

# White House Sending Right Signal On Energy

By Carolyn Humphreys

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President Barack Obama's decision to go solar should provide an additional boost for our modern-era solar energy technologies and the U.S. solar industry.

In announcing the White House will be installing solar hot water collectors — again — and adding equipment that uses the sun's rays to produce electricity, Energy Secretary Steven Chu shared the much anticipated news that our president will use the roof of the executive mansion to lead by example. The adoption of renewable energy systems on the East Wing will highlight the growing popularity of dependable and affordable alternatives to non-sustainable fuel sources. These upgrades to the White House are expected to be complete and operational next year.

While the most recent effort to highlight alternative energy received considerable media attention, it is not the first time a president has modeled a sustainable energy option. President Jimmy Carter had solar panels installed on the White House's West Wing three decades ago, but they were removed early in Ronald Reagan's presidency.

Solar panels were returned to the White House compound by President George W. Bush, who had them installed both on a maintenance building to provide workers with hot water and to heat the White House spa and outdoor pool. Solar energy supporters exerted considerable pressure on the current president to also return panels to the first family's residence.

For too many years Americans have seen a disconnect between the promises made and the actions taken with regard to our government's commitment to alternative energy sources. As a result, we continue to contend with growing energy costs, both for the fuels themselves and the associated costs of attaining, transporting and protecting them. We could be touting our energy independence, green job growth and leadership in reducing green house gas production instead.

The new solar installation on the White House will show Americans that solar energy has no "spills," no on-going extraction costs, no on-going transportation costs and no on-going fuel expenses for that matter. Renewable energy adoption helps to alleviate national energy security issues and the inevitable costs of environmental degradation.

Because utility rates, incentives and state policies vary widely throughout the country, financial discussions need to be state specific. Much like the tax on gasoline sold in Connecticut, our utilities charge the second highest rates for electricity in the continental U.S. — up to 24 cents per kilowatt-hour. To provide context, the national average is less than half, just over 10 cents per kWh. With such high energy costs and no indication the upward trend will be reversed in the foreseeable future, solar power makes far more sense for Connecticut energy consumers.

State incentives combined with the 30 percent federal tax credit have significantly reduced the initial capital outlay and shortened pay back periods for solar energy systems here. There are even higher incentives for governmental entities and non-profits that can't take advantage of the tax credits. A growing number of Connecticut investors have been attracted by the low risk, guaranteed savings and assured financial returns in a period of economic uncertainty.

The Connecticut Clean Energy Fund has offered rebates and grants to lower the cost of solar electric systems for years and announced recently that it increased solar hot water incentive levels to ensure that the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funds attained from the federal government do not go unused and result in a subsequent return. These increases resulted in projected paybacks for solar hot water decreasing to only one to five years. Even without any incentives available for solar pool heating, it can take as little as two years to repay the cost of a system.

Importantly, after a typical payback there can be a very long period of free electricity or free hot water. It doesn't seem likely the utility companies will offer a period of free electricity or free fuel delivery soon.

Solar panels on the roof are effective "insurance" against rising electric rates. In fact, a solar system could result in nearly eliminating the family electric bill for the 35- to 50-year life of the system. The vast majority of solar electric panels carries a 25-year power warranty but the panels are designed to last much longer.

Additionally, conversion to solar energy typically increases a home's market value, yet remains exempt from a property tax increase in Connecticut.

Continuing technological advancements are helping to make solar power ever more reliable, efficient, esthetically appealing and cost effective over time. And though the U.S. has been outpaced in the global race to develop alternative energy strategies, recent developments may change this.

Connecticut has been one of the fastest growing markets for solar energy adoption and is poised to increase the pace with improved and returning incentives.

The White House is sending a clear message to all Americans that clean, renewable solar energy is a powerful solution to many of the energy, environmental and employment issues we face. Connecticut residents and businesses, nonprofits and municipalities should embrace the opportunity to make a wise investment that improves our collective well-being.



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