

Piece of the Sun' drawing consumers

United Press International
SACRAMENTO, Calif. — California's free guide to buying solar energy systems for the home is becoming a best seller, and not just in the Golden State.

The first 20,000 copies of "Get a Piece of the Sun" were grabbed in three months. More than a third of the second printing of 50,000 copies has gone in another two months.

Requests come from all over the nation, said Kathryn Ramsay, manager of the state Solar and Insulation Unit that published the booklet.

"We are trying to help the consumer protect himself from being ripped off and get the most from his solar energy dollar," Ramsay said in an interview.

California has 40 percent of the nation's solar energy systems installed for heating air and water and air cooling. More than half of that 40 percent are used exclusively to heat swimming pools.

Ramsay said the booklet is a product of complaints and questions received by her unit in the Department of Consumer Affairs. The unit

mediates consumer complaints.

Many complaints result from consumer ignorance about solar energy systems and solar contractors' unfamiliarity with the new technology.

"The solar energy industry is being asked to grow up overnight and have a perfect system," Ramsay said. "It is doing a good job. But always when there is something new, there's more of a chance of something going wrong. A consumer has to be cautious."

For example, Ramsey said, rooftop solar collectors installed at a new

San Diego subdivision faced different directions on many houses instead of the desired southerly direction for maximum exposure to the sun's rays.

She said workers were told to face the collectors toward the sun. As a result, units installed in the morning faced east, those installed at midday faced south and those put in during the afternoon faced west.

Basic solar energy systems are either passive or active.

Passive involves structuring a home to collect, store and distribute

the sun's heat or protect the interior from the heat with a minimum of mechanical aids. Passive homes have such features as large south-facing windows, dense walls and floors, insulating window shutters, and strategically located shade trees.

Active systems use basic plumbing equipment such as tanks, pumps and collector panels to capture the sun's energy and convert it to practical use.

Many solar homes combine both systems.

The booklet says the average do-it-

yourself can handle many energy conservation tasks needed for installing a passive system. They include attic insulation, weatherstripping and caulking windows and doors.

An active system has mechanical aspects, so its installation without professional help calls for know-how in plumbing and related techniques.

"If you have any doubts, hire or consult a professional architect, designer or contractor," the booklet suggests.

The two biggest steps, it adds, are selecting a suitable system and

choosing a professional to install it or help in the installation.


The booklet recommends that homeowners have a professional designer analyze their heat load requirements and hot water needs to assure proper sizing of the system.

For a copy of the free booklet, write: Solar & Insulation Unit, Division of Consumer Services, Department of Consumer Affairs, 1020 N Street, Room A-547-D, Sacramento, Calif., 95814.



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