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Twin-panel, “do-it-yourself” solar tracker draws crowds at Md. Solar Expo

May 23, Columbia, Md. – A powerful, affordable and easy-to-install solar “tracker” made by Advanced Technology & Research Corp. drew much interest at the second Maryland Solar and Wind Expo, held May 13-15 at the Timonium Fairgrounds.

“We had strong traffic throughout the show. Many visitors asked lots of questions and thought the tracker could be a good fit for their homes and their budgets,” said ATR Vice President Rob Lundahl. “We heard comments such as ‘the price is right,’ ‘I like the option of not having to put panels on my roof,’ ‘I’d take them with me if I ever moved,’ and ‘it looks easy to install,’ ” Lundahl added.

Each ground-mounted unit holds two standard solar panels and the tracking mechanism itself, which uses GPS technology to literally follow the sun and produce up to 30% more power than fixed, optimally tilted panels and up to 45% more power than panels installed on rooftops. Each unit, rated at 470 watts, costs under \$3,000 off the shelf. Federal, state and local tax credits and other incentives can bring that down by more than 50 percent. Each tracker should pay for itself in about five years and generate free electricity for at least 15 more, said Lundahl.

Depending on the size of your house and your power usage, you’d probably need 10 to 15 twin-panel units to provide for all of your home’s electricity needs, Lundahl said. But a major advantage of ATR’s trackers is that you can install one, two or a few units at a time and add more when you’re ready, Lundahl said. “Another comment we heard more than once is ‘this is a good way to get your feet wet with solar,’ because you don’t have to commit to putting 20 or 30 panels on your roof at once,” which can cost upwards of \$30,000 before incentives, he added.

A local sustainability advocate agrees. “Roof-top arrays are a good fit for many homeowners, but the dual-panel tracker is a great way for many others to start getting into solar,” said Heather Szymanski, executive director of the Green Building Institute, an educational organization based in Jessup, Md. “The high cost of installing a large, roof-top array can be a barrier for numerous consumers,” Szymanski added. “Being able to install just one, two or three tracking units to start greatly eases that barrier while still letting a homeowner start benefitting from solar energy.”

In addition, many roofs just aren’t suited to installing solar panels because they don’t face the right way (south), aren’t optimally tilted, don’t get enough direct sunlight or are made of material (such as slate) that can’t accommodate panels, said Lundahl, adding, “Some folks just don’t want to put panels on their roof, especially when there’s a viable option such as the ground-mounted tracker.”

The home version is designed to be mounted on a simple wooden or metal post and be easy enough for someone with fairly basic DIY skills to install, said ATR technician Bruce Shirey. “If you can put in a fencepost, you can install a post-mounted tracker,” though you need a licensed electrician to do the wiring, he added. An installation manual is available with each unit. If you’d rather let someone else do the installing, it should cost about \$500 for one twin-panel unit, and less for each additional unit you install at the same time, Shirey says.

In addition to the home version, ATR makes a single-panel unit designed to be mounted on a light pole, such as in a park-and-ride lot; a multi-panel tracker that attaches to a pole-mounted wind turbine, and, with more electric vehicles hitting the roads, a multi-panel, solar-assisted car-charger – the first will go up later this spring in Bethesda, Md. Nearly all of the manufacturing and assembly for ATR’s trackers is done in Maryland and the panels are U.S.-made, Lundahl pointed out. “These tracking solar devices can definitely help cut our dependence on imported fossil fuels, and also help protect the environment as well as our wallets,” he added.

Advanced Technology and Research Corp. (ATR) is a Maryland company that has been designing and manufacturing innovative energy-related and other automation products for more than 20 years (www.ATRsolartech.com).

Attachments: Photos:

- Visitors to ATR booth at Md. Solar & Wind Expo see, discuss trackers
- Dual-panel tracker at ATR booth at Md. Solar & Wind Expo
- Three dual-panel trackers installed at Clarksville, Md. home