

Rural Business and Cooperative Service • Rural Energy for America Program

Rural Co-op Shines a Light on the Benefits of Solar Energy

Sustainability has been a fundamental tenant of the food cooperative movement since it began, and not only in terms of selling organic, sustainably-harvested food. Co-ops around the country are also turning to renewable energy. For the [Astoria Co-op](#) on the Oregon coast, that meant finding a way to offset the energy required to keep its products refrigerated. When the co-op began renovating its facility, it presented the perfect opportunity to install solar panels, but the cost exceed its budget.

The nonprofit Spark Northwest referred the co-op to the [Rural Energy for America Program](#) offered by USDA Rural Development. It was awarded a nearly \$50,000 grant, enabling the co-op to install a 60-kilowatt solar array on its roof.

“It’s the cherry on top of our project,” said Matt Stanley, General Manager. “Throughout construction, we heard tremendous support from our customers and owners. Had we not gotten the USDA grant, then I don’t see how we would have done this.”

While people may not associate solar energy with Oregon’s coast, known for its overcast skies and rainfall, the co-op’s solar panels will generate energy from solar irradiance, even on cloudy days. Overall, they are expected to generate 69,000 kilowatt-hours of renewable electricity per year, enough to power the equivalent of six homes. It will replace about 25 percent of the co-op’s energy use with renewable electricity and help reduce its utility bill.

“It’s valuable not just because of the cost savings,” said Matt, “but also because it’s the right thing to do.” The co-op is sharing the results on its website, providing real-time data on the energy generated and its impact.

Construction was completed as pandemic restrictions began to ease and more people returned to shopping in person. “It’s a bright story in a dark time,” said Zetty Nemlowill, Marketing Director. “This solar project helps us live our message and protect the planet. I personally am very proud of it and know many of our staff are as well.”



Photo courtesy of Trav Williams, Broken Banjo Photography.
The Astoria Co-op installed rooftop solar panels to offset its energy use.

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| Obligation Amount: | \$47,824 grant |
| Date of Obligation: | August 2019 |
| Congressional District: | Representative Bonamici, District 01; Senators Wyden and Merkley |
| Partners: | Spark Northwest, Elemental Energy (solar installer) |
| Demographics: | Astoria, Oregon; population 9,836 |
| Impact: | By installing solar panels, a co-op is reducing its carbon footprint and helping to protect the environment while also reducing its utility bill and meeting customer demand for environment-conscious business practices. |
