



Blair Touts Solar Project at Graton Wine Operation

Santa Rosa Press Democrat

November 4, 2010



KENT PORTER/The Press Democrat

Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, middle, tours Sonoma Wine Company in Graton on Thursday with Wine Company owner Derek Benham, left and venture capitalist Vinod Khosla.

It's not every day that a former world leader shows up in downtown Graton.

But there was ex-British prime minister Tony Blair, helping dedicate a first-of-its-kind solar energy project Thursday at Graton's largest employer, Sonoma Wine Company.

"This is a technology with a real chance to succeed," said Blair, who was hired last May as senior adviser to Khosla Ventures, a Silicon Valley venture fund that bankrolls green energy startups.

Blair joined Khosla Ventures' Vinod Khosla, co-founder of Sun Microsystems and backer of Cogenra Solar, the startup that built the solar project in Graton.

“I hope this is the first of many such things,” said Blair, the United Kingdom's political leader from 1997 to 2007.

He arrived at the winery Thursday in a caravan of black SUVs, surrounded by security from Scotland Yard and the U.S. Secret Service.

He apparently was struck by the West County's rolling hills and gold-colored vineyards. “It's a nice place to be if you're from the other side of the water,” he said. “It kind of reminds me of Europe.”

He ducked a question about Tuesday's U.S. elections, which gave Republicans control of the House of Representatives.

“The elections are for you, not for me,” Blair said.

Blair's strong support of the Bush administration and U.S. military action in Iraq and Afghanistan led to criticism from his own Labour Party and eventually forced him to step down.

But he was warmly received at Thursday's private event, posing for photographs and touring Sonoma Wine Company's sprawling facility with company founder Derek Benham.

Blair said governments should pursue “a low-carbon path” and can't lose focus because of world economic troubles. “The environment may have other ideas,” he said.

Sonoma Wine Company is a custom crush facility that produces nearly 3 million cases a year for wine company customers. It also produces its own brands, including Mark West, Rock Rabbit and Avalon.

Benham also founded Blackstone Winery, which was sold to Constellation Brands for \$140 million in 2001.

The solar co-generation project will produce energy for the 250,000-square-foot winemaking facility, providing 30 percent of its electricity and more than 40 percent of its hot water.

Sonoma Wine Company uses lots of hot water to wash tanks, barrels, pipes and hoses, Benham said.

Five giant curved arrays use mirrors to focus sunlight on solar panels that heat water to 180 degrees.

The system harvests up to 70 percent of the sun's energy and produces five times more power than conventional solar technology, according to Cogenra.

“These types of solutions are crucial to our economy and to the health of our planet,” Benham said.

Cogenra received a \$1.5 million California solar research grant to develop the technology, which is getting its first commercial application at the Graton winery.

Cogenra paid for the system and the wine company is buying the energy from the solar startup at rates lower than PG&E's, Benham said. Cogenra didn't disclose the system's cost.

Renewable energy needs to pay for itself without government subsidies, Khosla said. “This is one of the first companies that's going to approach that model,” he said.

San Francisco Chronicle

Cogenra Solar's system Includes Practical Twist

David R. Baker
November 8, 2010

A gleaming array of mirrors tucked behind a Sonoma County winery promises a new wrinkle in renewable energy - solar power without all the waste.

Solar panels convert into electricity just a fraction of the energy the sun throws at them, typically 15 to 20 percent. The rest is wasted as heat.

But the solar array nestled next to the Sonoma Wine Co. captures the heat as well. The winery gets electricity for its lights and bottling machinery as well as hot water - up to 165 degrees - for cleaning barrels.



Lacy Atkins / The Chronicle
Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair (center) looks at the mirror solar panels as he and a group of people examine the installed system from Cogenra Solar at the Sonoma Wine Co.

The array is the brainchild of the Mountain View startup Cogenra Solar. Backed by \$10.5 million from clean-tech venture capitalist Vinod Khosla, the year-old company aims to make renewable power more cost-competitive with fossil fuels. Cogenra will own the solar arrays it installs, charging its customers for the electricity and hot water rather than the equipment.

"Practically any location we've looked at, we can beat their utility rates," said Chief Executive Officer Gilad Almogy.

Cogenra claims its arrays produce five times the total energy output of comparably sized traditional solar systems, one reason the company can offer attractive rates. The other

reason - Cogenra pieces its arrays together using pre-existing solar equipment rather than inventing all its own gear from scratch.

Almogy "said to me, 'Derek, you could go down to the hardware store and get most of this stuff yourself,' " said Derek Benham, who owns the winery in the small town of Graton. "It looks kind of Avatar-like, but you take a close look at it and think, 'Hey, this looks like siding.' "

Benham and Almogly unveiled the system last week at an event packed with curious representatives from other wine-makers such as Bogle Vineyards and Kendall-Jackson. The event also drew former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, an adviser to Khosla Ventures, who praised the technology's potential for lowering greenhouse gas emissions and fighting global warming. Cogenra arrays cut the amount of natural gas customers burn to heat water, in addition to replacing electricity from fossil-fuel power plants.

"We won't win this unless business is our ally," Blair told the crowd. "What is really important right now is that instead of losing interest in this issue or pushing it back, we need to pay attention."

Cogenra's arrays combine elements of other, older forms of solar power.

A curved trough of mirrors, similar to those used in large-scale solar power plants, focuses sunlight on a narrow strip of common solar cells. Behind the cells runs a tube filled with a liquid chemical. The liquid absorbs heat from the solar cells and transfers that heat to water. The trough, mounted on a beam about 7 feet off the ground, pivots to track the sun across the sky.

"We essentially designed the system to work with the existing supply chains around the world," Almogly said. That approach allowed Cogenra to deploy its first system, at the winery, little more than a year after the company's founding, and with relatively little funding. In addition to the investment from Khosla Ventures, Cogenra this year also won a \$1.5 million research grant from the California Public Utilities Commission.

"We do not require a billion-dollar loan guarantee," Almogly said.

Other companies are trying their own variations of solar-hybrid technology. PVT Solar, based in Berkeley, has designed a hybrid system for houses, using air flowing beneath rooftop solar panels to transfer heat.

Cogenra's array, by itself, does not supply all the winery's energy. The array provides 30 to 40 percent of the facility's electricity, Benham said, and about half its water-heating needs.

This article appeared on page D - 1 of the San Francisco Chronicle