



Blackout parties: how solar and storage made WA farmers the most popular in town

Once considered an eco-warrior's pipe dream, renewable energy is rapidly gaining ground in the traditional mining state of Western Australia

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Along the remote southern coastline of Western Australia, the locals have cottoned on to a new, surefire way to keep their beer cold.

The energy grid around Esperance and Ravensthorpe is unreliable at the best of times, but after a bushfire took out the poles and wires around these far-flung outback towns last year, the power company asked residents if they might be interested in trying out a more economically and environmentally sustainable way to keep the lights on and the bar fridge humming.

Rather than fully rebuild the sprawling infrastructure required to reconnect all residents to the grid, network operator Horizon Power turned to WA renewables pioneer Carnegie Clean Energy to help roll out stand-alone solar and storage systems.

The Carnegie managing director, Michael Ottaviano, said the scheme had led to a new phenomenon in the towns. "People assume the grid is something reliable and permanent, but in reality it is a centralised system with very long lines out to remote communities - it is in fact highly susceptible to failure," he says.

“And when it does now we’re hearing our customers are having blackout parties. You take Ravensthorpe for instance, which has several hundred houses, only half a dozen of which have our systems - the people living there suddenly become very popular when the power goes out.”

Rodney Locke, a farmer near Esperance, says blackouts had plagued his property long before the Yarloop bushfire decimated the area’s energy infrastructure last year. He says he jumped at Horizon Power’s offer for an alternative way of doing things.

He had his property fitted out with a solar and storage system, and has had the odd visitor since - although nothing too out of hand, he says.

“There are a couple of people we know who drop in once a week anyway, so, well, if there’s a blackout, instead of sitting at home in the dark, they come and visit,” he says.

“The beer does stay colder with the power on - it doesn’t have to be drunk as quick. Actually, come to think of it, maybe it should be the other way round? Maybe we should be the ones visiting the places with no power - help drink their beer before it gets warm.”

It is but one small example of how perceptions around solar energy are changing in what remains one of Australia’s most politically conservative states. Once regarded as an eco-warrior’s pipe dream, renewable energy is suddenly the hottest ticket in WA, a gateway to independence in a fiercely self-reliant place.

A breakdown of data from the Clean Energy Regulator has concluded the state is rising in the solar energy national rankings.

Analyst Warwick Johnston, the managing director of SunWiz, said WA’s rise is the most notable outtake from the industry research. “The biggest change has been Western Australia leapfrogging Victoria into third place when it comes to the number of new solar installations,” he says.

Queensland and New South Wales remain in first and second position respectively.

Johnston noted solar installations numbers spiked in late 2016, and continued on into the new year, with the first quarter of 2017 one of the industry’s strongest-ever periods.

He partly credited solar and storage systems like those rolled out by Horizon Power in Ravensthorpe and Esperance for the growth.

“With batteries now readily available on the market, many people are taking this opportunity to install both solar and batteries - or to upgrade the size of their existing solar systems,” he says.

“The price of solar has dropped low enough and power prices are rising high enough for this to make economic sense for many commercial operators, too.”

The Horizon Power managing director, Frank Tudor, confirmed that increasingly affordable technology was at the heart of the growth. “Horizon Power is quickly responding to the growing demand for solar which, coupled with declining costs of the related technology, is allowing us to offer a greater range of solutions in this space,” he says.

“This includes battery storage at a power station level, stand-alone power systems for individual customers and later this year, an increase in hosting capacity which will allow more solar on rooftops in many of our microgrids.”

The company has also just reached agreement to expand stand-alone power systems into Exmouth, in the north of the state.

Solar power has become so popular in some parts of Western Australia that there are more households equipped with panels than without.

The national leader is Baldivis, south of Perth, where two-thirds of households feature rooftop solar. Other strong WA performers include Byford (56%) and Rockingham (53%).

There is now six gigawatts of solar power installed across the country. The Australian Photovoltaic Institute chair, Renate Egan, said an additional 1GW was added over the past year by household-scale solar in tandem with commercial and large-scale solar farms.

Egan says: “Solar power now makes up 11% of our country’s total electricity generation capacity with more solar added to the system in 2016 than any other fuel type.”

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