

Rooftop solar will make modest comeback in N. Nevada

By Michelle Rindels, AP

Exactly a year after a controversial rate hike dramatically hampered the number of new rooftop solar installations, Nevada utility regulators voted Thursday to allow about 1,200 customers to install solar systems and get older, more favorable rates when they sell back excess electricity.

The Public Utilities Commission of Nevada voted unanimously to allow a small portion of Northern Nevada residents to sign up for the attractive rates over the next three years. It's a modest but promising step forward after months of acrimonious debate that pit rooftop solar companies against traditional utilities.

"We need to restart a conversation, work together," said commissioner Joe Reynolds, who was appointed chairman by Gov. Brian Sandoval in September. As part of a reshuffling, the prior chairman was moved to a regular commissioner role and the architect of the controversial rate hike was not reappointed to the three-person panel.

"Nevada is at its best when we roll up our sleeves and figure out a way to solve challenges and think outside the box," Reynolds said.

The newly admitted rooftop solar users will account for a small portion of the Sierra Pacific Power Company's estimated 290,000 residential customers. About 2,100 customers in Northern Nevada have already enrolled in the so-called "net metering" program that pays them for their excess energy.

In a lengthy order explaining the policy, Reynolds wrote that allowing new rooftop solar installations at the attractive

rates will support the state's goal of diversifying its energy portfolio, and will reduce the average residential customer's bill by 1 cent a month.

Rooftop solar proponents noted that the decision doesn't apply to the larger customer base in southern Nevada or offer a long-term solution for the solar debate, but praised the decision.

"The commission took a small but important step toward re-aligning rates with the goals that state policymakers and the people of Nevada share: to see more homegrown solar powering their communities and their economy," said Jessica Scott, regional director for the pro-solar nonprofit Vote Solar. "Today's votes signal that Nevada is ready to lead on solar once again."

Regulators said the rate hike last year aimed to end a subsidy that non-solar customers were paying for solar customers. Solar companies disputed that there was a cost-shift, arguing that regulators' calculations didn't factor in environmental and health benefits that solar panels bring to Nevadans.

"It's a difficult issue because you're getting smart folks – well-educated, well-intentioned – who just disagree on basic facts," Reynolds said on Thursday.

Regulators this fall undid one of the most loathed portions of their ruling: applying the new, less-favorable rates to customers who had signed up for net metering under more lucrative conditions. About 32,000 customers with the systems were grandfathered into the better rates this fall, although future customers weren't eligible.

Reynolds' order described the unpopular 2015 ruling as "a promise better left unkept" and said regulators are free to try new approaches to addressing rooftop solar rates. But he also wrote that questions about how to price rooftop solar power are unresolved and it's too early to make broad, binding

decisions about net metering policy.