

Green investment gets a slow, steady move-on

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By Matt Wrye

Attracting enough smart people and investment capital to the Inland Empire might be the key to unlocking the area's green technology potential.

While a foundation is being poured in the public sector to catapult the region into the green energy arena, there's still much to accomplish in the private sector, experts say.

"Venture dollars tend to flow where the quality management teams are," said Tim Woodward, managing director for San Francisco-based Nth Power, a green venture capital firm. "Usually there's something of a network in a region creating some sort of dynamic, but there isn't a lot of that coming out of the Inland Empire."

One reason multi-million dollar Internet companies flocked to Silicon Valley during the technology boom is because they realized the area's business base provided a strong foundation for out-of-state tech gurus to fall back on if they ever lost their jobs.

The Inland Empire doesn't have that.

Nonetheless, the local green energy movement's wheels are slowly starting to turn.

Solar installation, bio-fuel production, water conservation and electric vehicle companies are popping up across San Bernardino and Riverside counties, although they're small.

In mid-January, Newark-based Petersen-Dean Inc. - the state's largest private solar roofing contractor - acquired Vacaville-based OCR Solar & Roofing, which has a branch in Corona.

Petersen-Dean engineers, designs and installs solar panels for customers.

"We're looking to add substantial jobs in the marketplace in the next 12 months," said Jim Petersen, president and CEO the company.

Even though a big-time renewable energy company hasn't relocated to the region, Petersen thinks the Inland Empire's near-term green wave lies in putting solar panels on top of warehouse rooftops.

Southern California Edison thinks so, too.

The Rosemead-based electricity company recently turned on 33,000 solar panels on top of a Fontana distribution center - the first step of an envisioned \$875 million project that

would be the largest of its kind if it gets approval from the California Public Utilities Commission.

Ultimately, Edison wants to lease 2 square miles of rooftop space for the project, pumping 250 megawatts of juice onto the local grid.

Projects like this make Petersen optimistic, but it's going to take heavy collaboration between the public and private sectors to attract green dollars to the Inland Empire.

"If the Inland Empire wants to take this role, they can," Petersen said. "But the industry has to be welcomed in. They have to work hand in glove with these leaders. We stand to grow in areas we're welcomed in."

The federal government is poised to have a huge role, too.

Besides the multi-billion stimulus package coming up for a Senate vote, which includes millions of dollars for green energy projects, the Bureau of Land Management announced Wednesday it will bring in staff at a Moreno Valley office to process solar, wind and geothermal applications for developing renewable energy projects on local public lands.

Out of the 170 applications for wind and solar projects, "most of them are in the Southern California desert, particularly solar," said John Dearing, spokesman with the bureau.

But "it's not going to be an overnight boom," he noted, referring to state environmental standards that each project must pass.

The Corona-based Green Valley Initiative, a public-private initiative, might have the most successful achievements to date.

The Commerce Department approved the initiative's economic plan for the two-county region, which allows for local businesses and governments to apply for federal grants to help fund energy-saving projects.

Doug Henton, co-founder of Collaborative Economics research group, echoed Petersen's opinion.

In a recent report he prepared for Palo Alto-based Next 10 - a nonprofit research group - Henton shows that green jobs are leading California's job growth.

The Inland Empire should probably capitalize on its rooftop space for the time being.

But for future innovation, more collaboration will be needed.

"What's necessary now is bringing together the local businesses and communities, saying 'How can we make this happen?'," Henton said.

"I don't think it's an industry that's going to be based on one big company (coming to the region)," he added. "I think you'll see lots of medium and small companies - but you will see opportunities for entrepreneurship in this region."