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Solar-energy customers hope to receive credit on power bill

Next week's vote will determine whether they can sell surplus energy to utility companies.

Christopher Boyd | Sentinel Staff Writer
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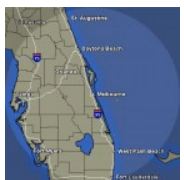
Florida's solar-energy advocates are eagerly awaiting a state Public Service Commission vote next week on rules that would require electric utilities to buy power at market rates from customers who install solar-generating systems.

The proposal sets guidelines for "net-metering," a billing structure that allows customers who generate their own electricity to sell any surplus amounts to their utilities in exchange for a credit on their power bill. Regulators are scheduled to vote on the change Tuesday.

According to the Florida Solar Energy Industries Association, Florida is one of only a handful of states that doesn't already have a net-metering standard in place.

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"This should open the marketplace to solar in Florida," said Bruce Kershner, a spokesman for the association. "It will remove some of the barriers. Those who install solar systems want to get paid."

Under the proposed rules, utilities would credit customers' accounts when they send surplus electricity to the power grid, offsetting the cost of the utility-generated electricity that the customers consume.

The change would apply to power generated by solar and other sources of renewable energy.

Solar advocates say such a financial incentive will boost their industry in a state synonymous with sunshine. Although the state offers rebates to those who install a solar-generating system, and federal tax credits are also available, the cost of the technology is high.

"A system could run \$20,000, \$30,000 or \$40,000 for a house," Kershner said. "But with crude oil passing \$100 a barrel, the impact on energy rates is coming."

Kershner said rising demand for solar systems also should lower the cost of such systems.

"You take computers, high-definition televisions and other technologies -- when the price comes down, demand goes up," Kershner said.

Regulators drafted the new rules in December and have been collecting comments from utilities and others since then.

C.J. Drake, a spokesman for [Progress Energy](#) Florida, said his utility currently reimburses about 70 customers who operate solar generators -- but at a lower rate than the proposed state rules would require.

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