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August 29, 2012 | By Jim Hook

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ROXBURY -- A seasoned wind farmer is planning to build one of the largest solar farms on the East Coast in northern Franklin County.

Orion Renewable Energy Group LLC, based in Oakland, Calif., plans to lease parts of three hay and crop farms just south of the Blue Mountain Interchange of the Pennsylvania Turnpike (Interstate 76) and reap the sun's rays.

The 14 megawatt project in Lurgan Township would be more than twice the size of Pennsylvania's largest (6 MW) solar farm currently under construction in East Drumore Township, Lancaster County. Covering about 103 acres, the photovoltaic panels would produce enough electricity to power 2,000 to 2,500 homes, according to Ed Shoener of Shoener Environmental, Dickson City.

"This is a sunny spot in Pennsylvania," he said. "There is a market for renewable energy in Pennsylvania. It's a good place to tie into the power lines and the Roxbury substation."

Shoener has submitted erosion control plans to the Franklin County Conservation District. Developers also will need township approval of a land development plan and a building permit. They have signed lease agreements with landowners.

"We'd like to get the permits approved this year and into next year," Shoener said. "Certainly within a couple of years we'd like to be under construction."

The investment is currently estimated at \$25 million, although the price of solar panels has been declining and their efficiency increasing.

Shoener said the array would be

the first solar project for Orion, which has 12 years experience in generating electricity from wind.

Orion operates at least 24 wind projects in the U.S. including the Green Mountain (Somerset County) and Waymart (Wayne County) wind energy centers in Pennsylvania.

The solar venture is also the first for British Petroleum since it turned off subsidiary BP Solar late last year. BP Solar gave up on solar farming just a couple of years after closing its plant that manufactured solar energy components in Frederick, Md.

BP Alternative Energy, acquired Orion in 2006, a year after BP formed its low-carbon-electricity subsidiary. Orion Energy LLC, founded in 1998, had a reputation as a successful independent developer of large-scale wind energy projects.

Once approved, Orion's solar farm in Lurgan Township would take a couple of months to construct, Shoener said. Thousands of two- by five-foot panels will be mounted on racks atop posts and will reach as high as 10 feet. The posts will be driven into the ground. Concrete should not be used. The generation facility has a life span of more than 20 years, after which the posts could be removed and the land returned to traditional farming.

Schoener said he does not anticipate any reflection problems from the array.

"The whole idea is to pull the sunlight in and not to have it bounce back," he said.

The panels are dark.

"The landowners are going to benefit from this," Shoener said. "We hope to be a productive member of the community. Hopefully, they'll be proud to have us."

According to the erosion control plans for Orion's Franklin County Solar Project LLC:

-- A six-foot high chain link fence would surround the 248 acres along Mowersville Road east from Pa. 997.

-- They panels would be located on properties of Glenn D. and Catherine Dice, Roger and Danielle Ashway and Robert and Joanne Sheets.

-- The project would disturb 167 acres and make an additional two acres impervious to water. A four-acre staging area would be established.

-- The ground would be planted with a deep-rooted mixture of grass and meadow flowers.

Earth moving would be limited, Shoener said.

"Unlike a hog farm, a solar farm had no odors or noises," Shoener said. "It doesn't require a lot of maintenance. Folks come

by from time to time. A lot is monitored by a computer control system. One it's completed, a pickup truck comes by one or tow time a week for maintenance. That would be about it."

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