



## Valley farmers look to solar power

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By Robert Rodriguez / The Fresno Bee

A San Diego-area solar-power company is cultivating some new customers in the San Joaquin Valley: farmers looking to slash their utility bills.

Cenergy Power recently broke ground on a 540-kilowatt system at Minturn Huller in Chowchilla, an almond huller and sheller.

The cooperative joins a growing number of agricultural companies using solar to help power everything from water pumps to processing equipment.

Minturn's system — estimated to cut the cooperative's power bill by 20% annually — is one of several projects Cenergy has begun or completed over the last year.

It has installed systems on farms, nut-processing facilities and hullers in the Merced area, Turlock, Le Grand, Bakersfield and Madera.

“We are seeing a lot of traction in the Valley,” said Nader Yarpezeshkan, Cenergy's director of business development. “Farmers see their costs going up every year, and they are looking for ways to cut their utility bills.”

This time of year, few industries consume as much energy as almond hullers and shellers.

From the middle of August to nearly Thanksgiving, Minturn's plant runs 24 hours a day, seven days a week. And all of its equipment that removes the hulls and shells from the nut is electric-powered.

The cooperative serves more than 260 almond growers in the Valley.

Jeff Hamilton, the plant's general manager, estimates the company's electric bill runs between \$45,000 to \$50,000 a month.

“We are trying to manage our costs as best we can, and we are hoping this will be a good step forward,” Hamilton said.

Cenergy officials expect the Minturn system to be operational by mid-December. The almond huller has the option to purchase the system at fair market value within seven years.

The cost of the \$3.2 million system will be offset with a \$1 million federal grant and a \$600,000 rebate from Pacific Gas & Electric.

Hamilton said several of the cooperative's growers approached him about using solar to reduce their electrical costs.

"They had home solar projects that worked out well for them, and they wanted us to take a look at it," Hamilton said.

Minturn's system will be installed on the ground, and the panels will be spread out over 2 acres.

Larger solar projects in the Valley include a 1.13-megawatt system at Clovis-based P-R Farms and Paramount Farms' 1.1-megawatt system covering about 8 acres in Lost Hills in Kern County.

A 60,000-kilowatt system was also installed at Terra Linda Farms in west Fresno County.

The reporter can be reached at [brodriguez@fresnobee.com](mailto:brodriguez@fresnobee.com) or (559) 441-6327.