

THE SOLAR STATE *yet to shine*

We may be the Sunshine State but our efforts to become a solar power are still lagging, writes **Graham Readfearn**

In giant letters bathed in spotlights, the advertising hoarding declares simply "Welcome to the solar state". This Queensland Government advert has been sitting aloft the main highway out of Brisbane Airport for weeks. Yet campaigners claim the reality of the state's record on renewable energies, especially solar, is not something to shout about.

Only about two per cent of the state's electricity actually comes from renewable sources, but historically most of this has come from burning a by-product of the sugar industry. These minuscule slices of Queensland's electricity pie are dwarfed by the mining and burning of coal, which gives us 88 per cent of our electricity. The other 10 per cent comes from another fossil-fuel, gas. These factors are one of the main reasons why the state emits more greenhouse gases per person than anywhere else in Australia, in a country which emits more greenhouse gases per person than almost all other developed countries.

But Queensland's fossil-fuel habit will come under close scrutiny in coming weeks as advocates for renewable energy state their case for change and a Queensland parliament inquiry hands down a report. Announcing the inquiry, which should report to Parliament in November, the committee chair Carryn Sullivan MP (Pumicestone) said: "I think every Queenslanders knows we have massive reserves of coal. But our solar, wind, biomass and geothermal energy resources are potentially limitless, and even more valuable and sustainable."

Next week in Brisbane former lobbyist and Liberal party political advisor Dr

Guy Pearse will attack the Queensland Government's response to cutting its emissions. "There are a whole lot of very small measures which are cumulatively just tinkering at the margins and distracting the attention of well-meaning Queenslanders from the much larger continuing addiction to carbon that this state is fueling," he tells *bmag*.

Dr Pearse, now a research fellow at the University of Queensland's Global Change Institute, will deliver a seminar with the provocative title, *Queensland: The Dumb State*. Referring to the "solar state" billboard, Pearse is damning. "It's one thing to call itself the Sunshine State, but to call itself the solar state is both deceptive and patronising," he says. "It's also self-delusive on the Government's part. Most people who see that sign will be Queenslanders and that is who it is intended to fool. It is intended to delude them into thinking the Government is serious about the issue."

A Mines and Energy spokesman for the Department of Employment, Economic Development and Innovation says the Government's response to cutting the state's emissions "is focused on practical action at the household and business level".

In April, the Government pledged to double the use of solar energy across the entire state within five years from 250MW to 500MW, which would be about four per cent of Queensland's current power. South East Queensland's Tarong power station

generates 1400MW.

The Government's pledge also includes rooftop solar hot water heaters, which the spokesman explains don't generate power, but "are helping to reduce our state's demand on grid electricity."

The spokesman adds the Government

“There are a whole lot of very small measures which are ...distracting attention from the much larger addiction to carbon that this state is fueling”

has introduced a feed-in-tariff which pays solar householders for their excess electricity. Since the scheme started in July 2008, an extra 32,000 homes and small businesses have installed solar panels. Other measures to boost solar energy include rebates for solar hot water heaters and community-based grants for small-scale projects.

One group which is unarguably serious about making the most of Queensland's renewable energy resources, particularly all of that sunshine, is the not-for-profit bi-partisan group Beyond Zero Emissions (BZE). The group will launch a report in Brisbane next week detailing how Queensland could be part of an Australia-wide effort to generate all of its electricity from renewables in just 10 years time. "Australia is a mountain of coal surrounded by a sea of gas, but I'd rather see it as a sunburnt country," says BZE executive director Matthew Wright.

The 200-page report explains in detail how the transition to round-the-clock renewable energy is technically possible using technology which is already in use around the globe. The report says in Queensland a form of solar power called Concentrated Solar Thermal could take up the lion's share, generating roughly two-thirds of all the power.

These power plants use mirrors which reflect the sun's rays onto towers to generate heat which is stored using molten salt for up to 17 hours. This heat is used to generate steam to drive turbines.

"Anytime you need power, the water is passed over the salt to create the steam," says Wright.

When combined with wind and hydro-power, the report says, this gives the state more than 22,000MW of electricity – well beyond the 14,000MW the state will need by 2020.

The report even details where the new power plants could go and how the electricity could reach the main distribution network. But what about the cost? Consumers would pay "around 6.5c/kWh by 2020" extra, which the report says "is a similar electricity price rise to what may be expected in Australia's business-unusual electricity market."

The only thing in the way of this move to clean power, says Wright, is political will.

"We are still transitioning out of the old economy and a lot of the thinking in industry and government is stuck there."

Guy Pearse is speaking at the UQ Global Change Institute, St Lucia, on 28 October between 5.30pm and 6.30pm. Entry is free but booking is essential. Visit www.gci.uq.edu.au or call 336 53555.

For more information about the Queensland Government's *Do The Bright Thing* campaign, take a look at <http://brightthing.energy.qld.gov.au>.

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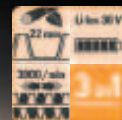
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