

Solar Energy for District Heating - A Promising Technology

Munich, 25 May 2009. 9% of the heating loads in Europe are covered by block and district heating systems, and the new EU Renewable Energy Directive promotes the integration of renewables – including solar thermal – into these networks. The 4th European Solar Thermal Energy Conference (estec2009) will bring to the fore the improvements needed to fully utilise the potential of solar district heating.

More than 95% of today's solar thermal market is in individual domestic hot water and space heating systems. Large solar thermal systems still represent a very small share of the European solar thermal market and currently account for less than 0.5% of the total solar thermal capacity in operation in the EU. But the EU Renewable Energy Directive agreed in December 2008 specifically promotes also renewable energies in district heating and cooling.

Efficiency and cost are two key benefits of district heating systems. Although they represent only a small share of EU solar thermal, their combined capacity is higher than that of many small solar domestic hot water systems. Furthermore, where the heating and cooling networks already exist, the integration of solar thermal energy can often be realised at very low cost.

Sweden – which first introduced a solar district heating system at the end of the 1970's – is the leading country with 22 plants. However, Denmark currently has the largest solar district heating system in Europe (18 300 m² of collector area). In the Netherlands solar district heating systems are essentially used for collective housing, including homes for elderly. In Germany solar district heating systems have been used for new residential development areas, e.g. within the framework of the so-called "solar roofs" projects.

In spite of the very favourable climate, this technology has so far not been developed in Southern countries where solar district heating systems have a very high potential. estec2009 will identify the key technological achievements required – such as the improvement of the long-term seasonal storage and the further development of large solar collectors – for solar district heating systems to develop in the upcoming Southern markets and to improve in the traditional Northern countries.

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