

Fair's main stage has a wall of solar-powered sound

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This mobile solar system is providing all the electricity for the main stage at the county fair.

If you're curious about solar-powered sound and light systems for major outdoor concerts, check out the Ben & Jerry's stage at the Marin County Fair.

You really can't miss it. Sponsored by Pacific Gas & Electric, the stage will have a 20-foot-long, custom-designed solar trailer parked beside it with a gleaming bank of six 300-watt solar panels aimed toward the sun.

You've heard of a wall of sound. This is a wall of solar.

Called Solar Trailer 2, it powers a 1.8 kilowatt system that translates into 1,800 watts of power, enough to run 60 amps continuously at 120 volts. It's enough juice for an outdoor concert with as many as 10,000 music fans.

"It's a ton of power," says Mark McLarry, 36, co-founder of Sustainable Waves, a four-year-old company that provides "clean mobile power solutions for the entertainment industry."

"The quick version of the way it works is that the panels capture the sun's energy, that energy gets transferred into a bank of batteries, and from there that power goes through a couple of inverters that change the energy from DC to AC," McLarry explains. "From there, you just plug in any kind of traditional sound system." And you're ready to rock.

In the event of cloudy days or for nighttime concerts, the panels have already charged up 24 six-volt batteries that serve as an alternative, backup power supply.

"If it's cloudy, or if it's nighttime, the key is the batteries," McLarry says. "We've been capturing the sun's energy as we're driving down the road, so we show up fully charged. If the sun's out, we can run directly from the panels. If it's cloudy, we tap into our battery bank for backup."

In keeping with the theme "The Greenest County Fair on Earth," the solar stage is a glamorous way to showcase alternative energy.

"It's so cool," says PG&E spokesperson Jana Morris. "It gives us an opportunity to educate our customers about the benefits of solar and how it can be utilized in day to day life. It encourages people to utilize it in their own homes, and it's also a great way to reduce the impact on the environment of a large event like the Marin County Fair."

In addition to five solar trailers, Sustainable Waves, with offices in Austin and San Diego, also provides three complete solar-integrated stages and an event tent powered by wind turbines.

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The stages have been used at many high-profile concerts and events, including the Olympic Trials, Burning Man, the X Games, the Lollapalooza, Virgin Fest and Warped rock tours.

Sustainable Waves has also developed a trailer that takes carbon dioxide from a traditional generator and runs it through a series of tubes full of algae. Through photosynthesis, the algae converts the carbon dioxide into oxygen that gets released into the air instead of the CO2.

"It's pretty impressive," McLarry remarks. "And it works."

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