

# Electricity retailer setting an example

## FireFly Energy lines its roof with 51 solar panels

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### GUELPH

**F**ireFly Energy sells conventional power, but it supplements its own office needs with an array of rooftop solar panels.

That's not a contradiction. The local electricity retailer is promoting conservation in a power-hogging province by setting an example for its customers.

"We needed a new roof. We thought it was an ideal opportunity . . . to practise what we preach and put some renewable energy up," operations support manager Richard Mash said yesterday from the company's office complex on Speedvale Avenue.

"We're trying to be a (conservation) advocate for our members and our customers."

By becoming experts on energy alternatives such as solar power, FireFly can provide advice on the benefits and challenges of such alternatives, said Tina McAuley, the company's marketing and communications co-ordinator.

Toronto-based Solera Sustainable Energies Co. supplied and installed the \$95,000 system, an array of 51 panels, each about three feet by four feet, that convert sunlight to electricity.

Combined, they're estimated to provide FireFly 12,500 kilowatt hours of power a year, Mash said.

"The solar panels on the roof completely support our whole office on a sunny day," Mash said. At night and on cloudy days, however, the office complex draws conventional power from the local power utility, so it's not a net exporter of energy.

But during peak periods of maximum sun "we're actually running the meter backward. We're producing more than we can use." That means it's transferring some power back to the utility.

"It reduces our bills," Mash said, adding he can't yet estimate the savings because the system is only three



Tina McAuley and Richard Mash of FireFly Energy stand among the solar panels yesterday that have been installed on the roof of their new office building on Speedvale Avenue in Guelph.

NICKI CORRELL, GUELPH MERCURY

weeks old.

In addition to savings, the system reduces carbon dioxide generation from conventional power sources like hydroelectric, nuclear and coal-fired plants by about 11 tonnes a year, he added.

To augment the new system's efficiency, the offices have been retrofitted with energy-efficient lighting, heating and central air conditioning.

Mash conceded photovoltaic (solar cell) systems aren't yet as efficient as proponents would like.

His is state-of-the-art and converts 19 per cent of the sunlight it receives into electricity, up from a more common 15 per cent. But Mash said that's already a significant leap forward in just a short while.

"Fifteen per cent was unheard of two years ago," Mash emphasized.

There's also a long payback period.

Mash estimates under current conditions the array of solar panels will pay for itself in 15 to 20 years, so busi-

nesses can't expect a quick recovery of costs.

The systems, however, can run up to 40 years with little or no maintenance, according to the industry.

In the past, Mash said, solar power has had two main obstacles: conventional power consumption in Ontario was subsidized by Queen's Park, and sun-based systems weren't inexpensive to install.

But solar costs are coming down as systems become more efficient and conventional energy costs, while still regulated, have been rising, he noted.

In fact, McAuley anticipated Ontarians will pay more for conventional energy as it increasingly reflects the full cost of production.

"The prices will probably go up quite a bit over the next few years," McAuley said.

Both expect that will make solar more popular, with FireFly at the forefront of this trend.

FireFly is a subsidiary of Guelph-

based Ag Energy Co-operative. The parent, which FireFly shares offices with, was formed in 1988 to sell natural gas when that sector was deregulated in the late 1980s.

The Ontario government subsequently deregulated electricity retailing in 2002 and FireFly came into being slightly more than a year ago to serve that market.

The co-op has 250 members, typically large agricultural farms, while FireFly has 1,500 customers to date, McAuley said.

They've been asking about the solar array.

"It's just generated a huge amount of interest from our customers," Mash said, satisfied with the new system's performance.

"It's done everything we expected," Mash said.

"We're extremely happy with it," McAuley added.

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