



Ontario a magnet for solar tech firm

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Sustainable Energy Technologies Ltd. is a developer of power electronics gear for solar projects – and until recently it was going to outsource the manufacturing of that equipment to a firm in China.

But the Calgary-based technology company has decided that Ontario is where it wants to lay roots. Chief executive Robert Bucher told the *Star* his plan now is to establish manufacturing in southern Ontario that could create up to 300 jobs in the province.

"If things work out we'll be here," said Bucher, assuring that it won't just be a satellite operation. Sustainable Energy's head office, research and development, and manufacturing would be located in Ontario and the company could begin churning out product as early as the first quarter of 2010, he said. "We're negotiating right now."

It's the latest sign that the province's strategy of attracting "green-collar" jobs may be starting to work. Beyond high-profile wins, such as Samsung Group's plan to locate manufacturing in Ontario to support its own wind and solar projects, a number of smaller players are beginning to emerge.

Bucher explained the change of heart as an "aligning of the stars" – Ontario's aggressive support of solar projects and massive U.S. stimulus spending, a good chunk of which is committed to the deployment of renewable power.

Locating in Ontario gives him easy access to U.S. markets.

His company's product, an advanced device called an inverter, is a crucial part of any solar power installation. It changes the direct current generated by a solar panel into an alternating current that goes on the grid.

New provincial local-content rules require that at least 40 per cent of a small rooftop solar project and 50 per cent of a larger installation consist of made-in-Ontario labour, technology and equipment. When using local labour, solar installers can meet the target if either the inverter or most of the solar panel is manufactured in Ontario.

Right now the only company that makes solar inverters in the province is Boston-based Satcon Technology Corp., which in 2001 acquired Burlington-based Inverpower Controls and renamed it Satcon Canada. With demand for inverters expected to be high over the coming years, Sustainable Energy is betting Ontario will be a good place to call home.

When first announced, the local content rules had many solar installers and developers worried about their ability to comply. Blair Beesley, founder of Toronto-based SolSmart Energy Solutions Inc., is still concerned about restricting choice in the market, but he's increasingly comfortable he'll be able to meet content targets.

"Overall I'm optimistic," said Beesley, adding that he's heard of a few companies that are serious about manufacturing racking systems, solar panels and inverters in Ontario. "It seems like there are enough people willing to dive into this, even though there is no proven market yet."

Bucher believes concerns about local content rules are overblown. Some foreign makers of thin-film solar panels have shown interest in partnering with Sustainable Energy and establishing assembly operations in Ontario.