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Sun shines brightly for Vermont energy firm

AllEarth Renewables enters new partnerships across VT, eyes U.S. expansion

By Sara Widness

A Williston company that began as a residential, small wind turbine firm is making a large impact across Vermont with its pole-mounted solar photovoltaic (PV) system.

In September, Inc. magazine included AllEarth Renewables in its annual Inc. 500/5000, a ranking of the nation's fastest-growing private companies. It was ranked 148th and was the ninth-fastest-growing energy company nationwide, said spokesperson Andrew Savage. The firm's three-year growth stood at 2,217 percent, with revenues of \$20 million in 2011.

One reason for this growth is its AllSun Tracker solar panel system, which came onto the market some three years ago and is being distributed in New England. Plans call for moving the product into national distribution. AllEarth Renewables morphed from a company called Earth Turbines in 2005. The shift to a pole-mounted solar PV system using global positioning systems (GPS) and wireless technology occurred in 2009.

Accolades aren't new to David Blittersdorf, the company's chief executive officer, who was listed by Business Week among 25 of "America's Most Promising Social Entrepreneurs of 2011." The AllSun Tracker was also named a top-10 green product for 2012 by BuildingGreen magazine.

Sunflowers shift up and down with the sun. This is what the AllSun Tracker does, thanks to GPS and wireless technology. These solar panels, which behave like sunflowers, boost solar production 45-percent more than fixed-roof solar panels.

When the solar production is fed into the electrical grid, household and commercial electric bills begin to drop; in some cases, customers build up electric credits.

Before AllEarth Renewables' ground-breaking product came onto the market, Jim and Karen Lee's Arlington, VT, company, Solar Pro, was primarily a solar thermal company focused on solar-heated water. Now, it is the southwestern Vermont distributor for the Williston company.

Karen Lee called AllSun Tracker "a very dynamic, flexible, innovative solar invention. It's brilliant."

"I am a huge fan and supporter of solar thermal technology as the most cost-effective form of renewable energy," she said. "However, when AllSun Tracker came along, it changed my mind.

"Why? The tracker provides a higher rate of efficiency, because the solar array follows the sun at the optimal angle of every hour of every day in every month in every season. It is brilliant in the way the technology is devised."

As of mid-fall, Lee said they had installed one system and signed two contracts for fall installations, and there are "at least a dozen in serious negotiation stages. I am confident that we will be installing these within the next three months."

Last spring, 14 solar trackers were installed as a 60-kilowatt (kW) orchard by Woodstock Aqueduct Co., which has

been teamed up with AllEarth Renewables since last March. Passing by on Route 12 just outside of Woodstock, onlookers amuse themselves by guessing where the sun is strongest by which way the panels are facing.

This privately regulated utility in Woodstock can now offset monthly utility bills of \$2,000, which come from pumping water at its main pump house near the panels.

“It’s totally green. It pays for all of our electricity demands at five locations and we’re getting electricity at lower rates,” said Eric Wegner, vice president and general manger.

A 130-acre Vermont apple orchard in Shoreham is now 100-percent renewable in its use of electricity, thanks to having installed two new 60 kW solar orchards.

One became operational in December 2011; the second in April 2012, said Bill Suhr, owner of Champlain Orchards with wife Andrea Scott. The two installations supply the electrical energy for the orchard’s main campus, refrigeration, processing equipment, offices and seasonal housing, according to Suhr.

“Green Mountain Power acts as a piggy bank. Sometimes, we have monetarily a surplus of power stored; sometimes, we might be in a deficit position. But overall, it provides a net-zero result,” said Suhr.

Having made an initial foray into the New England market, Savage said AllEarth Renewables “is looking to make an impact on the national solar energy [market] next.” “Our company is expecting to expand throughout the Midwest and western U.S. . . . to states where there is a viable and growing solar market.” The firm’s installer partners are helping to develop the network of sales partners, he added.

How does the company protect its technology?

“We continue to manufacture a high-quality product backed by an industry-leading 10-year warranty,” said Savage. “The brand and the product are strong within the industry. This makes it harder for other companies to follow in our footsteps.”

The company is a “lean” manufacturer, said Savage: electrical boards are soldered and created in Bristol at Grennon’s Hands On Solder Works, Inc. Electrical boards are also created at PCM Image-Tek in Springfield. Some metal work and assembly are done in Lyndonville and St. Johnsbury. Metal frames come from Tennessee.

“We’re a Vermont company that’s a lean manufacturer that procures a number of our parts within Vermont and as much as possible domestically in the U.S.” v