



Warming up to Sunshine

Solar thermal technology goes mainstream as utility tests sun-powered hot water systems in 1,200 homes

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Natural gas utility Enbridge Gas Distribution Inc. and green electricity retailer Bullfrog Power Inc. have teamed up on a pilot project that aims to install 1,200 residential solar hot-water systems in Ontario within the next two years.



MICHAEL STUPARYK/TORONTO STAR FILE PHOTO
Enbridge Gas Distribution Inc. and Bullfrog Power Inc. plan to install 1,200 residential solar hot-water systems in Ontario over the next two years.

The two companies will launch the project in Ottawa today in partnership with Natural Resources Canada and solar-thermal equipment maker EnerWorks Inc. of Dorchester, Ont.

It's a sign of the times. Once considered a niche technology embraced by the most eco-conscious consumers, solar thermal hot-water systems are now seen as an economical way to reduce the use of natural gas and electricity by extracting clean energy from the sun.

The systems, which range in price from \$6,000 to \$9,000 installed, don't produce electricity like their photovoltaic cousins. Instead, they use sunlight to preheat cold water before it enters the hot-water tank in your basement. The more heated water you get from the sun, the less natural gas or electricity you consume.

The fact that a natural gas giant such as Enbridge is taking the lead on the project shows the technology is gaining mainstream acceptance, observers say.

“The entry of Enbridge is a wonderful development,” said Mary Pickering, acting executive director of the Toronto Atmospheric Fund, which is overseeing its own solar-thermal project involving more than 100 homes in the city's Riverdale neighbourhood.

“I think people feel comfortable working with their utilities. They're credible, they're there for the long term and we already pay our money to them,” Pickering said.

Enbridge vice-president Arunas Pleckaitis said if the project is successful the company may look at ways of expanding it into a mainstream product offering.

``You'd have to be from another planet to not realize things are changing," he said.

``We clearly realize the role of the utility is going to change. The question is, how quickly and what technologies, and what direction will we take?

``It could be geothermal. It could be micro-generators in people's homes. It could be heat pumps. There are all sorts of different technologies we're looking at."

Enbridge, which has 1.9 million customers in Ontario, will manage the selection of certified installers, operate a call centre to handle inquiries and help customers arrange financing through TD Bank.

Installers will help homeowners determine if solar thermal is right for them based on their hot-water use and the suitability of their roof. Installers will also be responsible for getting all necessary municipal permits.

Bullfrog Power will help Enbridge market the program to existing customers. ``Frankly, our customers want us to do more of this," Bullfrog president Tom Heintzman said, calling the project an ``experiment" from which the company hopes to learn.

``Changing people's behaviour is critical to increasing the penetration of solar thermal, and that's something we have some expertise in."

The companies are taking advantage of generous solar incentives offered by the federal and provincial governments. Ottawa's EcoEnergy program recently increased the rebate on solar thermal hot-water systems to \$1,250 from \$500 contingent on an energy audit. Homeowners can also get 15 per cent back on the purchase through the federal Home Renovation Tax Credit.

Ontario doesn't charge provincial sales tax on the systems and offers a \$500 rebate, which could rise to \$1,250 if Queen's Park, as it has indicated, matches the federal rebate. It means homeowners who get a \$7,500 system could get back up to \$2,875, and potentially \$3,625 if Ontario ups its rebate.

Phil Whiting, president of EnerWorks, said his was the first solar-thermal company to get its product certified by the Canadian Standards Association. The systems were designed to handle cold Canadian winters and blistering hot summers, he said.

``I can't imagine Enbridge and Bullfrog wanting to lend their names to any product that's not absolutely first-rate," he said, adding that EnerWorks is committed to building its business in the province. ``I'm a big believer we can become a world player in solar thermal out of Ontario."

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