

Solar industry hiring stalls in New York



Edward Sarcione, left, and electrician Joe Kilijanski of CIR Electrical Construction Corp. install an array of solar panels made by Silevo on a “tracker” system that automatically follows the sun to optimize the system’s performance at a residence in Marilla, Friday, June 20, 2014. (Derek Gee/Buffalo News)

The solar energy industry's rapid growth across the country continued in 2016 – but not in New York.

While the solar industry's job growth topped 20 percent for the fourth straight year in 2016, New York actually lost solar energy jobs last year – a decline officials blamed on delays in launching an initiative to encourage the development of community solar projects across the state.

New York had 8,135 solar energy jobs last year, down 1 percent from 2015 but still the sixth most of any state in the nation, according to a new report from the Solar Foundation.

New York was one of just six states to lose solar energy jobs last year, although solar industry officials in the state indicated that they expect to grow by about 11 percent this year.

"It's really about delays," said Andrea Luecke, the solar energy group's executive vice president.

New York lost about 800 solar installer jobs last year, while employment related to utility-scale solar arrays tripled, the report found. Luecke said delays in getting community solar projects started accounted for the industry's decline last year.

Unlike conventional rooftop solar, where a homeowner installs solar panels on a residence, community solar projects put panels at a larger, remote site, backed by support by residents, who often are unable to put solar panels on their own homes, and community groups. The state has nearly \$1.8 billion in community solar projects that have been proposed.

In addition, Luecke said the state's efforts to change the way it regulates utilities to reflect the growth of solar energy and other alternative power sources has been encouraging for the solar industry, unlike some states, such as Nevada, that have sought to reduce subsidies for solar energy.

"I think people know New York is going to be a strong state on the regulatory side," Luecke said.

Nationally, the report found that employment in the solar energy industry grew by nearly 25 percent last year to about 260,000 people. About one of every 50 jobs created in the United States last year came from the solar energy industry.

While solar power generates only a little more than 1 percent of the nation's electricity, it has become a major source of jobs nationwide, largely because of the labor-intensive nature of rooftop solar installation. The solar energy industry employs more people than the natural gas sector and almost twice as many as the coal industry.

Luecke, noting President Donald Trump's support for the coal industry and other fossil fuels, said it would be a mistake to overlook the impact of the solar industry's growing base of jobs.

"If President Trump wants jobs, I hope he'll look at the American solar industry, because we're an American success story," she said.