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# Solar Helps Give an Ancient Tribe Power for a Prosperous Future

A Dispatch from the Pueblo of Jemez in New Mexico



PHOTO CREDIT: LESLIE CARLSON

The Jemez Pueblo tribe in New Mexico plans to install a 4-megawatt solar array that will help bring the ancient tribe power for the future. Above, traditional clothing worn during the corn dance is depicted in a mural at the Indian Pueblo Cultural Center in Albuquerque.

By LESLIE CARLSON

**A**s the red dust of the pueblo square is rhythmically kicked by hundreds of Jemez Pueblo tribe members, I am transported back to a time of intense communal power. The men are painted in blue or orange, according to their family clans, and wear decorative shells and bells. The women wear traditional smocks and jewelry. Both men and women carry pine boughs. It seems as if all 3,000 tribe members are here in the long narrow square, stamping and singing, unified by the corn dance.

I am lucky enough to be here because of a fellowship from the Institute for Journalism and Natural Resources. The IJNR has awarded me a weeklong journey through New Mexico to “Energy Country.” Along with 15 other fellows, I am bombarded with

information during my travels through this unique land. I have become a firsthand witness to the potential of renewable energy – seeing its most modern forms at Sandia National Laboratories in Albuquerque, and now here, in an ancient setting.



PHOTO CREDIT: LESLIE CARLSON

**Few jobs are available on the reservation.**

“Jemez are experts at not changing,” said Greg Kaufman, an environmental scientist at Jemez Pueblo, about 50 miles northwest of Albuquerque. According to Mr. Kaufman, the Jemez are the most traditional tribe in New Mexico. Their remote, poor pueblo is only open to the public a few days out of the year, and they are the only speakers of Towa, an ancient Native American language.

They are also the only tribe to have proposed a commercial-scale solar plant on their land. The solar project, which will generate revenue for the entire tribe, will use 30 acres of reservation land as a site for single-axis, flat-plate solar arrays. The \$22 million construction cost is to be funded through U.S. government loans, grants and tax credits. With a transmission line already available at the site, and an average of 310 sunny days a year, the 4-megawatt solar project is expected to generate \$25 million in revenue over the next 25 years for the tribe through the sale of the electricity.

Right now, the only paying jobs available on the reservation are through government grants, a convenience store and some artisan work. Tribe members work off reservation to earn a living. They were denied a permit to build a casino off-site, because the proposed site was too far from the reservation land.

The Jemez do not want their way of life to be disturbed. They see the promise of renewable energy. Their goal is not to get rich, but to improve the reservation as a whole.

The precedent they are setting has enormous potential. Native American tribes control 55 million acres of land in the United States. Solar panels on this land could generate 17 trillion kilowatt-hours per year of electricity. At present, wind power is being developed on some tribal lands, but solar is very limited. The Jemez Pueblo project is the only large-scale solar plant proposed thus far.

During my stay at the Jemez Pueblo, I experienced what it means to be a part of a cohesive, ancient culture. The fact that the tribe wants to take part in the promise of renewable energy to preserve its identity impressed me as a path from an ages-old past to a very bright future.

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### ***About the Project***

The Pueblo of Jemez is a federally recognized tribe with about 3,000 members, including about 2,200 who live in the village of Walatowa, about 50 miles west of Santa Fe, N.M. Tribal members are descendants of people who have occupied the Jemez Valley for about 800 years. They are the only tribe still speaking an unwritten language called Towa. Fluency among the population is high. So is the poverty rate, with about one-fourth of the population living below the federal poverty line. The tribe operates a convenience store at the village, where there are few other sources of income.

Several years ago, tribal members, with the help of government officials, began investigating the possibility of installing a large solar array that could generate power that would be sold to a utility. The array project is about to get under way on a 30-acre site near the village and will produce about 4 megawatts of electrical power. Planners had difficulty finding a flat site in the narrow valley, which is an important archaeological site. When completed, the array is expected to provide a profitable, sustainable revenue source to the pueblo.

It is believed that the Jemez project will be the largest solar array on tribal lands. The federal government has said that Native American tribes control about 55 million acres throughout the United States, and that all of the nation's annual electricity needs could be met by installing solar on about one-fourth of that land.