

Arizona Guardian

Paul Giblin

Arizona has the potential to become a national leader and exporter of renewable energy, and should use funding available in the stimulus package to build the industry, U.S. Rep. Harry Mitchell said.

However, Arizona is lagging behind other Western states in capturing the solar energy market, he said during a forum on sustainability in Scottsdale.

"Just because we have 300 days of sunshine a year, does not mean that we will automatically lead the way. We must take some very definite steps," the second-term Democrat said Thursday.

Governments, universities and businesses in Arizona all should tap into the stimulus money, which is available on a competitive basis nationwide, to develop infrastructure for the solar power industry, Mitchell said.

Furthermore, governments across the state must lead the way by retrofitting older buildings with renewable energy sources. Just as importantly, state and local officials must work with existing and emerging companies to develop infrastructure for the solar power industry.

"In Arizona, are we making the right moves? Are we truly in a position to take advantage of the opportunities that are coming around?" he asked an audience of 200 at Arizona State University's SkySong development.

A panel of experts who spoke at the forum generally concluded that Arizona is positioned better geographically than it is politically to develop the industry.

Arizona Corporation Commission chairwoman Kris Mayes noted that states across the West are competing to capture the renewable energy market.

"They're going to the mattresses and we have to, too," she said. "The state of Arizona, if we're going to compete against California and Nevada and New Mexico and Colorado, has to be on the same page," said Mayes, a Republican.

Time is short, she said. The solar industry is likely to be rooted in one geographic area or another in as little as two years, she said.

Arizona's policymakers and business executives have to develop a unified message that the state is committed to becoming the nation's renewable energy leader.

Funding in the stimulus package could be used to attract the industry. In addition, the state

needs favorable policy to help develop a sustainable business sector, she said.

For example, the sun-scorched region between Phoenix, Tucson and Yuma could -- and should -- become the nation's epicenter for solar-power generation, she said. But the potential "Solar Zone" will go untapped without development of a new network of transmission lines to move sun-generated energy to urban markets in Arizona, California and elsewhere.

"What's the point of building it if you can't take it someplace?" Mayes said.

Barry Broome, the president and CEO of the Greater Phoenix Economic Council, said Arizona certainly will begin to sprout solar-power generation plants simply because of the ample sunshine. However, policy makers should go further by trying to attract public-sector and private-sector operations dedicated to research and development in "green and clean" energy sources.

He envisions a solar-power equipment production sector similar to the state's existing semiconductor production sector.

Broome echoed Mayes' call for development of new transmission lines, which he said could be a "solar Alaskan pipeline" to export Arizona-made energy across state lines to markets in California, which are increasing their renewable energy requirements.

ASU economic professor Timothy James said it's important that Arizona policymakers ensure the state benefits from the "creative destruction" caused by the recession by positioning the state for emerging industries, such as renewable energy.

Displaced construction workers could be retrained to build the solar-power equipment. The state's universities could teach the next generation of energy engineers.

He noted that solar institutes are being developed across the country, including in Delaware. "Now I'm not a climatological expert, but I bet there isn't as much sun in Delaware as there is in Arizona," he said.

Mayes and Broome said they hope Gov. Jan Brewer and leaders in the state Senate and House will maneuver around a "small pocket" of lawmakers who don't recognize the potential that renewable energy offers Arizona.

Democratic state Rep. Eric Meyer, who attended the forum, said Arizona needs to increase its efforts to attract renewable energy companies.

"Other states have made it attractive for those industries to move to their states. We need to look at what they're offering and at least get to that same level, so we can bring those industries to our state and have them develop here," he said after the event.