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Dan Blake, editor dblake@courier-journal.com | 502-4651 | Fax: 582-4360

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“We are in the middle of a green building boom.”

JOHNNY MILLER, president, Earthwell Energy Management



By Bill Wolfe, The Courier-Journal

Chris Curry, left, Earthwell's renewable energy manager, and President Johnny Miller stood near a 2,000-watt solar-power system that the company installed at the University of Louisville's Henry Vogt Building.

Earthwell forecasts bright green future

Bailout is boon to solar, energy management firm

By Bill Wolfe

bwolfe@courier-journal.com

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Here comes the sun.

After a dark decade or so of relative indifference to energy issues, the nation now seems firmly fixed on a green-energy transformation, said Johnny Miller, president and owner of Earthwell Energy Management in Louisville.

"The past 13 years, energy conservation and environmental stewardship haven't always been as high a priority as they are today," Miller said. But currently, "we are in the middle of a green building boom," with growing interest in energy efficiency and increased use of renewable energy.

Adding to the momentum, the federal government recently extended and expanded tax credits for energy conservation and alternative energies as part of the \$700 billion financial bailout bill. "It was wonderful news. It's good news for us. It's good news for America," Miller said.

His Louisville company is a full-service energy-management business that designs and installs solar-power systems, automatic building controls, heating and air-conditioning equipment, high-efficiency lighting, and other types of electrical work.

Since the company was founded in 1996, "we've gone from a startup operation to 25 employees with a \$1 million payroll," Miller said.

Earthwell, which serves industrial, government and commercial customers, is licensed as an electrical contractor in Kentucky, Ohio and Tennessee, and employs board-certified solar installers and energy managers.

The company is one of the primary energy-management contractors for the Jefferson County Public Schools, said Kevin Stoltz, the district's energy auditor. Earthwell shared in a \$5 million project about five years ago to find places where energy was being wasted and to provide improvements that pay for themselves in savings, he said. It's also bidding on an electricity-generating wind turbine planned for the new Ramsey Middle School.

"They would like to get involved with our solar projects, and probably will in the

future," Stoltz said.

Earthwell recently completed a 2,000-watt solar-power system and solar water heater at the University of Louisville's Henry Vogt Building and is putting the finishing touches on a 50,000-watt solar array -- one of the largest in the region -- for the university's new biosafety lab on its Shelby Campus.

The photovoltaic system, which uses solar cells to convert light directly to electricity, will handle the lighting load of the building, which in a large commercial building "can be substantial," said John Stratton, U of L's project manager for the job and a senior architect with its office of planning, design and construction.

The same power would probably supply the needs of four average-sized houses, Miller said.

"Going green is not necessarily a new concept," Stratton said, but recent years have brought a "concerted effort by all contractors and all professionals" toward efficiency and sustainability. Energy-management companies such as Earthwell are "important members of our team."

Chris Curry, renewable energy manager for Earthwell, said he enjoys knowing that his work brings people power from sunlight. Power generation is essentially free -- though "the system's not. That's the hard part," he said.

Counting equipment expense, solar power costs about 16 cents per kilowatt hour -- compared with about 6 cents per kwh for coal-generated power from Louisville Gas and Electric Co. Still, prices for solar energy are falling while conventional power costs are rising, Miller said. Eventually, solar may be cheaper.

In any case, solar can help the nation become energy independent, Curry said. "I think that desire is in almost everyone that's got a breath."

Miller said he became interested in energy management after the 1990 Gulf War, when Kuwaiti oil wells were set ablaze "and there was a lot of discussion about the environmental impact of being dependent on

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JOHNNY MILLER, President, Earthwell Energy Management

a fossil-fuel economy."

He began a company in Dayton, Ohio, that focused mostly on lighting -- "the low-hanging fruit" of energy management. A Louisville native, Miller sold his share of the Ohio business to a partner and moved with his wife back to his hometown to found Earthwell.

Lighting was an important part of the new company's business and continues to be a mainstay. Earthwell recently engineered, designed and installed new lights for Humana's Waterside Building on West Washington Street, and kicked off a year-long project for a similar lighting upgrade at Eastern Kentucky University in Richmond last week.

"I think that there's been an awareness today that we've never had," Miller said. People know that oil reserves are being depleted, energy costs are rising and there's "a growing concern over climate change. All these have come together to contribute to ... a perfect storm" blowing over the energy economy.

The energy section of the bailout bill not only extended credits another eight years, it also eliminated some caps that were part of the old program, "so it's actually sweetened the deal a little bit," he said.

At one time, customers sought his help because going green seemed "the right thing to do." Now they see that "it's a necessity." Reporter Bill Wolfe can be reached at (502) 582-4248.