



Solar Power International 2014 preview

October 20-23, 2014 • Las Vegas, Nevada • USA

Two worlds collide at solar hits entertainment capital of the world

This year Solar Power International rolls into that haven for hedonism, Las Vegas. But as the chief executives of the two bodies behind the event tell Lucy Woods, behind the pazazz, some serious issues will be under the spotlight

An entertainment beacon in the middle of the desert, illuminated at all times with blazing bars and flashing casino lights, known as the Entertainment Capital of the World and home to an iconic solar-powered sign: Las Vegas is to host this year's Solar Power International.

From Nerf games and solar trivia to a poolside party at the Las Vegas Eiffel Tower, "it will not be like anything you can imagine; it is going to be really phenomenal", says Julia Hamm, president and CEO of Solar Electric Power Association (SEPA).

Further laying the foundations for an exciting conference atmosphere, the US solar industry is forecast to grow by 60%, with a further 7.4GW to be installed throughout the rest of 2014 alone, says Rhone Resch, president and CEO of the Solar Energy Industries Association (SEIA), co-organiser with SEPA.

"The message that people will hear most consistently at SPI is that the US is one of the

most exciting markets for solar energy in the world, and that is going to continue to be the case for a while," says Resch.

The US industry is currently "constantly evolving with everything from kids coming out of business school with new ideas on how to advance solar, to well-established companies taking it to the next level", continues Resch.

Education, education, education

Both Hamm and Resch highlight SPI's stand-out attraction as the education on offer. "From a conference standpoint we have the strongest education out there just because SEPA and SEIA are the two organisations that produce SPI, so we have real insight in terms of the key issues of the industry at any given moment in time," says Hamm. SPI understands that the maturing solar industry needs "a variety of different education forums and formats", she says.

Rhone Resch, top, and Julia Hamm, predict big things for SPI 2014, left.



From 'QuickTalks', a solar industry version of TedTalks, to interactive sessions and technical workshops, SPI allows people to "get some education without having to step off the show floor", says Hamm.

"There will be over 100 different concurrent sessions in which participants have a chance to exchange ideas and learn from peers," says Resch. "We try to emphasise this is not a chance for a consultant to come in and pitch an idea or services; this is for companies learning from other companies."

Since SunEdison wrote the first solar power purchase agreement (PPA) in 2004 and shared its model with the industry, Resch says SPI has sought to build on that sharing mentality. "You have to think of the solar industry as an open source industry where the companies are willing to share what they are doing and how they are doing it," says Resch.

SPI has also caught the ears of decision makers – SPI is set to be politically charged

with a "record number" of politicians in attendance, providing industry with "quality face to face time with some of the most powerful elected officials in the US," says Resch.

Resch also reveals that on the attendee list is none other than senate majority leader and senator for Nevada, Harry Reid. "Having Reid there, experiencing one of the fastest growing industries in the US, does a lot to solidify political support," says Resch.

The US solar industry is currently embroiled in political drama, notably its ongoing trade dispute with China, which is still under negotiation. SPI promises to give real-time information from the heart of the US-China solar trade dispute, says Resch. Heading the conference's line up of critical speakers, the SEIA's vice president of trade, John Smirnow, is to give details on what Resch hopes will be an industry-backed settlement to the China trade dispute. Insiders from the Chinese and US governments, and SolarWorld will be "actively engaged" in "frank discussion on what is happening," says Resch.

Smirnow "is one of the nation's leading experts on that topic and will make sure everyone really understands the current status," agrees Hamm.

Also top of the political agenda and expected to be tackled head on at SPI is the demise of the income tax credit (ITC), scheduled to go down from 30% to 10% at the end of 2016. The SEIA is to roll out its solar support campaign at SPI 2014. Resch describes the ITC as "the backbone for the solar industry across every state". The SEIA aims to include all solar professionals attending SPI in its multi-year plan for solar in the run-up to the 2016 presidential election. Resch says SPI is a forum where Republicans and Democrats can come together to develop a shared plan for getting the credit

reinstated "at a time when Congress has been highly dysfunctional".

