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Solar Energy Management install first solar powered car wash on west coast of Florida.

ST. PETERSBURG

Most of the customers, as many as 70 a day, who clean their cars at the Sparkle Self Serve Car Wash at 3700 34th St. S don't notice the solar panels on the roof. They also don't realize they are taking part in what alternative energy proponents say is the future of our country.

But Jay Anderson, who owns six self-service car washes on Florida's west coast, is very aware of the difference those 44 3-by-5-foot panels make.

"We've saved \$448, at a price of 12 cents per kilowatt hour, since it was installed," he said pointing to a reading on the solar inverter box inside a storage room at the car wash. He pushed another of the four buttons below a small digital screen. "Today produced 31 kilowatt-hours so far. What's nice is it gives you so much information to use to determine what it is actually doing."

Anderson and his brother Steve spent \$47,000 on the solar panels installed on the roof of the seven-bay car wash in June. Their cost was defrayed by a \$20,000 check from Progress Energy and \$14,000 from the federal government. With annual savings on the power bill of \$2,153, and depreciation savings on taxes, the solar energy system will pay for itself in less than four years.

Sparkle was one of 22 of Progress Energy's commercial customers that received money this year to defray solar panel installation costs through its SunSense program. The power company is spending \$1 million a year through 2014 on incentives for commercial customers and \$1 million for residential users.

"This is all part of a balanced solution to our energy needs," said Progress Energy spokesman Rob Sumner. "We have to look at new technology, but you can only use solar during the day. Most of these systems will not provide all the power that a business would need. It's part of the overall solution to a power system that is there for everybody."

Sparkle is the only St. Petersburg business to get the SunSense rebate so far. Applicants who applied in October for another \$1 million to be doled out next year will find out in March if they were awarded the financial incentive.

Anderson first got the idea when he was approached by a solar installation company in Sarasota for his car wash there. Then he talked with Scott McIntyre, president of Solar Energy Management in St. Petersburg, and was sold.

"There is still a cost involved to us, and in these times spending money on anything is a challenge," Anderson said. "But if you're looking long term ... it's hard to say no."

Along with saving energy, the system Solar Energy Management installs also creates jobs, McIntyre said. The Mage brand solar panels are made at a newly opened plant in Dublin, Ga. Production started this summer with 50 employees and should call for 350 employees over the next four years, according to a spokeswoman for the German-owned company.

Mage's panels are known for providing the most power in high temperatures, McIntyre said. Solar power flows best in sunny but cool weather.

"This is our oil field and this is our gold mine," he said, pointing to the bright blue sky above the Sparkle Car Wash. "East of the Mississippi, Florida gets the most radiant energy."

The Andersons also installed solar power at their car wash in Sarasota. They can't add panels to all their businesses because they have to have a southern exposure.

It may seem odd for a business that gushes water to be focused on saving energy. As it turns out, Anderson said, self-service car washes as an industry use less water than other methods of cleaning a car. They need 12 to 18 gallons of water per car because the water comes out with such force for minimal time. In your driveway, a typical garden hose spews out 11 gallons per minute, according to a 2002 study commissioned by the International Carwash Association.

So since Anderson saves money with the solar power on sunny days, does he now find himself cursing the weather if it's overcast or rainy?

"We've always done that," he said with a laugh, "because in the carwash business we never like cloudy or rainy days."



Mike Hall cleans his SUV at Sparkle Self Serve Car Wash on 34th Street S. The business got a \$20,000 incentive from Progress Energy to install solar panels. The system will pay for itself in less than four years.