

Are Our Utilities Trying to Block Solar Power?

What's This Case All About?

Idaho Power wants the Public Utilities Commission to dramatically limit the terms under which they are required to buy solar energy from small or moderate sized projects, and how much it must pay for that clean energy. Idaho Power claims a flood of massive amounts of energy projects could force it to buy so much energy it would compromise its grid. Avista Utilities in northern Idaho and PacifiCorp in southeastern Idaho quickly joined the case. Clean energy advocates like the Snake River Alliance are standing up for solar: If Idaho utilities worked harder, they could figure out how to add a lot of solar – and a lot cheaper than they claim. We disagree with utilities that say they are forced to buy expensive, unneeded power from solar projects under what's known as "PURPA."

What's PURPA?

Congress passed the Public Utility Regulatory Policies Act during the 1978 energy crisis to promote renewable energy projects. It tells utilities to buy renewable power under terms set by each state. Developers say customers are provided clean and affordable energy. Utilities say PURPA forces them to buy unneeded power.

What's Next?

The PUC has set a June 29 "technical hearing," like a trial and open to the public but testimony is limited to certain parties, in the case but hasn't yet set the three public hearings in Boise and probably the Magic Valley and Pocatello. But you can give the PUC your views at any time until it sets a comment deadline, which hasn't happened.

Where Can I Read About the Case?

You can go to the PUC's website at puc.idaho.gov and click "Electric" and then "Open Cases" and scroll to IPC-E-15-01. For nearly identical filings by Avista and PacifiCorp, scroll to AVU-E-15-01 and PAC-E-15-03.

How Can I Comment to the PUC?

Just go to the PUC's home page, and click the "Consumers" button and then "Utility Case Comment or Question Form," and type or paste in your comments. Make sure you enter your name and case number(s) above. You can also comment by mail to:

Idaho Public Utilities Commission
P O Box 83720
Boise, Idaho 83720-0074
FAX (208) 334-3762

Have Your Say and Get Involved!

We Should *Support* Solar Power, Not Kill It

Utilities insist they're not trying to kill new solar power in Idaho, but to get it under control. If they prevail in this case, we'll be looking at a *de facto* shut-down of new or proposed solar projects because 2-year or even 5-year contract terms with utilities make almost all solar projects unable to secure financing. Solar developers are already leaving Idaho because of this case, and prospective solar developers are almost certain to take their projects – and the jobs and other economic benefits that go with them – elsewhere.

What's Wrong With Shortening the Contract Terms?

When our utilities build a big fossil fuel plant, it retires that investment over decades and puts it into our rates and we pay for it every month. And because investors know customers will foot the bill, utilities have access to vast amounts of capital. But now those same utilities want to force renewable energy developers to agree to 2-year contract terms. Developers say it's almost impossible to finance projects under those terms because it's also impossible to know what the payments from utilities will be every other year. Could you get a mortgage for 2 years?

Do We Have Too Much Solar Power in Idaho?

Far from it. Not one utility-scale solar project has been built in Idaho today, and at the same time our utilities are trying to discourage residential customers from putting solar panels on their roofs to generate their own electricity. Less than 1 percent of Idaho's electricity generation comes from solar power, and all of that's on our roofs, paid for by customers, not the utilities.

Isn't Solar More Expensive and Less Reliable Than Coal or Hydropower?

Not any more. Solar power costs are going down every year and now match and even beat those from coal. Also, coal's true costs are not taken into account by our utilities. The costs of coming pollution control and health and environmental protection requirements will be huge, but so far utilities aren't accounting them. Also, hydropower's "reliability" continues to decline along with declining stream flows caused in large part by climate change that is fueled by burning coal. We can plan on when solar power will produce. The same can't be said about hydropower.

What Will Happen if Utilities Win This Case?

The wave of solar businesses that flocked to Idaho because of our incredible solar potential but that are now leaving will continue. The clean energy business is Idaho's future, and we can't afford to send these jobs, dollars, and energy security somewhere else!