Always a big topic at SPI, "the real meat of the conversation here in the US," says Hamm, with "a lot of discussion and debate back and forth", adds Resch - net metering will also be high on the SPI agenda.

SPI aims to create opportunities for utilities and solar companies from across the states to engage in debates on the benefit and value of solar. SPI will wade headlong into the heated debate over determining "what is the number that distributed solar is actually worth", explains Hamm. SPI's sessions and facilities will bring both sides together to move the discussion forward, with appropriate rates for solar and new incentive mechanisms proposed, says Hamm, as SPI caters for "the market and customers getting more sophisticated".

Meanwhile the SEIA is "certainly going to push back on any penalty" applied to solar adopters, says Resch, with SPI dialogue to focus on a 'minimum charge' for all grid users.

Storage, soft costs and finance

Another big issue for SPI will of course be storage. With Tesla announcing a 1GW battery factory in Nevada and storage hitting the mainstream with Nevada's neighbour California's 1.3GW of storage by 2020 mandate, SPI has, for the first time ever, dedicated a pavilion and lounge to addressing the industry's thirst for storage technology. Hamm reveals there will be information on how the Californian mandate is progressing, while storage and technology companies will showcase the latest battery gadgets. "We want to bring all the energy storage technologies together so it is a one-stop shop for businesses to look at the latest technology," says Resch.

Resch adds that closely related to storage,



Source: SEPA

Extensive networking opportunities always form a core part of SPI.

SPI will be discussing the logistics of putting together micro-grid deals. "We are increasingly seeing the partnership of storage with utility and small grid integration issues," he says. SPI offers a chance to "come together and answer some of the questions from developers trying to put together micro-grids".

Hamm also says to watch out for racking and smart converters on the trade floor, as higher concentrations of solar have been added to the grid.

One of the "biggest focus areas for the industry in the US today" to look out for at SPI, says Resch, is the US Department of Energy's SunShot Initiative to lower soft costs. With a myriad of costs arising from customers and contracts, SPI will focus on how the US market can continue to streamline. "Especially compared to Germany: Germany has a very streamlined process," says Resch - hinting at the prominent absence of SPI experts just before the show. To really stretch the education opportunity, SPI sent a team of researchers to Germany to bring back knowledge to be shared at SPI.

Also high on the SPI agenda is access to financing, hand in hand with the growing interest in community solar. Community solar is "one of the hottest trends right now," says Hamm. Potential solar customers for the rooftop industry face many access barriers to solar electricity, making community solar "quite a large theme throughout much of the education content [at SPI]. It is really about making solar accessible to everyone," says Hamm.

With that in mind, financing community solar will be a hot topic. "The equity issue is an important one that is coming up more and more in policy settings," explains Hamm; SPI sessions will address ways "everyone can have access to solar regardless of income levels".

Although the US industry has plenty to be excited about, it is cluttered with big obstacles and difficult questions, and SPI is just the place to tackle them - even when surrounded by the world's best entertainment, says Resch: "Las Vegas is a lot of fun but SPI doesn't shy away from the tough challenges and tough issues that the industry faces." ▶



Source: SEPA

SPI 2014 top picks

From 20-23 October, busloads of solar professionals will roll into the Las Vegas Convention Centre for the 2014 Solar Power International, the annual industry jamboree led by the Solar Electric Power Association (SEPA) and the Solar Energy Industries Association (SEIA).

This year's SPI promises to dig deep into the most daunting to the most optimistic issues challenging solar professionals across the states and beyond, from the predicted collapse of utility-scale solar post-investment tax credit, to energy-saving grid storage, state-by-state net metering overhauls and the take-off of community solar.

With the US solar market closing in on 16GW total solar deployment, while the US Department of Trade and the Chinese government negotiate, SPI promises real-time coverage of the headline grabbing global trade disputes and controversial anti dumping duties and trade levies.

The event stage will be set to hear from the negotiations expert, SEIA's vice president of trade and competitiveness, John Smirnow, and US and Chinese government representatives.

