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N.C. region becoming a hotbed for renewable energy

MURFREESBORO, N.C.

In a Hertford County field where rows of corn once grew, rows of solar panels now stand - 20,000 panels that will soon convert sunshine into enough electricity to power a small town.

When finished next month, Duke Energy Renewables' project on 37 acres will be one of the state's largest.

About 40 miles to the southeast, on a 100-acre field in Perquimans County, a Charlotte company plans to build another solar farm, this one consisting of 83,000 panels. It would stand out as the largest in North Carolina.

With the two solar farms and at least three major wind farms in development, northeastern North Carolina has become a hot bed for renewable energy.

The region has plenty of open land, plus a sunny, breezy coastal climate. Just as critical: It has a major power transmission line running through it with ties to the PJM Interconnection, the largest competitive wholesale electricity market in the world.

"Alternative energy is one of our main economic niches now," said Vann Rogerson, president of North Carolina's Northeast Commission, which recruits industry to the region. "The big players know where northeastern North Carolina is now."

Rogerson is working on additional projects with at least two other green-energy companies, he said.

Much of the surge in green energy ventures stems from North Carolina's 2007 mandate requiring utility companies to produce 12.5 percent of their power from renewable resources by 2021, said Julie Robinson, spokeswoman for the North Carolina Sustainable Energy Association. Utilities are actually ahead of schedule, especially in the solar field, she said.

"Solar energy in North Carolina has grown dramatically over the last few years," she said.

The more capacity in megawatts that a green project has, the closer that utilities get to reaching the state mandate, and the bigger the reputation gets within the industry.

Duke Energy Renewable's Murfreesboro Solar Project is expected to carry a 6.4 megawatt capacity and be able to power 700 homes. The North Carolina Electric Membership Corp. will buy the electricity.

The Perquimans project, built by Solar Green Development of Charlotte, plans to have a capacity of 20 megawatts, enough to provide electricity to nearly 3,000 homes - more than half of all the households in the county. It is expected to connect to Dominion Power.

"It's been a passion for me," said Shelley Layden, a Perquimans businesswoman and vice president of Solar Green Development. "I'm so ready."

The solar projects would complement the wind farms that have found their way to the region.

Iberdrola Renewables plans to build a wind farm with 150 turbines on 20,000 acres straddling Pasquotank and Perquimans counties. In Camden County, Invenergy is seeking permits to erect 100 turbines on thousands of acres of open farmland. Together, the projects could power about 100,000 homes. Each wind farm is projected to involve a \$600 million investment and would be among the largest in the nation.

Down in Beaufort County, Invenergy has announced plans to build a wind farm valued at \$160 million that would power about 15,000 homes.

Although the best wind for power generation is found on mountaintops, state law

prevents large-scale wind projects on mountain ridges. Several southeastern coastal counties have passed ordinances with setbacks so large that they effectively prevent wind farm construction, according to Kennie Ellis, an engineer with the North Carolina Utilities Commission.

That leaves the northeastern corner of the state, with plenty of inexpensive, open land, a sparse population, and officials who are receptive. The proximity of the major transmission line is also a big draw.

"When that wind is really blowing, then there is a lot of power coming out of those turbines, and you need a place to send it," Ellis said.

The Perquimans County solar farm will have a capital investment of \$85 million.

Duke Energy Renewables would not disclose the value of its project in Hertford County. But, based on an average of \$4 a watt, according to Ellis, a 6.4-megawatt project would typically have a capital investment of about \$25 million.

Given that kind of investment, tax breaks are a major motivator. Among other state and federal tax breaks, North Carolina allows local governments to collect only 20 percent of the property tax value from land on which renewable-energy projects are built.

That's all right, said Bobby Darden, Perquimans County manager.

"Twenty percent of \$85 million," he said, "is still a good-sized tax boost."

Jeff Hampton, (252) 338-0159, jeff.hampton@pilotonline.com

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