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Stan Watters, Pacific Power president, left, and Sen. Ron Wyden answer questions in front of the new solar pavilion at the Jackson County Expo Friday. The pavilion is powered by a 24.75-kilowatt photovoltaic system capable of providing electricity for five major concerts. (Mail Tribune / Jim Craven)

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Wyden lauds solar effort

By Damian Mann, Mail Tribune

Standing under a new solar-powered pavilion at the Jackson County Expo, U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden said the country needs to do more to free itself from its addiction to foreign oil.

Out of every dollar paid for gas, a portion goes to a Middle Eastern country such as Saudi Arabia that sends some of the money out the "back door" to terrorist groups, said Wyden, speaking before officials inaugurating the facility that will help power the fairgrounds in Central Point.

"You pay a terror tax when you go to a gas station in Southern Oregon," he said. Wyden, who has proposed various bills to promote energy conservation in the past, said the mood in Congress has changed recently after spikes in gas prices.

"I'm hopeful that these last few months have been an eye-opener," he said. Sen. Gordon Smith has sponsored a bill that has received the backing of 11 senators that would offer tax incentives for businesses and individuals considering solar power or other alternative energy sources.

Wyden has co-sponsored the bill, which would pay for 30 percent of the cost of solar retrofits on houses up to \$2,000, or offer a \$2,000 tax credit to developers who build energy-efficient homes.

"We need to do more to go out and promote renewable energy," said Wyden, who is on the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee. "It's just about the most patriotic thing you can do."

Instead of sending more troops to the Middle East 10 or 20 years from now, Wyden said he hopes an aggressive energy policy would help keep them at home.

Everything from fuels made from crops to solar power to more research should be supported, he said.

The solar pavilion stood as an example of how other countries have pushed ahead with solar technology. The solar panels came from Germany and the power inverter from Spain. Expo officials said they were able to get these units cheaper from those countries.

Wyden said he would work to make Oregon "the green capital of the west."
Leigh Johnson, president of the Friends of the Fair Foundation, said Expo officials would like to see more solar-powered installations at the fairgrounds.

Pacific Power President Stan Watters said Southern Oregon is ideally situated for solar power, getting about 200 days of sunshine annually, or the equivalent of the state of Florida.

Wyden also planned an appearance in Eugene to promote a bio-fuel refueling station there.

Speaking for about 10 minutes at the Expo Center, Wyden said, "This is a day to celebrate solar power and you aren't going to get any political wind."

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LOCAL

Solar power comes to Expo

By Greg Stiles
Mail Tribune

Some of the region's largest energy users are now among the biggest boosters for renewable solar power.

While solar energy can't begin to provide the hefty amount of electricity needed to operate wood products and manufacturing plants, a consortium of industrial users has joined forces to show what solar energy can do on a smaller scale.

Nine industrial electrical customers and Pacific Power collaborated in funding a \$300,000 solar pavilion at the Jackson County Expo in Central Point. The pavilion, powered by a 24.75-kilowatt photovoltaic system capable of providing electricity for three households or five major concerts, went live Friday.

"What appeals to me about this project is that it is very visible," said Sierra Pine General Manager Dan Sickler. "It shows our community and youth that there are alternative energy options in the future. We use a tremendous amount of electricity, about 12 megawatts, so it's not practical for us. But if we can use solar energy for houses and reduce the amount of natural gas, oil, coal consumption, it will be a good thing."

Oregon electrical customers pay a 3 percent public-purpose tax on their monthly bill. The state energy department allows major power customers to self-direct more than half of that public-purpose charge to conservation projects and 17 percent of it to renewable energy projects. Pacific Power has partnered with Sierra Pine/Medite, Harry & David, Timber Products, Eastman Kodak, Asante Health System, CertainTeed, Boise Wood Products,

Providence Medford Medical Center and Cascade Wood Products in funding the project, built by S&B James Construction.

Pacific Power's Claudia Steinbroner said the Expo project is expected to pay for itself within five years, at which time the funding group will dissolve. She said the Expo will consume all the electricity the pavilion produces.

The big electrical users hope their commitment to renewable energy will spark more residential activity.

Ralph Olney III, plant manager at the White City Eastman Kodak plant, lived in China the past four years. He said it was common to come home and see posted signs telling residents that neither power nor water was available.

"If we can free up more energy by using solar for houses, it will lessen the burden for industry," Olney said.

A quarter-century ago, tax credits led to some residential solar activity, but that move has largely faded away. While global solar power demand is rapidly increasing, mass production has yet to bring down costs.

"Most people who are aware of this technology think it makes good sense," said Bob Maynard of Energy Outfitters, one of the contractors who installed the system. "But the current cost in an unsubsidized environment makes it a financial reality out of reach for most people."

Solar cells are made of converted silicon, the same substance used in computer chips.

"There have been billions of dollars invested in new silicon processing facilities," Maynard said. "But it is going to take until 2008 for those new facilities to come on line."

Maynard said present global production for solar production modules can provide just over 1.5 gigawatts. Three new plants in Moses Lake, Wash., Minnesota and Michigan will radically increase availability, with the Moses Lake plant alone expected to produce 2.2 gigawatts worth of cells alone.

A megawatt is roughly enough electricity to power 1,000 residences simultaneously.

Bob Morris, regional engineer for Boise Wood Products, says Boise's 5.5 megawatt energy consumption here means there are few operational applications for solar power.

"The exception would be where there are some remote control issues where we don't want to run a wire," Morris said. "If we want to measure the flow of water in a ditch or canal, this is one way of doing it."

"It's a technology that I hope isn't mature and hopefully will improve so we won't need as large of panels in the future," he said.

Timber Products Regional Controller Terri Haydukiwecz said her company is extremely interested in the benefits green energy provides.

"This is a project we will watch and see where it goes," she said. "In the future, it may apply to our business."

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