The must-attend solar event will showcase trends, speakers, experts, professionals, exhibitions, entertainment and essential networking. Starting with a gathering at the bar and some games, the SPI event is forecast to be a memorable one.

In terms of solar industry progression and education, hopefully this will be the one time that the "what happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas" adage doesn't apply.

Conference highlights

SOLAR CENTRAL

Booth 4920 (Upper Level Exhibit Hall)

A useful starting point for the huge range of events taking place is Solar Central, SPI's broadcasting and sales booth, an information hub for interviews, discussion, debates, expert panels and presentations. Attendees can browse more than 100 educational posters at SPI's Poster Reception, being held on Wednesday 22, with networking and drinks with poster authors all included.

QUICKTALKS

Wednesday 22 October, 3-5pm;

Thursday 23 October, 1030am-noon

SPI is looking to maintain its reputation as the undisputed fount of solar industry knowledge through the premiering of

'QuickTalks'. Modelled on the popular Youtube phenomenon, TEDtalks, SPI will host short and simple 25-minute idea presentations from industry experts on critical topics, with an assembly of 'Master Speakers' – government officials and industry experts – taking the floor to discuss what challenges and opportunities the US solar industry faces over the next year.

INDUSTRY TRENDS

Tuesday 21 October, Wednesday 22 October, 1030am-5pm, Booth 3909

After its success last year, GTM Research and the Interstate Renewable Energy Council will join SEIA and SEPA to lead the educational sessions, featuring interactive information and leading market research and key industry data analysis on key trends.

ENERGY STORAGE

South Hall 3, Upper Level

To showcase the array of new PV storage technology, SPI will provide an Energy Storage Pavilion and lounge to host all the latest technology, products and trends in the storage market. SPI will also host numerous educational sessions on energy storage.

EXPLORING THE ENERGY TRANSITION

Tuesday 21 October, 9-10am. Room 229

US energy officials and executives recently jetted off to Europe on a SEPA-led trip to gather and research information from Germany, Europe's leading solar nation. Insights and lessons from the trip will be shared at this session, which is particularly aimed at attendees from a commercial and utility-scale PV background.

MEET THE SOLAR TWEETS AT THE ANNUAL SPI SOLAR TWEETUP

Wednesday 22 October, 12-2pm, South Hall 3 Networking Area

The Solar Tweeps event allows attendees to meet prolific solar industry tweeters and master social media users, from Facebook to LinkedIn. Based on past SPIs the annual Tweetup is expected to be well attended with RSVPs-only.

PV TECHNICAL TRAINING

21-23 October, various times. Booth 1933 (Main Level Exhibit Hall)

The lightning pace of the industry makes updating skills and improving on training



Start-up Alley is one of SPI's highlights.

imperative. For attendees looking to brush up or learn new skills, the PV Technical Training booth will offer beginner to advanced training for various solar professionals, from sales to installers with the help of the North American Board of Certified Energy Practitioners (NABCEP) and Solar Energy International (SEI).

START-UP ALLEY

Wednesday 22 October, 10:30am-12:30pm. Pavilion in South Hall 1

After a great first year appearance for SPI 2013, the SPI 'Start-Up Alley' returns, providing a chance to witness a group of finalist companies pitch and showcase their business ideas to the SPI panel of judges, competing for the winning title of 2014's Start-Up Alley challenge.

PROFESSIONAL WOMEN IN SOLAR NETWORKING

Tuesday 21 October, 3-4pm. Room 222

To find out how all members of the solar industry can team together to attract the very best talent to the dynamic world of solar, SPI is hosting this networking and discussion event to explore how leadership, human resources, companies and individuals can work to help attract the best candidates and promote women in working in the industry.

BLOCK PARTY

Tuesday 21 October, 7-10pm. Paris Hotel Pool Deck & Chateau Nightclub

Keeping up with the captivating surroundings, Las Vegas' mini Paris promises gymnastics to live music, to the theme of Fire and Ice.