

Blue Lake Rancheria celebrates going solar



David Narum, a project manager for the Blue Lake Rancheria, examines a solar panel electricity output display before the microgrid celebration at Blue Lake Casino on Thursday. Shaun Walker — The Times-Standard

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The Blue Lake Rancheria on Thursday afternoon celebrated the completion of the solar array and microgrid setup that will power the Blue Lake Casino and Hotel and tribal government office facilities.

About 80 people sat in the casino's Sapphire Palace for the microgrid celebration to hear speakers talk about their part in the project. Self guided tours of the microgrid sites took place after the presentations.

"The microgrid is on track to save the tribe \$200,000 a year," Blue Lake Rancheria sustainability director Jana Ganion said.

The microgrid includes a 500 kilowatt solar system and a 950 kilowatt/hour Tesla battery storage system managed with microgrid software from Siemens.

The 2-acre, 1,500 solar panel array and microgrid will power six buildings on 17 acres of the Blue Lake Rancheria. The rancheria has been working toward this goal for about two decades but this exact project has taken about two years to complete, Ganion said.

"The goals we had in mind — economic, environmental and clean job creation — have all come to fruition," she said.

The array went online in mid-March, Ganion said.

"We have about an 800 kilowatt load at our peak," she said.

Blue Lake Rancheria Council secretary treasurer Art Ramsey said he's already seen the benefits of the project.

"The checks that I'm signing now are a lot less than the checks I was signing before the array went online," he said about the rancheria's power bill. "And it's not even summer yet."

The array was installed by San Luis Obispo-based REC Solar. The array took about three months to install and will last between 25 and 35 years, REC Solar director of commercial sales Jared Friedman said.

“It’s super exciting,” he said.

The type of array, fixed tilt, and its location on flat ground kept the installation easy and the future upkeep simple, Friedman said.

“For an owner, it’s great because there’s hardly anything that can go wrong,” he said.

During her speech, Ganion thanked the many partners on the project including the Humboldt State University Schatz Energy Research Lab, Tesla, Siemens and the Pacific Gas & Electric Company. She also thanked the California Energy Commission for grant funding that made the project possible.

Siemens digital grid division director Pat Wilkinson said the company does microgrids for a lot of customers but mostly on a larger scale.

“This is pretty neat because now we’re dealing with small communities,” he said.

California Energy Commission commissioner Karen Douglas said Californians across the state are stepping up to address the affects of climate change.

“This is a real example of how we can help meet our greenhouse gas goals,” she said. “ ... There’s a community resource here as a result of this project.”

Schatz Energy Research Center founding director Peter Lehman said the center is proud of leading the effort on this “ground-breaking project.”

Lehman said the country is going through a “dark time for science.”

“We are holding up a torch to light that darkness,” he said.

PG&E service analysis director David Rubin said the company is glad to be a part of the work and celebration.

“We think it’s a very ground-breaking project that we want to continue to support and we will continue to support,” he said.

Ganion said she would like to see this project used as an example for other microgrids in small communities across the state and nation.

“We encourage them to contact us if they want to know more,” she said.

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