



ENERGY & ENVIRONMENT

Whole Foods Plans 100 Rooftop Solar Systems

By **DIANE CARDWELL** MARCH 8, 2016

Things at Whole Foods are about to get even greener.

The grocery chain plans to install as many as 100 rooftop solar systems, mainly through the power provider NRG Energy, on nearly a quarter of its stores and distribution centers, the companies said on Tuesday. SolarCity will also provide systems for the grocer, which could expand the rooftop solar program as the installations proceed.

“Installing solar at Whole Foods locations across the country will increase the percentage of renewable energy that is generated in communities where we work,” Kathy Luftus, global leader in sustainability at the company, said in a prepared statement. NRG plans to install systems in nine states, including California, Colorado, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Nevada and Texas.

Solar energy is in keeping with the Whole Foods image but it will also save the company money, because the solar providers can offer electricity at prices below what the stores and centers would normally pay utilities.

The grocer has been under pressure to reduce costs as it has faced increasing competition from other chains offering specialty and organic foods at lower prices.

For NRG, the move shows that the company, in retreat from an ambitious attempt under its former chief executive, David Crane, to become the Google or Apple of green energy, will pursue the market for renewables on a large scale.

The new chief executive, Mauricio Gutierrez, told investors last month that NRG was refocusing on its core business and was in negotiations concerning the fate of the home solar and electric vehicle charging divisions that he expected to complete in the second quarter of this year.

“Simplification of our business is an imperative, both for external perception and internal focus,” he said on a conference call. “Not all renewable businesses are viewed the same in terms of fit and value for NRG.”

That means NRG, which has headquarters in Princeton, N.J., and Houston, will continue to invest in large-scale wind and solar, including rooftop systems for commercial and industrial customers like Whole Foods, said Craig Cornelius, senior vice president.

The installations, which will range from five to 200 times the size of a typical home array, are attractive, Mr. Cornelius said, because the larger scale allows NRG to replicate a similar design across several sites.

“It really just comes down to streamlined engineering design, economies of scale in equipment purchasing and construction, and the finance-ability of Whole Foods as a quality customer,” he said.

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