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JACKSON COUNTY MARCH 11, 2016 5:48 PM

Working electric cooperative plants first to provide solar power to the Coast



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SINGING RIVER ELECTRIC The small-scale, half-acre solar power plant in Lucedale near the offices of Singing River Electric, pictured under construction, is now fully operational and supplying power to the Coast.

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BY KAREN NELSON
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GAUTIER -- They are considered small scale, but two solar power-generating plants -- one in Kiln and one in Lucedale -- are the first to supply solar power to the Coast.

They began generating electricity in February. And they belong to South Mississippi Electric.

The plants occupy half-acre sites near the offices of two of the electric cooperative's members -- Coast Electric and Singing River Electric.

Coast Electric provides power to the west and central portions of the Coast, mostly outside the cities, and Singing River provides power to Gautier and the rural communities on the east side of the Coast. Together, those two cooperatives supply power to 153,000 homes and businesses.

And now they can claim a small portion of the power they supply is generated by the sun.

There will be a ground-breaking celebration Monday -- 9 a.m. at Coast Electric, 18020 Mississippi 603 in Kiln and 11 a.m. at Singing River Electric, 11187 Old 63 South in Lucedale.

The electric cooperatives took the leap because research showed their members want renewable energy, in particular solar, and the two solar plants diversify the fuel base.

Each of the two installations has 360 large solar panels and generates 100 kilowatts of power, enough to run six to seven normal-sized homes.

That compares with plans Mississippi Power Co. (186,000 customers) has announced to add utility-scale solar plants by early next year -- a 4-megawatt plant on 23 acres to power the Seabee Base in Gulfport, a 50-megawatt plant on 450 acres in Hattiesburg and a 52-megawatt plant in Sumrall. Those will be the largest in the state. For example, 55 megawatts will power about 7,800 homes.

But in the meantime, the electric cooperatives can bask in their success of being first.

"It's already creating electricity," Singing River spokeswoman Lorri Freeman said about the plant near their offices. "It's basically a functioning substation.

"They're rather large. The panels are bigger than you think they would be.

"We have nuclear, hydro-electric, natural gas, coal and now solar power," Freeman told the Sun Herald.

South Mississippi Electric cooperative provides electricity to nine other members besides Coast Electric and Singing River Electric. Not-for-profit cooperatives are owned by their members.

The cooperative plans three more solar plants, farther north, in the coming months. And it has teamed up with Origis Energy USA for a 52-megawatt solar plant in Lamar County, to be built and operated by Origis with South Mississippi Electric buying the power.

Mississippi Power will receive renewable-energy credits for its projects and the cooperatives will help meet federal Clean Power Plan rules designed to cut carbon pollution.

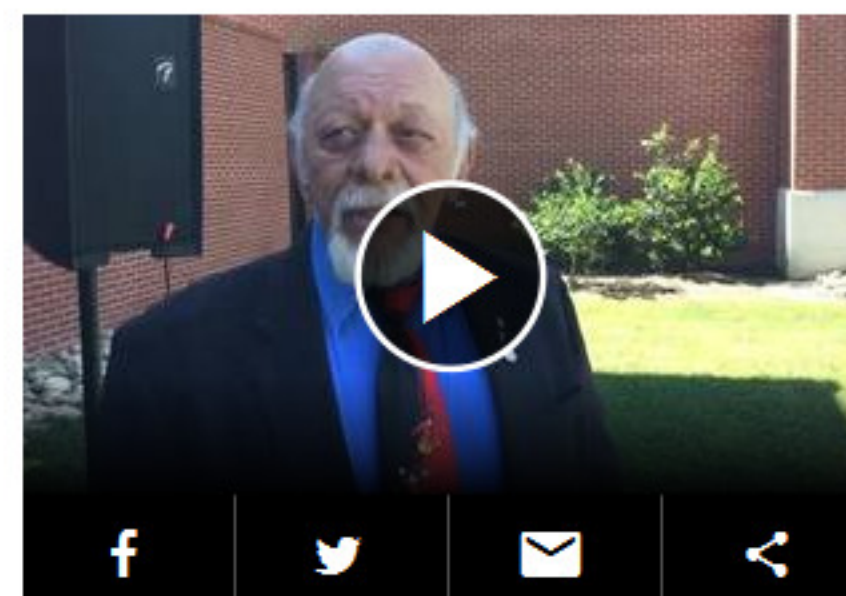
Fun solar energy facts from South Mississippi Electric:

- The sun produces more energy in one hour than the Earth uses in an entire year, making it the most abundant energy resource by far.
- People think of converting solar energy to electricity as modern technology, but the process was first invented in 1839. It was commercialized by Bell Labs in the 1950s.
- In 1990, a solar-powered airplane flew across the United States.
- One of the earliest uses of solar energy in the United States was NASA in the 1960s, when solar was used to power spacecraft.
- One of the oldest satellites still in orbit -- Vanguard 1 -- has logged more than 6 billion miles powered by solar.

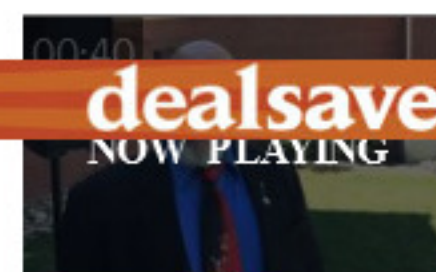
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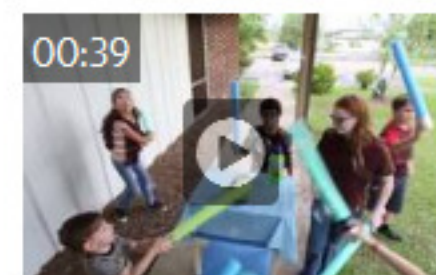
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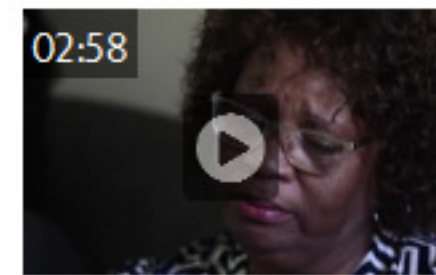
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