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Berks' Biz Owner: Expect Big Jump in Solar Power

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(Source: Lebanon Daily News) By Steve Snyder, Lebanon Daily News, Pa.

May 24--Paul Wittemann expects his solar-installation business will get a big boost from Pennsylvania's PA Sunshine Solar Program, which launched Monday.

"This is really going to put Pennsylvania in the top five or six states for solar development," said Wittemann, owner of Greenspring Energy, which has offices in Leesport, Berks County, and Timonium, Md., north of Baltimore.

PA Sunshine Solar will provide \$100 million in rebates to help with solar electric and hot-water projects, reimbursing eligible consumers up to 35 percent of purchase and installation costs. By comparison, a similar program in Maryland has a total budget of \$565,000, Wittemann said.

Combined with a 30 percent federal tax credit that is part of the February stimulus package, a customer could have 65 percent of his costs covered.

Greenspring is certified by Pennsylvania to install solar hot-water and electric systems, which have separate certifications.

"Pennsylvania is requiring a long application to be approved as a solar contractor," Wittemann said. "That's a good thing. People can feel confident."

Wittemann started the business in March 2007 and now has 16 employees. His firm has installed 230 solar systems, about equally divided between hot-water and electric, for residential and small-business customers in Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia and Delaware. One of his salespeople, Gary Emery, lives in Lebanon.

An average solar array consists of 20 to 30 solar panels aligned on a south-facing roof or on the ground. A solar electric system usually costs between \$20,000 and \$30,000, Wittemann said. The process, from initial phone call to installation, usually takes three to six weeks.

With electric-rate caps due to expire at the end of next year for Met-Ed customers, Wittemann said, his business is poised for more growth. When caps came off in Maryland, electric rates jumped 80 percent in three years in Timonium.

"Things are happening on the East Coast that happened in California earlier," he said, noting that rates in this area are projected to spike 30 to 50 percent when Met-Ed's caps expire. "The assumption is that people are (installing solar systems) for environmental reasons. We see people going solar to eliminate the impact of rate increases."

Greenspring also does energy audits.

"We test equipment and help people understand how to lower energy costs,"
Wittemann said.

For more information about the PA Sunshine Solar Program, visit the Web site
<http://www.depweb.state.pa.us>; key word PA Sunshine.

Greenspring's Web site is <http://www.greenspringenergy.com>. Its phone number is
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