

# Solar power revolution underway in WA as households take advantage of sunny skies

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Leanne Lay is among a growing number of solar power converts in the Wheatbelt. Picture: Ross Swainborough

A HAMLET in the Wheatbelt has taken the title of WA's top solar suburb, where almost one in two homes are powered by solar panels.

A report to be released tomorrow by the WA Greens, using new figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, shows 180,000 WA households now have solar panels — equal to one in five homes and a jump of 20 per cent in the past year.

WA has four postcodes, among the top 20 in the nation based on power generated from the sun, including Mandurah (second), Hartwood (eighth), Canning Vale and Willetton (12th), and Cockburn (19th).

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For the second year in a row, the top postcode based on the percentage of homes with solar panels was the community of Balkeas near Rockingham, where 61 per cent of homes now have panels.

But the sunny skies of the Wheatbelt are also home to some of the highest percentage of homes with solar.

Collectively, WA's farming towns now make up six of the top 20 postcodes including Dardanup, Moorla, Morawa, Gingin-Candigarang, Donnybrook-Balingup, and Northam.

In a separate analysis, the WA towns with the biggest uptake of solar power in the past 12 months included the southern Wheatbelt townships of Yealering, 240km southeast of Perth, and Pingrup, 350km east of Perth, with 37 per cent more homes powered by the sun compared with the same time last year.

New entries in WA's top 10 solar postcodes include Welshpool in Perth's southeast, Dardanup to the southeast of Bunbury, and Gidgegannup to Perth's northeast.

In suburbs in the top 20 postcodes, one in every three homes have solar panels, up from one in about 100 a decade ago.



Yealering resident Fran Allan cut her power bill after installing solar panels. Picture: Ross Swainborough

Yealering retiree Fran Allan cut her power bill from almost \$300 to about \$60 with eight solar panels and a 2kW system, and many other retirees in Yealering have done the same.

The town falls in the Shire of Wickham and shire president Steve Martin said the Wheatbelt's perpetually sunny skies were the perfect place for generating solar power.

Even the local school, where his wife Debbie is the principal, has photovoltaic cells on the roof.

Yealering's Kevin and Rose Coxon put solar panels on the roof of their granny flat and make enough extra power during the day to cover their right-time power consumption, minimising power bills.

Australian Greens deputy leader and WA Senator Scott Ludlam said householders were "doing their bit" by installing solar panels in their homes.

But he said the WA Government was not ready for the rapid switch to solar.

"Our Energy Minister (Mike Nahan) needs to stop pretending to be surprised and show leadership to embrace the rapid switch to solar that is growing every year," Senator Ludlam said.

The Greens said the results showed their vision for a state run entirely on renewable energy by 2029 was possible.

Mr Nahan said solar power was a key part of WA's energy mix alongside gas and coal-fired power plants.

Suppliers said installation costs had dropped as much as 75 per cent in a decade.



Fran Sefting stocking the shelves inside the Yealering Shop & 95 that's powered by the sun. Picture: Ross Swainborough

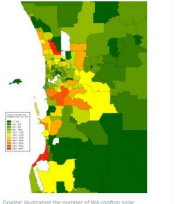
## BATTERY PROMISES A SECOND POWER BOOM

A solar power revolution is well under way in WA, but experts say a new battery storage innovation will create a second boom in solar panel installation.

Solar panels give homeowners plenty of electricity during the day but storing excess power for use after dark has not been practical because the batteries required to do so are expensive and inefficient.

Tesla, the company famous for high-performance luxury electric vehicles, claims to have solved the problem with a "game changing" system for homeowners to reduce reliance on the grid at half the price of existing technology.

Called the PowerWall, it uses lithium-ion batteries and an inverter in a compact wall-mounted unit to store extra electricity generated by solar panels during the day for use at night, when solar-powered homes normally rely on mains power from the grid.



While it costs \$9,533,500 for a 10 kWh system, a report by Deutsche Bank found the combination of rooftop solar panels and lithium ion battery storage can be cheaper than the grid, especially in places — like Australia — where sunshine is plentiful and electricity is expensive.

The first systems arrive in Australia next year but industry experts are tipping the price to come down as Tesla shifts its production to a new "gigafactory" in Nevada, USA.

The Australian Energy Storage Council is predicting big demand and led the innovation will put a "bump" under existing power utilities.

LG, among other competitors, is also working on rival batteries that will compete with Tesla.

Jemma Green, a Curtin Univ researcher who is conducting trials of battery storage in Perth, said the Tesla announcement had moved battery storage "into the mainstream".

She said the Powerwall could eliminate 90 per cent of power bills for the average WA household over 15 per cent of the year. And she predicted prices to come down rapidly as uptake surges.

"The prime customers will be people who already have solar panels, but it will also lead to a lot of new customers who will sign up for solar panels and battery storage. It will go up astronomically," she predicted.

"It's going to change our entire energy system. I personally believe the grid as we know it will become a back-up system."

The innovative new storage system comes after Climate Council Professor Tim Flannery and Australian Solar Council CEO John Green released a report on global renewable energy trends, which found Australia is lagging behind the world's major economies when it comes to renewable energy generation, despite having enough renewable energy resources to power the country 500 times over.

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