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Italy PV Greenhouses Seen As Potentially Interesting, But Uncertainty Over Remuneration Persists

Photovoltaic plants on the roofs of greenhouses in Italy could be a booming niche market in the medium term but a great deal of uncertainty persists on how remunerative the investment will be after the recent reduction in feed-in tariffs, according to sector experts.

By Yael Schrage



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The GSE (Gestore Servizi Elettrici) said it does not have data on the exact number of photovoltaic greenhouses installed in Italy however sector associations agreed that to date they were still very few. But they have potential.

According to the 2009 Solar Energy Report, a study published by Milan's Politecnico university earlier this year, if between 2010 and 2020 just 20% of the surface of greenhouses that were in place at the end of 2008 (the latest data available) were covered by photovoltaic panels, the overall installed capacity would reach 5.8 GWp.

Greenhouses were penalized in the new feed-in tariff mechanism, revised this summer, after investors built photovoltaic plants on greenhouses that in reality had no agricultural use, as they were too hot and too dark for anything to grow.

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So while the maximum incentive applies to photovoltaic greenhouses installed by the end of 2010 as under the previous feed-in tariff mechanism they were considered as fully integrated plants, those becoming operational next year will receive the arithmetic average of incentives given to “PV plants on buildings” and the less remunerative “other photovoltaic” plants.

“They deformed and distorted a good idea transforming it into speculation. This way, under the new feed-in tariffs, greenhouses were no longer considered as they should have been, severely penalizing them,” said Luca Fermo, chairman of Ray Energy, which last year inaugurated an 888 Kwh photovoltaic greenhouse near Brescia.

According to Assosolare president Gianni Chianetta with the new feed-in tariff the development of this potentially interesting sector has been delayed by one year.

“We have to work on defining solutions for greenhouses in order for them to have costs that make a photovoltaic business plan still interesting. Surely with the new feed-in tariffs it will be more difficult,” Chianetta said.

Therefore, a lot has to be done to find ways to reduce the costs of building the greenhouse itself through research and development or finding other ways to offset the lower tariffs, Chianetta said.

Stefania Vurchio, part of the communication group of sector association GIFI and head of marketing and communication at the Italian division of solar cells and modules producer Isofoton, underlines that the success of photovoltaic greenhouses depends on each individual region’s rural development plan, which can compensate the tariff drop.

For example in the Marche region, where Isofoton developed a 250 Kwatt photovoltaic greenhouse, the farmer not only receives incentives from the feed-in tariff but is also entitled to a grant by the Region for the construction of the greenhouse itself.

The Region of Sardinia this summer set for itself an objective of developing, over the next three years, 500 MW of photovoltaic greenhouses. It placed stringent conditions, including having a 75% luminosity rate, in a bid to ensure that greenhouses are in fact used for agriculture.

The Vona Group sees scope to interpret in a more favorable light the feed-in tariff revision. “We still see greenhouses as attractive. But we have to assess the interpretations of the new feed-in tariff scheme. For example the new system foresees incentives for new technologies. If we can put together these new technologies for solar panels with photovoltaic greenhouses, the feed-in tariff should still be rather high and therefore we still consider it an important investment,” said Michele Vona, chairman of the Vona Group.

The group is currently finalizing a 2.5-3.0 MW photovoltaic greenhouse in Tarquinia (Lazio)

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that should be completed by the end of this year, therefore benefiting from the maximum incentive foreseen under the old feed-in tariff system.

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