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Ausra's first solar thermal plant starts up

By CHRIS MORRISON, [VentureBeat](#)

Solar startup [Ausra](#) added a small notch to its belt today, by becoming the first of a new generation of solar thermal companies to open a full-sized electricity generation plant. The Palo Alto, Calif. company cut the ribbon on a 5 megawatt, facility about 250 miles southward in central California, where it will generate enough electricity at peak hours to power 3,500 homes.

The new plant is being lauded as the first solar thermal installation to begin generating electricity in California in 20 years, but it is also many times smaller than the plants that will be considered standard in the future. To be specific, it will generate about 35 times less power than [Ausra's own planned 177MW plant](#) that will be constructed nearby in San Luis Obispo County, and a string of similar installations will be [built by Brightsource for a total of 900MW](#).

Plants in the range of the 5MW installation won't be unknown either, though. They'll just be used for different purposes. A number of companies are looking at (relatively) small-scale solar thermal lines to generate steam for industrial processes. [ESolar](#) has told me it's planning to roll out small modular plants for that purpose, and on an even smaller scale, [Sopogy](#) can [use miniature solar-thermal dishes for heating and cooling large buildings](#). There's more on those alternate uses at [Green Wombat](#).

For the moment, it doesn't look like the credit crunch is delaying plans for larger, utility-scale deployments of 50MW and upward, at least according to what company execs have told me. Most plants haven't yet begun construction, and can spend time locating funding sources during permitting, while others have already secured debt or equity money to build. However, an extended recession could trim the number of plants that go online over the next four to five years.

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