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## Palo Alto firm to build solar thermal equipment factory in Nevada

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Call it assembly-line solar.

Palo Alto's Ausra Inc. said Thursday that it is building the country's first factory dedicated to making equipment for large-scale solar thermal farms.

The factory, in Las Vegas, will crank out the mirrors, towers and tubing for solar facilities throughout the desert Southwest. That includes a solar farm Ausra plans to build just north of California's Carrizo Plain in San Luis Obispo County. Pacific Gas and Electric Co. has already agreed to buy the Carrizo plant's power, enough to light more than 132,000 homes.

Ausra executives see their new factory as a key step toward cutting solar power's price by mass producing components that can be assembled easily in the field. The highly automated factory - whose price Ausra did not disclose Thursday - will be able to create enough reflectors each year to cover 4 square miles.

"It's a realization of the vision we've had, since we started the company, to build at high volume," said John O'Donnell, the privately held company's executive vice president. "Applying Detroit-style production is critical to bringing down the cost."

Ausra specializes in concentrated solar thermal technology, which is far different from the photovoltaic solar panels sprouting on more and more California rooftops.

Photovoltaic panels generate electricity when exposed to sunlight. Solar thermal farms, in contrast, use mirrors to concentrate the sunlight on a single spot, greatly enhancing its power. In Ausra's system, the focused light boils water, generating steam to drive an electrical turbine.

Variations of the same technology have been used in California and elsewhere for years. Now, however, solar thermal has seen increased interest because it can create large amounts of power without spewing the greenhouse gases that cause global warming. A recent survey from the Emerging Energy Research firm found that the United States will likely add 2,855 megawatts of solar thermal energy by the end of 2012, enough to power more than 2 million homes.

Most of that development will be concentrated in the desert Southwest. The area every year receives more solar energy per square foot, on average, than any other place in the country.

Which explains Ausra's decision to put its factory in Las Vegas. Although the company considered Southern California, Las Vegas was more centrally located for the solar farms it expects to build.

"We see that the solar thermal power market is going to grow from Utah to Colorado, New Mexico to California, and Nevada is kind of ground zero, with a business-friendly climate," O'Donnell said.

Nevada officials crowded over Ausra's choice of location. The factory will employ about 50 people.

"The decision by Ausra to locate here points further to Nevada becoming a leader in building and delivering clean power to our state, to our region and to our country," said Somer Hollingsworth, president of the Nevada Development Authority.

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