

Google plans cheap mirrors to reduce cost of solar energy

Google is developing mirror technology that could reduce the cost of solar-powered turbine plants as part of its investment in green innovations.

By Alastair Jamieson

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The internet search giant is focusing on solar thermal technology in which the sun's energy is used to heat up a substance that produces steam to turn a turbine. Mirrors focus the sun's rays on the heated substance.

Bill Wehl, the company's green energy czar, said: "We've been looking at very unusual materials for the mirrors both for the reflective surface as well as the substrate that the mirror is mounted on."

He told a conference in San Francisco that Google is looking to cut the cost of making heliostats, the fields of mirrors that have to track the sun, by at least a factor of two, "ideally a factor of three or four."

The California-based company hopes to have viable technology for internal review within a couple of months.

It is also working on is gas turbines that would run on solar power rather than natural gas, an idea that has the potential of further cutting the cost of electricity.

Google has invested in two solar thermal companies, eSolar and BrightSolar but is not working with these companies in developing the cheaper mirrors or turbines.

In wide-ranging remarks, Mr Wehl also called on the United States to increase government-backed research, particularly in the very initial stages to encourage breakthrough ideas in the sector.

He said there is a lack of companies that have ideas that would be considered breakthroughs in the green technology sector.

After announcing its plans to create renewable energy at a price lower than power from coal, it has invested less than \$50 million in the idea because there was little on which to spend money.

"I would say it's reasonable to be a little bit discouraged there and from my point of view, it's not right to be seriously discouraged," he said. "There isn't enough investment going into the early stages of investment pipeline before the venture funds come into the play."



The California-based company hopes to have viable technology for internal review within a couple of months. Photo: AP

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