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SOLAR POWER IN SWITZERLAND

In 1990, a solar-powered car designed by Biel's engineering school won the World Solar Challenge across Australia. More recently, the Sun21 boat successfully completed a trans-Atlantic crossing. In 2009, a 30-metre boat known as Planet Solar will try to circumnavigate the globe. And in 2011, Swiss adventurer Bertrand Piccard hopes his Solar Impulse aircraft will fly around the world. Switzerland is among the top countries when it comes to research and development.

Yet when it comes to domestic solar energy use, the Swiss are dragging their feet. Last year, sales of solar-powered products and related services only reached SFr 22 million. The solar power professionals association, Swissolar, wants to see that change. They would like to see the amount of solar heating used increase 20 times and sun-generated electricity twice as much. The aim is to have one square metre of solar panels per inhabitant by 2020, with public services leading the way. If this target is reached, two thirds of the country's hot water will come from the sun, while one tenth of its electricity requirements will be covered. The proposal is similar to the European Union's own solar action plan, and its goals can be reached, according to Swissolar. Switzerland has 400 million squaremetres of roof surfaces that could be used for solar energy. If those surfaces were entirely covered with solar panels, they could provide one third of the country's electricity and half of its heating.

The slow growth of Switzerland's solar market contrasts with official and public concerns about ecology and climate change. Energy specialists say this is because of the strength of the national hydropower industry, but also because businesses have yet to turn to alternative sources for electricity. To suggestions that solar energy is not ideal in the Swiss climate they say that Switzerland's neighbour Austria has ten times more solar panels.

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