

FPL begins building 10 solar power plants around Florida

By Chris Wille Herald Tribune Business Editor May 23, 2019

Florida Power & Light Co. announced Thursday that construction has started on a major expansion of its solar energy capabilities. The utility's 10 newest solar power plants, scattered across the state, include sites in Manatee, Charlotte and DeSoto counties. Power generation is expected to begin by early 2020. Combined, the plants will contain 3 million solar panels as part of FPL's goal to complete its "30-by-30" plan to install more than 30 million panels by 2030.

The latest Manatee County operation follows an FPL announcement in late March that the utility would be converting an old plant into the FPL Manatee Energy Storage Center, whose massive batteries will stockpile power from the existing solar plant in Parrish for use during peak hours. The center will have 409 megawatts of capacity.

The battery system will be built on 40 acres next to the Parrish plant, which opened in 2016. The utility will demolish two aging natural gas units that have dotted the skyline there for nearly 50 years. "Replacing a large, aging fossil fuel plant with a mega battery that's adjacent to a large solar plant is another world-first accomplishment," Eric Silagy, president and CEO of the company, said in the March announcement.

Today, the company operates approximately 1,250 megawatts of solar capacity across 18 existing solar plants and other smaller installations. Each of the new solar plants will have a capacity of 74.5 megawatts. When the new solar power plants begin serving customers early next year, FPL's total solar capacity will reach nearly 2,000 megawatts — enough to power approximately 400,000 homes.

"FPL is well on its way to making Florida a world leader in solar energy," Silagy said in this week's announcement. "This year alone we're building enough solar to increase our solar capacity by 60% and we are just getting started as we count down to the installation of 30 million panels by 2030.

Sites for FPL's new solar power plants

FPL Babcock Preserve Solar Energy Center, Charlotte County

FPL Blue Heron Solar Energy Center, Hendry County

FPL Cattle Ranch Solar Energy Center, DeSoto County

FPL Echo River Solar Energy Center, Suwannee County

FPL Hibiscus Solar Energy Center, Palm Beach County

FPL Northern Preserve Solar Energy Center, Baker County

FPL Okeechobee Solar Energy Center, Okeechobee County

FPL Southfork Solar Energy Center, Manatee County

FPL Sweetbay Solar Energy Center, Martin County

FPL Twin Lakes Solar Energy Center, Putnam County

"With 18 solar plants in operation and 10 more on the way, we're adding even more emissions-free power to one of the cleanest systems in the nation while consistently keeping our customers' bills among the lowest in the nation."

The new solar plants, the company states, are examples of FPL's strategy of advancing affordable clean energy that has resulted in customer bills that are 30% below the national average. FPL expects the new solar plants to save customers millions of dollars in avoided fuel and other costs over the long term.

Each of the 10 new solar plants FPL is building this year is expected to create approximately 200 jobs during peak construction.

Florida ranked second in the nation in 2018 in solar employment, behind California, according to The Solar Foundation.