

SECURITY SYSTEMS NEWS

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The newest vertical: Protecting solar panels

As alternative energy booms, crooks take notice

By **L. Samuel Pfeifle** - 12.02.2009  email

NAPA, Calif.—Napa Valley is known the world over for its wine production, but less well known is those same wine makers' passion for alternative energy. Growing as fast as the grapes are fields of photovoltaic solar panels, used to convert the sun's energy into electricity. Along with this growth, however, has come a growth in criminals stealing these panels for resale on the black market and reported installation by unscrupulous solar-panel vendors.

To combat that growth in crime, new alarm companies have arisen and established alarm companies have created solutions to specifically address the problem. Daniel Sullivan is a Napa resident and owner of SunLock, a company that specializes in solar-panel alarm systems. A businessman and entrepreneur, Sullivan was at a solar conference in San Diego when "it just hit me: These panels cost thousands of dollars each, and where I live they're ground mounted. That's hundreds of thousands of dollars in assets that you could just remove. It was just common sense that this was going to become a problem and it was going to happen right away."

Then, somewhat serendipitously, Napa Valley College lost 40 solar panels in a theft right after Sullivan returned from the conference. Sullivan needed no more impetus to found his new company, teaming with an old friend who had experience in the security market.

For Texana Security CEO Sean O'Keefe, a similar coincidence led him to dive into the solar security market. He was in Napa to meet with Shamrock Renewable Energy Services, which had contacted him about a strategic alliance that would allow the company to bundle in a security solution upon installation of the panels, and to check in on a couple of alarm systems Texana had recently deployed for wineries.

"As fate would have it," O'Keefe said, "we went and visited one winery that was a prospect, and looked at their field, and someone had recently stolen some panels, and then it was lunch time, and we went and had lunch at the Honig winery, where we had a recent installation. I gave somebody my card and asked to see the manager, and he came right out and said, 'I can't believe you got here so soon.'" There had been a robbery that night, Texana's central station had alerted the police, and they had caught three crooks. The police were still in the

field collecting evidence.

“And it just kept getting better,” O’Keefe said. He spoke with the police collecting evidence, and “they told us there had been 40 thefts of solar panels, just in the past few months.”

The partnership with Shamrock was soon consummated and O’Keefe was soon helping to educate police about his company’s solution, which relies on the Videofied product, which is completely wireless and a great fit for the application. O’Keefe said the fields are obviously outdoors and (ironically) often far from a power source, so the Videofied product eliminates the need for costly trenching and can send back verifiable video clips that eliminate false alarms from animals and the weather that might trigger other motion-based solutions.

Emza, a manufacturer of a similar video-analytics-based solution that needs wired power (or a solar panel of its own), but which transmits data back to the central station wirelessly, also sees solar fields as a burgeoning market. “Solar panels are a hot topic right now,” said Emza U.S. general manager Mark Premo. “By introducing visual notification, you can see what’s happening as it happens and make a dispatch decision.”

Sullivan’s SunLock uses a wired solution and is looking to partner with commercial solar companies to package alarm installation with the initial panel installation, “so you can either price us as part of the initial deal, or do it afterward. It’s better if we work our security system in at the time of installation ... it’s much more cost-effective.”

But is there a real market, or will these companies quickly secure all of the solar installations out there? Statistics say the solar market is growing quickly. According to the **Energy Information Administration**, there were 280,475 panels installed in 2007, which was up from 206,511 in 2006, a 36 percent increase year over year, and a nearly 500 percent increase from five years prior.

“It’s a huge market,” claimed Sullivan, “and it’s growing exponentially.”

O’Keefe went with Shamrock to this year’s annual solar convention in Anaheim, and “I was shocked at how large it was,” but, further, “I was shocked at how many countries, even third-world countries, have installed or were installing panels—and how much of a problem theft is.”