

Rapid brewery openings are an opportunity for solar development

March 28, 2016 [Steven Bushong](#) : 0 Comments



Beer at one of Maine's top breweries just got a little sweeter thanks to two solar trackers and a rooftop array now powering the brewery and tasting room for The Maine Beer Company, in Freeport, Maine. The solar installation is part of a micro-trend in craft brewing. Photo: AllEarth Renewables

[Jackie O's Brewery](#), maker of Mystic Mama IPA and Razz Wheat among other canned craft beers, is expanding production to a new 8,000-sq-ft facility. And like a growing number of brewery owners, Art Oestrike decided to use all that new roof space for a solar array.

"I don't know why we wouldn't," Oestrike said. "From an environmental, financial and general business operations view—especially with today's worries about climate change—the less carbon footprint we have, the better."

With help from a USDA grant, the Athens, Ohio, brewer has followed in the footsteps of other craft brews, positioning itself as a sustainability focused business, even adopting the slogan "sustainably crafted with purpose." In fact, it's becoming a micro-trend in the micro-brew business to go solar, with breweries nationwide becoming advocates for sustainability.

SolarPlaza, a trade conferences promoter and online hub of solar information, recently released a list of the Top 40 Solar Breweries—28 of which had solar installed since 2012. In a report accompanying the list, SolarPlaza points out that brewing is no longer a manual process. Modern breweries use industrial machinery that require a lot of power. "Greening up' this power demand is very much on the agenda of many beer brewers in the world," the report said.

"Breweries are spending money on pumps and chilling mechanism and better systems, and you have very hands-on breweries that have gravitated toward industrial equipment," Oestrike said. "I think we're just a crafty bunch that are looking to change old systems, and as a byproduct of that thought process, were looking at things from a different perspective."

As a result, solar is going up at breweries from MillerCoors in Irwindale, Calif., to Sierra Nevada in Mills River, North Carolina.

Opportunity for developers

Two breweries open every day in the U.S., and 75% of Americans live within 10 miles of one, according to data from the [Brewers Association](#). And as it turns out, many brewery owners are conscience of the environment and energy usage, potentially making them ideal solar customers.

This is especially true as breweries mature and make plans for their next phase of growth, said Bart Watson, chief economist of the Brewers Association. (*Listen to a podcast with Bart below.*)

"[Renewable energy] makes good business sense," Watson said. "Breweries are energy intensive. It's a manufacturing business. When you're constantly heating water for your boil kettle or hot liquor tank, having a reliable source of energy that over the long term reduces your costs makes sense."

With business longevity a critical component of financing, banks have been notoriously hesitant to lend to commercial properties for solar installations (a problem finance firms like Open Energy, Wiser Capital, KeyBanc and others are confronting). But breweries have already seen long-term business success.

"Seventy percent of breweries that have ever opened are still open now," Watson said. "There is a lot of longevity for breweries."

Of course, he notes, with 4,000 breweries opening in a short period of time, closures are inevitable. But then he looks to wineries, which have also become keen to go solar.

"There are 8,000 wineries in this country, and Americans drink a lot more beer than wine," he said. "The fact there are only 4,000 breweries show more opportunity for growth."

Watson said as breweries develop, and solidify their financial footing, they're more likely to start looking toward cost-saving mechanisms like solar power.

"When you're starting up, you're not thinking about a solar array," he said. "We're starting to see a lot of breweries reach a point where they're more mature, thinking long term. We're seeing breweries—particularly large regional craft breweries building second facilities—where they can do more of what they wanted, impose a vision rather than build in a piecemeal way like when they started."

Andrew Savage, chief strategy officer at [AllEarth Renewables](#), a Vermont-based solar tracker manufacturer and developer of solar projects, said breweries can make safe solar customers for lenders. (*Listen to a podcast with Andrew below.*)

"I think the industry has been a bit hamstrung too often by the question of bankable offsets, and we're doing a bit of a disservice by categorizing sectors out of the opportunity to go solar," Savage said. "If breweries can show a good balance sheet, they're a great opportunity for investing. Some brewers might also have an interest in taking their tax appetite and investing in solar themselves."

Building solar with brewers

AllEarth Renewables is becoming a go-to solar firm for breweries in the Northeast, with installations at Woodchuck Cider, Maine Beer Company and The Alchemist, which went solar after an environmental disaster. Tropical Storm Irene flooded the original location of The Alchemist's brew-pub in Waterbury, Vermont.

"[The Alchemist's owners] understood acutely from that experience what we need to do to transition our energy economy," Savage said. "They saw first-hand the impacts of climate change and they recognized they had the opportunity to do something by going solar."

Because their roof wasn't large enough or equipped to go solar, The Alchemist now has a 150-kW system onsite that participates in virtual net metering. In addition to the new solar commitment, The Alchemist's Waterbury cannery has increased its composting and side streaming program to reduce its waste.

Going solar also makes good marketing sense for breweries, said Savage. He said customers are demanding local ingredients and a high quality product, but they also increasingly want to know the energy used to make a product is sustainable.

"I think that breweries are typically pretty shrewd and savvy in business practices, especially smaller breweries," he said. "They often employ creative marketing tactics, they're customer focused and they're nimble. They can make smart decisions like going solar."

Savage says solar installers approaching breweries should keep two points in mind:

"First is making the sales pitch clear and easy to understand. Solar is not their business—it's ours ... When you come in with proposal, you can't make it rocket science. You have to make it clear. You have to make it appealing right off the bat.

"Second is finding an internal champion. I think to bring a project across the finish line for a commercial customer you need to have someone in marketing or financing side that can [champion the project and finish it]."

Finding an internal champion helped AllEarth Renewables build relationships that led to a project at [Maine Beer Company](#). The 55-kW solar project uses, in part, two solar trackers positioned in front of the brewery headquarters. The solar array will offset about 50% of the brewery's total electric energy usage.

"They loved the fact that it was a visible statement about the company's economic and environmental position," Savage said.