Rocky Mountain Power Solar Tax and My Fairpark Solar Experience

Bryce Garner

Earlier this year, Rocky Mountain Power (RMP) proposed a general rate increase for all their customers in Utah. This rate increase request also included a move from a $7/month minimum charge (before taxes) to a $15/month minimum charge (a 214% increase).

On top of this, RMP proposed that any customer who had solar panels on their house connected via a net meter to the grid would have to pay a monthly fee of $4.65 per month. This fee would be the same whether a customer had one solar panel or 30 panels on their home.

RMP contends that solar-power customers do not pay their fair share of the infrastructure costs associated with net-metering. In reality, even if a customer produces more energy from their panels than they use, they still pay the minimum $7 charge per month. During the day, when the solar panels are producing energy, that extra energy goes into the grid to the nearest customer using power, and is sold by RMP to other customers at no cost of production to RMP. This also saves RMP on the cost and energy loss associated with high power lines over long distances. This solar tax is a dis-incentive to customers moving toward clean renewable energy.

Since this rate increase was proposed, thousands of RMP customers have made comments to the Public Service Commission (PSC) almost unanimously against this solar tax. At its June 26th meeting, the Fairpark Community Council passed a resolution to submit a statement to the PSC supporting rooftop solar, and opposing the solar tax. The period for public comment on the proposed fee for solar-power customers closed at the end of July; it is expected that the PSC will issue its decision in the next few weeks.

The Garner Family is a RMP Solar-power Customer in Fairpark

I installed a 3.5 kilowatt (kW) system on my house in October of 2013. The system cost $14,249. Of that, $4,275 was covered by a Federal tax credit, $2,000 was covered by a

state tax credit, and $3,448.75 was covered by RMP's Blue Sky Customers Solar Incentive Program (funded by RMP customer donations, not out of RMP's revenues).

My final out-of-pocket cost for the system was $4,520. But, even at this highly discounted price, it should take me about 8-10 years of lower RMP payments to recoup my out-of-pocket investment in solar panels. If the PSC approves RMP's request for the monthly $4.65 fee for solar-power customer, my pay-off timeline could increase to 13-15 years.

Between October 2013 and March 2014, I produced 325 extra kilowatt hours (kWh) than I used in my house. Per my net-metering agreement with RMP, every March, any energy that has carried over throughout the year is zeroed out with no payment to the customer. During this time I paid $7.99 every month to be connected to the grid although I was producing more than I used.

But, since I realized I was producing more power than I was using, I decided in April to sell my gas-powered car and lease an electric vehicle to run off of the solar panels. Even with the increased use of electricity to recharge the car, as of my August power bill, I am still running a surplus of 178 kWh.

From the beginning, my panels have produced 3.2 megawatt-hours of energy. This has offset 3.05 tons of carbon emissions. On top of that, I have driven my electric car 4000 miles, which has also reduced carbon emissions by 1.35 tons.

In total, my experience with solar power has decreased carbon emissions by 4.4 tons. The air that my family breathes is cleaner; the air that the residents in the Fairpark Community breathe is cleaner. So for creating cleaner air, RMP want to charge me $4.65 every month. This does not seem right??? You be the judge.