

3 Stearns sites included in 2-state solar proposal

Each would have 60-70 acres of panels

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An energy developer's proposal to build large-scale solar farms across Minnesota and South Dakota includes three sites in Stearns County.

Edina-based Geronimo Energy is proposing the 100-megawatt Aurora Solar Project, which would have 25 sites in 18 counties. Each solar farm would range from 2-10 megawatts, with two of the biggest near Albany and Paynesville and a smaller one near Brooten.

The Aurora project is one of five proposals submitted to state regulators as part of a competitive bidding process for Xcel Energy to meet future energy needs. Geronimo representatives will appear before Stearns County commissioners on Tuesday asking for the county's support.

"We want to make sure they're aware of it and the process we're working through," said Nathan Franzen, Geronimo's solar director.

The three solar farms in Stearns County would comprise more than 20 percent of the entire Aurora project, making Stearns one of the leading solar-energy producing counties in the state.

At 10 megawatts each, the Paynesville and Albany sites would dwarf the county's existing half-megawatt solar farm at St. John's University, built in 2009. Each would have 60-70 acres of solar panels, Franzen said.

Stearns County is an attractive location because it has good solar resources and includes a lot of Xcel Energy's service area, Franzen said.

Geronimo also has proposed building two wind energy farms in Stearns County. The company is still pursuing those projects, which do not encompass the same land as the proposed solar farms, Franzen said.

Geronimo says the Aurora project has the potential to spur significant economic development in Minnesota, creating an estimated 800 construction jobs plus 30 permanent jobs in construction, operations, maintenance and electrical work.

The project would also generate an estimated \$240,000 annually in tax revenue, or about \$51,600 a year in Stearns County, according to the company.

Solar farms emit no pollutants or greenhouse gases, create no noise and are low to the ground, making them generally good neighbors, said Franzen, who also developed the St. John's project.

Including buffer land, the Albany site would encompass about 230 acres and the Paynesville one about 378 acres. The smaller 1.5-megawatt Brooten project would cover about 12 acres.

Geronimo already has the land under contract, Franzen said. Landowners were offered a choice whether to sell the land or negotiate a lease, which provides annual payments, he said.

Geronimo contends that the energy produced by the \$250 million Aurora project would flow directly into local communities where it's needed, reducing the cost of interconnection and need for transmission lines. The project would connect to Xcel's local substations in Albany, Paynesville and Brooten, according to Geronimo.

The Aurora project is competing against four other proposals that mostly involve natural gas.

A new solar mandate signed into law by Gov. Mark Dayton earlier this year requires Xcel and other major utilities to generate 1.5 percent of their power from the sun by 2020.

An administrative law judge will issue a recommendation in December. The state Public Utilities Commission likely will make a decision in February, Franzen said.

If the project goes forward, construction on the solar farms would start in 2015. Each site would take four to nine months to build.