



Green Notes: Don't Be Discouraged by Snow on Solar Panels

If you looked at the computer monitor in the Narthex last Sunday, you saw that our church's new solar panels produced lots of electricity – more than we used – from their activation on Oct. 11 through Nov. 6. Then came the snow, ice and freezing temperatures.

Since then, the 66 panels have not generated power because they've been covered in a layer of snow and ice, and cloudy days and sub-32-degree temperatures have thwarted melting.

The sharp drop in production shown by the SolarEdge graphic prompted more than one onlooker to ask: "Is this what we expected?"

The short answer is "yes." In Missoula, winter brings a steep decline in solar production. But the remainder of the year provides so much sunshine that our system will produce more electricity than we consume each day – enough that we'll send power onto

NorthWestern Energy's grid and "bank" those megawatts for colder months.

Even with winter's chill – in temperature and power production – First Church still will see 80% of its annual electrical needs provided by the solar installation atop our roof.

This week, we reached out to SBS Solar to relay the congregation's concern when the snowy weather shut down our power production. We got this helpful response from general manager Ralph Walters:

"At this time of year (normally later, I don't recall it getting and staying this cold this early for a long time), when the panels are covered with snow, they don't produce. As soon as it warms up just a little and the sun peeks out, the panels on the sloped roof will likely clean themselves off and start producing. But the panels on the flat roof might stay snow covered for the rest of the winter – unlikely but it's possible."

"The important thing to remember is that the church's system was designed with our seasonal weather in mind. The system's production forecast and bill offset all take into account the likelihood of little to no winter production. I know it's kind of a bummer, but it is the nature of the special place we all call home."

So while it's discouraging to see a sharp drop in power production coinciding with this extended stretch of cold, snowy weather, it was expected. And, as Ralph Walters said in his note, it's all part of living in Montana.

We've just got to hang in there. The sun will shine again, the snow and ice will melt, and those solar panels will get back to work generating electricity!