

North korea solar energy storage

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea) appears to have identified the benefits of harnessing renewable energy in the mid-2000s. From around that time, state media began reporting on developments of solar energy in other countries--a sign that work on the technology was already underway at home.[1]

In March 2009, Korean Central Television reported on what was probably one of the first uses of solar electricity in the country. The Central Tree Nursery had installed solar panels to help regulate the temperature and humidity in its greenhouses. The solar panels were seen in Rodong Sinmun in October 2011 as part of coverage of Kim Jong Il's visit to the site.[2]

Such heaters are a simpler technology than solar electricity panels and use the sun's energy to heat up water. While they are far from universal, they can be seen on some new construction buildings across North Korea.

Although these heaters are beyond the focus of this article, which deals with electricity generation, it is one way in which solar has been used to meet household needs despite the country's chronic energy shortages.

Both of those visits came about two months after North Korea made several amendments to the Law on the Protection of Environment (?????), including a call on institutions, organizations and enterprises to reduce consumption of fossil fuels and actively develop and use renewable energy including solar, geothermal, wind and tidal power.[3]

That amendment was eventually replaced with the Law on Renewable Energy, passed by the Supreme People's Assembly in May 2013. The new legislation built on the previous amendment, calling on the state and scientific institutions to conduct a survey of renewable energy resources and encouraging their development and use.[4]

The legal changes were some of the most visible signs that the state was getting more serious about renewable energy, including solar energy. That said, as discussed in the first article in this series, the push for renewable energy development is much more likely to be motivated by the challenges of basic energy provision than actual environmental concerns.

Less than a year after the new law was enacted, the State Academy of Sciences created the Natural Energy Research Institute (?????????) in January 2014. The institute is located on the academy's campus in Pyongsong, just north of Pyongyang.[5]

The institute likely grew out of the Natural Energy Development and Utilization Center (?????????????) at the State Academy of Sciences, which had been in existence since at least 2003.

The institute has been profiled by state media several times over the last nine years and is said to cover over 8,000 square meters and is engaged in research into geothermal, wind, biomass and solar energy.

Among its units is the Solar Cell Application Laboratory, which, according to state media, is developing domestically produced solar cells. A profile of the lab in 2020 said it had developed a panel "capable of generating electricity of 1 000kW [kilowatts] annually." [6]

In one 2016 report, state television showed images of engineers working on solar cells with what appeared to be soldering irons. The cells can be seen in plastic-wrapped packs on the work desk, which raises the possibility they were imported from an outside source rather than produced by the institute.

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