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Solar Developer Abandons Water Plans

By *TODD WOODY*

Solar Millennium In the face of growing concerns over water use by solar-power plants in the West, a German solar developer, Solar Millennium, has decided to use a dry-cooling method instead. Above, a Solar Millennium farm in Europe.

A solar developer caught in the crossfire of the [West's water wars](#) is waving the white flag.

[Solar Millennium](#), a German developer, had proposed using as much as 1.3 billion gallons of water a year to cool a massive solar-power plant complex it wants to build in a desert valley 80 miles northwest of Las Vegas.

That divided the residents of Amargosa Valley, some of whom feared the solar farm would suck dry their aquifer. Others worried about the impact of the \$3 billion project on the endangered pupfish, a tiny blue-gray fish that survives only in a few aquamarine desert pools fed by the valley's aquifer.

Now Solar Millennium says it will instead dry-cool the twin solar farms, which would result in a 90 percent drop in water consumption.

“We trust that this decision to employ dry-cooling will accelerate the approval process and enable us to begin construction and stimulate the local economy by December 2010,” Josef Eichhammer, president of Solar Millennium's American

operations, said in a statement on Monday.

Water has emerged as a contentious issue as dozens of large solar-power plants are proposed for the Southwest desert. Solar Millennium's move is likely to put pressure on other solar developers to follow suit.

Solar thermal plants use the sun's heat to create steam that drives electricity-generating turbines. After the steam is condensed back to water for reuse, it must be cooled. Developers prefer wet cooling, which allows the heat to evaporate, but which requires water to constantly be replenished.

Dry-cooling technology uses fans and heat exchangers to cool the water, but is more expensive and reduces the efficiency of a solar-power plant. Solar Millennium abandoned wet cooling for all its California projects after a local water district declined to supply the 815 million gallons of water one particular solar farm would consume annually.

Not everyone will be celebrating the company's decision to go dry in Amargosa Valley. Some residents and investors **had hoped to sell or lease their water rights** to Solar Millennium. Under Nevada's Byzantine water laws, water rights are held separate from a particular piece of property and Amargosa Valley alfalfa farmers — and even the owner of a local casino — expressed interest in doing deals with the company.

But with water off the table, the Amargosa Valley solar projects' odds of obtaining government approval have improved.

That's good news in a county with 15 percent unemployment. Solar Millennium estimates that each solar farm will generate

800 construction jobs and the complex will need a permanent staff of 100 workers.

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