

Solar and Glare



I. Introduction

A common misconception about solar photovoltaic (PV) panels is that they inherently cause or create “too much” glare, posing a nuisance to neighbors and a safety risk for pilots. While in certain situations the glass surfaces of solar PV systems can produce glint (a momentary flash of bright light) and glare (a reflection of bright light for a longer duration), light absorption, rather than reflection, is central to the function of a solar PV panel - to absorb solar radiation and convert it to electricity. Solar PV panels are constructed of dark-colored (usually blue or black) materials and are covered with anti-reflective coatings. Modern PV panels reflect as little as two percent of incoming sunlight, about the same as water and less than soil or even wood shingles (SEIA/Sandia 2013). Some of the concern and misconception is likely due to the confusion between solar PV systems and concentrated solar power (CSP) systems. CSP systems typically use an array of mirrors to reflect sunlight to heat water or other fluids to create steam that turns an electric generator. These typically involve large ground-mounted reflectors, usually in remote desert locations, and are not installed in residential or commercial areas or near airports.

Solar PV system on the left compared to a parabolic trough CSP system on the right. Photo Copyright DOE/NREL/ORNL



II. PV on or near airports

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As of June 2013, there were over 30 solar projects in operation at airports in 15 different states (Barrett 2013). Solar installations have been successfully located at or near US international airports in Boston, New York, San Francisco, and Denver, among others. Yet concerns over glint (a quick reflection) and glare (a longer reflection) often arise when a PV system is proposed on or near an airport. Pilots are familiar with both glint and glare as reflection is a common phenomenon, especially off of bodies of water or in the form of glare from the sun itself. However, issues can arise if the solar PV system were to cast glare into an air traffic control tower.¹

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) has been actively reviewing the impact of glare from solar panels to streamline an evaluation process that ensures safety while creating more opportunity for solar installations on or near airports. The FAA filed notice of its Interim Policy for review of solar energy systems on federally obligated airports (i.e. airports which receive federal funding) in October of 2013.² This policy requires that a sponsor of a federally obligated airport must request FAA review and approval to install solar on its "airport layout plan." Federally-obligated airports must also notify the FAA of its intent to construct any solar installation by filing FAA form 7460-1. The interim FAA policy also requires the use of the Solar Glare Hazard Analysis Tool for on-airport solar development.

III. FAA and the Solar Glare Hazard Analysis Tool

In order to understand and model glare in accordance with FAA standards, Sandia National Laboratories developed the Solar Glare Hazard Analysis Tool (SGHAT). Standardized safety metrics define what glare intensity will cause unwanted visual impacts to Air Traffic Control towers and airplane pilots. SGHAT can be used to evaluate the potential of a particular PV array to produce glare intensity, predicting when and where glare will occur from a prescribed PV array at user-defined observation points (i.e. from the Air Traffic Control Tower or from a series of points along an aircraft landing route) and be combined with Google maps for an easy user interface. In instances where glare may be a concern, the tool can prescribe minor adjustments to the tilt, direction, and location of the panels to alleviate any issues. SGHAT will predict annual energy production for the various adjusted positions (SEIA/Sandia PPT).

IV. Role for Local Governments

Local governments may wish to include airport guidance within their local zoning ordinances that address solar PV. The North Carolina Solar Center *Template Solar Energy Development Ordinance for North Carolina*³ includes a section on airports and recommends aviation notification steps for both on-airport solar projects and installations within 5 nautical miles of an airport. In addition to amendments to local zoning codes, local governments have the opportunity to conduct outreach to airports,

¹ <http://www.unionleader.com/article/20120830/NEWS02/708309966/0/newhampshire>

² <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2013-10-23/pdf/2013-24729.pdf>

³ http://ncsc.ncsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/Template-Solar-Ordinance_V1.0_12-18-13.pdf

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organizations and local stakeholders about methods for predicting and managing glare impacts from solar panels near airports or other locations. Such outreach furthers the safety goals of the FAA and the solar energy development goals of municipalities and communities. Spreading awareness of the safety of PV systems along with FAA guidance and glare measurement tools will help foster informed communities and enable the deployment of safe and productive solar PV projects in locations where glint and glare may be of concern.

V. Useful Links

Sandia Solar Glare Mapping Tools: <https://share.sandia.gov/phlux>

V. Citations

Barrett, S., June 2013, Glare Factor: Solar Installations And Airports, *Solar Industry, Volume 6, Number 5*.
http://www.solarindustrymag.com/issues/SI1306/FEAT_02_Glare_Factor.html.

Federal Register 2013, etc.: <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2013-10-23/pdf/2013-24729.pdf>

SEIA/Sandia Webinar on Solar PV and Glare:

<http://www.seia.org/sites/default/files/resources/Final%20ofAA%20Webinar%20Slides%20August%202013.pdf>

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