating energy, shade from the solar panels will help improve water quality by slowing the growth of algae and weeds. In addition, the nearly 1.8-acre array will reduce evaporation from the reservoir.

The project is one of many Medford Irrigation District is leading to modernize its infrastructure. Other work includes converting more than 16 miles of open irrigation canals to pressured pipes. As water travels through older, open canals, as much as half can be lost to evaporation and leaks. Through Energy Trust’s Irrigation Modernization program delivered by Farmers Conservation Alliance, Medford Irrigation District and the Rogue River Valley Irrigation District are together transforming these canals, so more water reaches the 2,200 farms they serve.

"All of this work together makes our agricultural and rural communities stronger and better prepared for the future," said Julie O'Shea, executive director of Farmers Conservation Alliance. "These irrigation modernization projects benefit farmers, the environment, and local communities all at once. As more get implemented, those benefits compound, building real resiliency for farmers facing drought and more extreme heat. And the gains extend beyond agriculture, to supporting healthier streams and rivers, stronger local economies, and a region ready for whatever comes next."

Piping the canals dramatically reduces the maintenance burden on irrigation districts. It also creates the opportunity to add hydropower, taking advantage of the piped water pressure to create clean energy and further lower operating costs. Farmers also save energy and money, because with pressurized water coming from pipes, they no longer need pumps to pull water from canals. Together, Energy Trust and Farmers Conservation Alliance have worked with more than 30 irrigation districts that deliver water to more than 500,000 acres across Oregon.

These efforts are helping communities across Oregon use water more efficiently, lower energy costs and build more reliable systems for the future.