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HelioPower gets One Block Off the Grid contract

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HelioPower, which was founded in Fallbrook, has received a contract from One Block Off the Grid to provide volume installation of energy-efficient residential systems.

"We're obviously very excited about it," said Scott Gordon, the vice president of residential sales for HelioPower. "It solidifies our market share in the area."

The One Block Off the Grid contract with HelioPower was awarded November 10 and lasts through February 12, 2010. The volume discount will allow HelioPower and One Block Off the Grid to provide the installation of solar panels, as well as impartial advice, at \$5.29 per watt.

"HelioPower was able to offer the San Diego community the lowest price ever offered to any community to date," said One Block Off the Grid head of product and strategy Brad Burton.

"This is our third campaign working with the HelioPower team. They have always delivered timely, high-quality installations to our members, and we are thrilled to be working with them again," said Burton. "We are confident that this partnership will continue to grow San Diego's booming reputation as the leading city for solar power in the U.S."

One Block Off the Grid was founded in June 2008 in San Francisco. It is a non-profit organization which seeks to increase solar power usage through the negotiation of volume discount contracts for installation of residential systems.

"We're aiming to cause a tipping point in the adoption of residential solar," Burton said.

Many of the One Block Off the Grid contracts have covered the Bay Area or the Los Angeles area. The first San Diego County area contract covered the period from May 2009 to August 2009 and resulted in more than 100 solar installations.

"It was definitely a successful campaign," Burton said.

Because the process includes an evaluation of infrastructure feasibility and financing, not all interested homeowners eventually convert their homes to solar energy. Nearly 1,000 residents expressed some sort of interest in the initial campaign, which utilized HelioPower and groSolar for installation.

"We're excited to get going again in San Diego," Burton said. "We're really excited specifically to get involved in the community."

Satellite imagery of rooftops is one of the factors analyzed in the decision whether to install solar paneling. Monthly utility bills are also discussed during the free evaluation process.

"One Block Off the Grid isn't only about price. It's about value," Gordon said.

One Block Off the Grid issues a request for proposals to the top ten installers in each area, narrows the selection to two finalists, and negotiates a discount. The pricing includes a base price with specific add-on options.

"The people have a better sense of what it is they're getting into," Burton said.

Gordon notes that solar panels are similar regardless of the installer.

"The difference is how it's all put together," he said.

HelioPower was founded in 2001 by Mo Russo, who lived in Fallbrook at the time and now lives in Oregon. Russo sold most of his interest in the company to investors in 2007, which is also when the company moved from Fallbrook to Murrieta.

The One Block Off the Grid contract for the San Diego area will cover the entirety of San Diego County and will also cover the I-15 corridor area in southern Riverside County between the county line and Lake Elsinore.

The San Diego area contract for 2009 helped HelioPower grow by 50 percent last year, and company sales have quadrupled since the 2007 transition. Although the One Block Off the Grid contract is for residential customers only, HelioPower also installs

commercial systems.

Gordon noted that past contracts with One Block Off the Grid didn't ensure the award of the current contract.

"Every one gets progressively harder to win," he said. "One Block Off the Grid calls everybody from the last campaign and does surveys."

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If customers from the previous campaign are dissatisfied, the contractor is not invited to participate in subsequent campaigns. One Block Off the Grid has utilized a total of eight solar installers during its campaigns; approximately 1,300 companies throughout the state install solar energy panels.

Gordon, who lives in Ontario, notes that the installation of solar energy panels in his own home will have a payback period of seven to eight years. The payback period differs for each home. Gordon also noted that factors such as shadows, roof support, and

electrical capacity may make a home unsuitable for installation of rooftop solar panels.

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