



National plan for solar energy plants to be approved within six months

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The National Planning and Building Council approved a solar energy planning strategy on Tuesday and stated its intention to have a national outline plan in place within six months - which, in planning terms, is very fast.

The national outline plan will be presented to the council at its next meeting in February, with the intention of completing the approval process within six months.

The council met to discuss a report put together by Ephraim Shlein, head of the infrastructures planning branch of the Planning Administration. Shlein led a team of Interior Ministry officials in crafting the guidelines for photovoltaic solar energy installations, from solar panels on rooftops to extensive solar fields.

While the council's approval considerably smooths the way towards an Israeli domestic solar industry, it only approved those matters which were within its purview. Some issues may necessitate changes in legislation as well, according to Shlein's report.

The main recommendations of the report was to support solar panels on roofs as much as possible and to put in place an expedited process for approving medium and large solar fields.

Environmental Protection Minister Gilad Erdan (Likud) made a rare appearance before the council to stress the importance of moving forward with alternative energy. He told the council that Israel's greenhouse gas emissions goals and air pollution reduction goals were dependent on alternative energy.

While erecting what were essentially industrial devices potentially conflicted with other environmental concerns, Erdan said, alternative energy was too important and therefore must be given priority.

The purpose of the Shlein Report and the national outline plan is to lay out the exact conditions under which developers can build solar fields. Shlein attempted to balance the various land-use needs, particularly in the South, with its abundant sunshine.

One of the major steps required to build solar fields is to rezone land allocated for industry and especially for agriculture.

The council approved a somewhat more conservative position advocated by the Agriculture Ministry that 300 dunams or 10 percent be rezoned for solar energy use out of any plot of agricultural land.

The National Infrastructures and Environmental Protection ministries had pushed for a 500 dunam allocation.

Each mid-size field of five megawatts of photovoltaic generated-electricity requires 100-120 dunams.

The council approved a cap of 10% for industry-slated land as well. That cap would be raised to 30% in the South, which would be given preferential treatment.

To that end, a planning subcommittee will be created under the Southern Regional Planning Council. Erdan also suggested that solar installations be considered engineering projects rather than power stations, because the environmental approval process is quicker for such types of projects.

Another subject of contention was whether the solar panels and trackers should be placed next to buildings or out in open fields. The council decided priority should be given to panels placed next to buildings, but panels placed in open fields would be evaluated for approval on a case-by-case basis.

The National Infrastructures Ministry was pleased with the council's decision, saying they had adopted most of its suggestions. Private solar energy company Arava Power praised the decision as an important step forward as well.

However, Arava's CEO Jon Cohen said, there were still many central decisions that needed to be made, including "whether it would take 3 years or six months to rezone the land.

"The council is supposed to make that decision at its meeting in February. We hope the council will create a fast-track process that will lead to the actualization of the Israeli solar revolution," he said in a statement after the meeting.

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