

With native help, Riverside goes green

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By Marla Dickerson, Press Enterprise



While some California utilities are struggling to meet tough state mandates requiring them to boost their use of green electricity, Riverside Public Utilities is powering ahead with its renewables program.

The City Council recently approved a long-term deal to purchase geothermal energy from Utah; so much of it, in fact, that Riverside will derive half its power from renewable sources by 2013, according to Gary Nolff, assistant general manager for resources at the municipally owned utility.

The deal is notable for a couple of reasons. Riverside is buying the electricity from the Northwestern Band of the Shoshone Nation. That Brigham City, Utah-based tribe is using clean energy as an economic development tool, one of the first in the nation to do so.

The pact will also transform Riverside Public Utilities into one of the greenest in California in little over a decade. As recently as 2002 the muni didn't supply a single electron of clean power to its customers. Zero. Nada. Zilch. Why the conversion? Political will, said Nolff.

California law requires every utility in the state to set a target for boosting the use of renewable energy sources. Riverside jumped at the opportunity to buy geothermal energy from the Shoshone, which uses natural steam heat from the Earth's crust to power turbines to make electricity. Unlike solar and wind power, which provide power only intermittently, geothermal energy sources work round the clock — a utility's dream. "It's there all the time," Nolff said.

Riverside is paying about 8 cents a kilowatt hour for its geothermal power. That's at least one-third cheaper than what it would cost to build a natural gas-fired plant and about half the cost of solar thermal energy. Still, it's double the price the utility currently pays for electricity from the dirty coal-fired plants that supply most of its power now. But those economics are changing fast. California has committed to cutting its greenhouse gas emissions dramatically by 2020. It has joined with four Canadian provinces and seven Western states in a regional carbon cap-and-trade program that will soon put a price on polluting. That has Riverside feeling pretty warm and fuzzy about its long-term supply of clean steam heat. "It's cheap, it's reliable, and it avoids all these uncertainties of carbon credit costs," Nolff said.

Photo: A Shoshone girl celebrates her tribe's deal to sell clean geothermal electricity to Riverside Public Utilities at a ceremony in Utah this year. Credit: Riverside Public Utilities
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