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Salt Lake powering a switch from coal to solar

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So long, coal. The heat of the sun could take coal's place as Utah's prime energy source.

Local officials on Thursday launched the Solar Salt Lake project, which was funded by a \$200,000 cash grant plus at least another \$200,000 in technical assistance from the U.S. Department of Energy. Salt Lake was one of 13 cities nationwide to receive funding as part of the Solar America Cities program.

With that money and national expertise, Salt Lake City and county officials hope to reach grid parity between coal and solar energy by 2015. And if solar power is just as cheap as coal, local officials believe residential and commercial developers will pick the environmentally friendly choice.

"As we incorporate (solar energy) more, as we get good policy in place, it's going to be less expensive, it's going to be more environmentally beneficial and we're going to get away from the reckless burning of coal and our dirty, dangerous coal-burning power plants," Salt Lake City Mayor Rocky Anderson said.

Power generated by new coal-burning plants costs nearly 7 cents per kilowatt hour, said Carol Hunter, vice president of Rocky Mountain Power. Solar power now runs about 10 to 13 cents per kilowatt hour.

The state has more than 300 days of sun a year. That sunlight could generate enough power for nearly 1 million Utah homes, said Sarah Wright, director of Utah Clean Energy.

"Utah has an incredible and untapped solar resource," Wright said. "It's an elegant solution to a good size part of Utah's energy problem."

Salt Lake County has already started using solar panels at the Salt Palace. Workers last year installed 104 panels at the downtown convention center.

Rocky Mountain Power paid for half of the \$200,000 project, with Salt Lake County paying for the other half.

Local leaders want to encourage commercial and residential developers to use solar power through incentives and easier zoning and permit processes.

Kennecott Land, which owns more than 40 percent of the developable land in the Salt Lake Valley, pledged to incorporate solar power into all new development on its land.

Builders at Daybreak already give homeowners the option of solar power in new homes. But that alone is not enough, said Don Whyte, president of Kennecott Land.

"We want to do more than just tell our builders, 'You should do this,'" Whyte said. "We want to lead the way by saying, 'Look what we're doing.'"

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