

Ameren seeks to build massive solar array along I-70



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St. Louisans driving to Columbia or Kansas City can look forward to some new scenery starting this fall.

By October, Ameren Missouri hopes to break ground on a large new solar array along the north side of Interstate 70 in Montgomery County. The 70-acre project between New Florence and High Hill will be visible from the highway for more than half a mile.

“Going between here and Columbia and here and Kansas City, you will not miss it in either direction,” said Bill Barbieri, the St. Louis utility’s renewable energy chief.

The solar array in Montgomery County would be Ameren’s second major solar project. It filed this week an application seeking approval from state regulators.

The utility’s plans call for a 15-megawatt solar plant that would produce an estimated 20,655 megawatt-hours per year, enough to power roughly 1,500 households annually. Construction is expected to take until the end of 2016.

Once completed, the new solar array would contain almost 48,000 panels and be nearly three times the size of Ameren’s first utility-scale solar array in O’Fallon, Mo. The O’Fallon array went into service in December.

Ameren first mentioned a new solar project when it released its long-range energy plan in October. The plan calls for phasing out two of its coal power plants by 2033. The roughly 1,800 megawatts of coal power would be offset by an additional 400 megawatts of wind and a new 600-megawatt combined cycle natural gas plant.

Ameren's renewable energy projects are largely driven by Missouri's renewable energy standard, passed by voters in 2008. It requires a certain amount of power to come from low carbon sources such as wind and hydroelectric, and it mandates a certain allocation for solar power.

Also, a federal tax credit for renewable energy investment is expected to drop to 10 percent from 30 percent at the end of 2016, and Barbieri said Ameren wants to take advantage of the larger credit while it's available.

The state's renewable energy standard also created a rebate program that allowed customers to offset the cost of installing their own solar panels on roofs. Those credits expired last year after Ameren paid some \$90 million to customers.

Efforts to revive the program haven't gained momentum, and meanwhile Ameren has started building utility-owned solar arrays, which it says is more efficient and cheaper for customers than a rebate program.

Ameren did not reveal the cost of the proposed solar array in Montgomery County because it's still negotiating with contractors, Barbieri said.