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KCP&L dropping solar installer after audit

By STEVE EVERLY
The Kansas City Star

Kansas City Power & Light said Monday it was dropping a St. Joseph company from its popular solar energy rebate program after finding instances of installed systems that were smaller than promised.

The utility also said it was approached last month by the Federal Bureau of Investigation about the installation company, U.S. Solar, and is cooperating with the bureau's investigation. A FBI spokeswoman declined to comment.

KCP&L commissioned an audit of its rebate program in June, and it's expected to be completed in two weeks. But the utility said enough had been discovered to conclude there were numerous examples of U.S. Solar installations' having less capacity to generate power than the company said. That allowed U.S. solar to overcharge those customers and collect more rebates than justified, the utility said.

"They are not delivering on what they say they are going to do," said Chuck Caisley, a spokesman for KCP&L.

The owner of U.S. Solar, which has installed hundreds of solar energy units for homes and businesses, rejected KCP&L's allegations.

"They are 100 percent incorrect," said the owner, Trevor Dryden.

He said the audit made a mistake that needs to be corrected. His company reduced the number of panels in those systems that are being challenged, he said, but larger panels were installed that provided the capacity promised. He said his company also was being targeted by competitors envious of his firm's success who want more of the rebates for themselves.

Caisley said the audit's conclusions were based on comparing the wattage capacity of the systems promised to what was installed. KCP&L said it would be more specific about the amount of overcharges later.

Caisley also said the utility would accept no new applications for U.S. Solar installations. Those that are pending will be honored, but only after a final inspection of the systems. KCP&L is asking staff at the Missouri Public Service Commission to review those steps to ensure they meet state rules governing the rebate program.

The rebate program, which provides \$2 per watt of capacity, has been very popular and when combined with other incentives pays the majority of a solar system's cost. But KCP&L earlier this month said it was capping the program to keep it from violating state rules that it can't affect rates by more than 1 percent.

That decision was criticized by solar energy companies and environmentalists. The Missouri Solar Energy Industries Association asked state regulators to audit U.S. Solar and prevent any improper payments from being included in the caps.

Susan Brown, a board member of the association and vice president of Brightergy, a Kansas City installer of solar energy systems, said the association expelled U.S. Solar from its organization in March for an ethics violation in its dealings with a customer, and there were growing concerns about the company.

She welcomed KCP&L's decision to drop U.S. Solar but questioned why it took so long.

"We want a full investigation because we don't know what's going on over there," she said.

But Caisley said the utility had been diligent in monitoring the rebate program, while the solar association could have done more to publicize its concerns about U.S. Solar.

KCP&L in the summer of 2012 fielded two complaints from U.S. Solar customers about their installations, which

were corrected after KCP&L investigated. Last month, after hearing the solar association's concerns about U.S. Solar, KCP&L agreed to audit the top 10 solar companies in the program.

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