

Broad support for solar power

by [Ryan Randazzo](#) - Jun. 27, 2011 04:54 PM
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Ninety-four percent of Arizona Public Service Co. customers who participated in a recent survey want the utility to increase the amount of solar power it uses, and a majority of them said they are willing to pay more for that to happen.

The utility commissioned a study by the Morrison Institute, an independent, nonpartisan center for research, analysis and public outreach at Arizona State University.

APS charges monthly tariffs averaging about \$7 for [renewableenergy](#) and efficiency programs, and faces state mandates to increase its use of those energy sources.

"We believe this absolutely affirms the direction we've been taking and will take on our energy portfolio," said Pat Dinkel, APS vice president of power marketing, resource planning and acquisitions. "We are making strong commitments to energy efficiency and renewable energy."

Dinkel said that 80 percent of the new energy APS will need to supply between now and 2025 will come from environmentally friendly power sources, helping meet the state requirement of 15 percent of energy from renewables by 2025.

The study was called an "informed perception" project because it involved surveying a broad range of APS customers, and then giving some of those respondents

a daylong education in energy issues, then surveying their thoughts again to see if the information changed their beliefs.

First, 1,070 customers were interviewed by telephone. To ensure the questions were not loaded, and presented a fair view of the industry, the Morrison Institute developed questions with help from a 24-member committee comprised of energy experts from the coal industry, renewable-energy advocates, Sierra Club and the Inter Tribal Council of Arizona.

Following the telephone interview, 184 randomly selected participants attended a daylong forum Dec. 4.

They were mailed a 24-page briefing on Arizona energy issues written with input from the expert committee.

They were surveyed again after they had a chance to read the briefing mailed to them, then again after the daylong seminar, and a fourth and final time a month later.

The daylong forum offered the opportunity to learn about benefits and drawbacks of energy sources, from solar and wind power

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to coal, **naturalgas** and nuclear energy, and conservation.

The multiple surveys were intended to see if education regarding energy issues changed perceptions, and researchers found that it did, at least briefly.

In the first survey, 81 percent of participants ranked "getting electricity from sources that will never be used up" as "extremely" or "somewhat" important, and by the fourth survey, that number increased slightly to 84 percent.

In the first interview, 80 percent of participants ranked "keeping electricity rates low for consumers" as "extremely" or "somewhat" important. By the fourth interview, just 59 percent ranked it that high.

However, the researchers noted that while many participants changed their perceptions of energy issues immediately after the daylong seminar, they "snapped back" 30 days later, reverting to their earlier beliefs.

For example, immediately after the daylong session, participants overwhelmingly preferred a decrease in the amount of coal used to generate electricity, and an increase in renewable energy. Thirty days later, they still preferred a decrease in coal, but only a modest increase in renewables.

The study found a wide disparity in what people are willing to pay for their electricity to ensure a clean environment, promote renewables, create jobs and ensure a reliable supply of power.

For example, 53 percent of respondents said they would support a 20 percent increase in their bills to ensure a clean environment, while 24 percent said they would not

support any increase at all.

"One of the things we weren't sure about going in, we knew there was pressure for utilities to manage costs and also support for green energy," Dinkel said. "What we didn't know is if there was any tension between the two and if one was stronger than the other. What we found was, customers want us to do both."

Dinkel said that renewable energy, such as solar and wind power, is getting much closer in price to conventional forms of electricity, but that all new generators are substantially more expensive than the old power plants supplying the grid today.

"Customers are smart enough to know that rates are going up, and to know there are pressures on all commodity costs," he said.

He said APS will use the survey results as the company prepares its plans to meet the state's growing energy demands.

"We are making billions of dollars in **investments** that Arizonans will live with for decades," he said. "We don't take those decisions lightly. It is good to know our

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customers know there are trade-offs with those decisions."

Salt River Project, which splits electric service in metro Phoenix with APS, conducted a similar survey earlier this year.

It indicated that most believe climate change is a serious or potentially serious issue that warrants action now and that most would pay a slight increase in utility bills to address it.

Eighty percent of the SRP respondents said they were either very likely or somewhat likely to support a 3 percent bill increase, or about \$57 a year by 2020, to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions from their electricity production.

Fifty-five percent of the SRP customers were very likely or somewhat likely to pay a 9 percent increase that would be about \$160 more a year, and 28 percent were very or somewhat likely to pay a 21 percent increase that would be about \$391 more per year.

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