

Clean Tech Summit provides divergent dialogue

BY K KAUFMANN
The Desert Sun

The Clean-Tech Investor Summit in Indian Wells last month might provide the Coachella Valley's green business community with both a glimpse of the region's potential future as a renewable energy hub and a sobering reality check on the long road ahead.

The two-day event was jam-packed with high-level discussions of industry trends that the valley is well poised to take advantage of — from renewable and natural gas co-generation projects to the Department of Energy's rising profile as a leading investor in emerging green businesses and large-scale wind and solar projects.

But the key moment for Wesley Ahlgren, chief operating officer of the Coachella Valley Economic Partnership, came as he was networking among the 440 investors and industry executives at the summit.

The event has been held in the valley since its inception in 2005, but this was the first year CVEP was a cosponsor, and Ahlgren found that many attendees had little idea of the region's strong portfolio of sun, wind, geothermal and biofuel resources.

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founder and CEO of Cypress Semiconductor Corp

"People are always amazed that we have all of this within 45 minutes' (drive)," he said. "I don't think they understand it."

CVEP has already targeted green tech as a core sector in its economic blueprint for diversifying the region's economy and creating new, well-paid jobs. Ahlgren said the way forward is to "brand the Coachella Valley as a business ecosystem for clean tech."

"I'm going to provide information and become a resource for (investors) because they do their due diligence," he said.

Ahlgren also used part of his time at the event scouting young entrepreneurs with promising new products and a need for business development space.

Mario Landau-Holdsworth, 24, of Portland, for example, has invented a wireless system to track the power use of electric vehicles. His plug-in device shows drivers and utilities where, when and how much a car is charging up its battery.

"I'm following up with him," Ahlgren said. "We'll incubate him."

Landau-Holdsworth said he's still looking for seed capital, but didn't rule out a future valley connection. The summit was his first trip to the region, but he said, "I felt like I had landed in an Ansel Adams photo."

"I love this area," he said. "I can't wait to come back."

Drawing young talent like Landau-Holdsworth also will mean staying on top of some of the summit's key trends and hot topics.

The bridge to green

Finding a bridge or bridges to transition the U.S. and global economies from their current fossil-fuel dependence to renewable power was a central thread running through several presentations at the summit.

Natural gas, especially the sea of shale oil now being unearthed in Pennsylvania, is undoubtedly part of the picture, but some speakers said the historical connections between natural gas and the oil industry need to be rethought.

Natural gas peaker plants are "very inefficient, very dirty and very noisy; they don't solve the problem," said Carl Pope, chairman of the Sierra Club.

"(We should) replace peakers with fuel cells and natural gas and take off the pressure to bring in power from far away."

"Looking at the system as a different kind of system is essential to getting the partnership of natural gas and renewables right," Pope said.

Andrew Littlefair, CEO of Clean Energy Fuels of Seal Beach, a firm that markets compressed and liquid natural gas in the transportation sector, said transitioning customers from traditional to cleaner fuels means "you better have a full portfolio of services to get them over the hump."

Vikram Rao, CEO of the Research Triangle Energy Consortium, a clean tech consulting firm in North Carolina, acknowledged the environmental issues surrounding shale oil — pollution of water supplies first and foremost — but he said, "Every time you have an issue, you have an investment opportunity."

Global competition versus local jobs

T.J. Rogers, founder and CEO of Cypress Semiconductor Corp., said it best.

The global market means "green jobs are mostly offshore. If you're making stuff in a factory, you're competing against the Chinese," said Rogers, a climate skeptic who was nonetheless a major investor in the development of

SunPower, a leading solar panel manufacturer.

"Typically, green jobs are going to be 60-90 percent offshore," he said.

Tom Tiller, president of Abound Solar, a Colorado-based solar manufacturer, disagreed.

"Labor is a small cost of solar costs," he said. "The U.S. can be competitive in this industry. We have to be highly innovative, and you have to have a global footprint in supply base and customer base."

Lack of a national energy policy

Another constant theme at the summit was the instability in clean tech markets created by Congress' failure to pass a strategic energy and climate change policy.

"Clean tech needs long-term capital," said Ira Ehrenpreis, chairman of the summit and a partner in Technology Partners, a Silicon Valley investment firm. "A mismatch of policy timing and project timing (means) instability."

Lack of a national policy also means a maze of different state

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President of Abound Solar

regulations and requirements for companies planning projects, Tiller said.

In Germany, companies fill out a three-page form, he said.

"It's not a lot more complicated than getting a driver's license. In the U.S., there needs to be some real thinking in trying to create more uniformity across the country."

Still, the policy vacuum in Congress does create opportunities at the state level, politically and economically, said Thomas Steyer, the Silicon Valley asset manager who led the successful campaign to defeat Proposition 23.

Had it passed, the November ballot initiative would have put California's aggressive climate change laws on indefinite hold.

"We have to succeed in California in proving that this makes sense on a business scale," he said. "We're going to be under the microscope in how it works. We've got to be hard-nosed in setting up a playing field ... where businesses can succeed."

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Middle East 'breakdown' fuels oil bulls' rampage for higher prices

BY MORRIS R. BESCHLOSS

For months, our predictions of an upward breakout of global oil pricing were hedged by the lack of a major geopolitical cataclysm that could spiral energy costs into the proverbial stratosphere.

While the recent flirtation with mid-'90s oil per-barrel price was primarily driven by the intense demand from developing nations — mostly the Southeast Asian quadrant — the uncertainty was caused by the ongoing sanctions confrontation with Iran and the doomsday possibility that military action could lead to a closure of the Persian Gulf choke point.

With the Islamic Middle East nations providing more than 40% of the current world demand of about 80 million barrels a day, the in-

evitability of a showdown with Iran could, in short order, rebound oil prices up and above the \$150 per barrel level reached in July 2008.

Least expected was the current sociopolitical deterioration impacting the primarily Sunni-Moslem nations of the oil rich region. Since the Shiite religious radicalism of Iran and its increasing influence in neighboring Iraq, as well as Syria and Lebanon, keeps them under Tehran's protective umbrella, the rage seems pointed at the North African tier (Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria) plus Yemen for the present.

Although these nations produce only a relatively minuscule amount of the oil emanating from the Middle East, the current civil turmoil will almost certainly spread to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in due

time. Although food shortages and unemployment are the main issues igniting the current imbroglio, the Jihadist Moslem brotherhood is waiting to take over.

If the worst case of extreme Islamism propagated by Iran becomes overwhelming, a global oil price disaster could be the outcome of such a dire development.

It is the ultimate irony that the dynastic Sunni family regimes, coddled for almost a century by Britain, France and the U.S., are on the verge of crashing.

Unlike the naive blather emanating from both the Bush and Obama Administrations, the replacement will be Islamic Shariah-law-based radical dictatorships, not the dreamy-eyed democracy visions of the West's misguided leaders.

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