

## **An energized future**

Written by By Holly J. Wagner Sun Correspondent  
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### **Ground broken on solar project at former Escalante Station coal plant**

The future of energy is renewable, and for the shuttered Escalante Station near Prewitt that future may follow two paths: solar and hydrogen.

Escalante operated as a 253-megawatt, coal-fired power plant from 1984 to 2020. The plant was built by Plains Electric Generation and Transmission Cooperative and began operations in 1984.

The closure and conversion are part of the Tri-State Generation and Transmission Association co-op's Responsible Energy Plan, which sets goals for reducing emissions and increasing clean energy and flexibility for its members.

When the closure was announced in January 2020 the plant had 107 employees; by the time it burned its last coal at 9:45 am Aug. 30 of that year, that number had slipped to 35. A few of those stayed on longer to complete the closure and turn out the lights.

Fast forward exactly three years to Aug. 30, 2023, when Florida-based Origis Energy announced breaking ground on the conversion to Escalante Solar at the site.

Origis acquired the development rights for the project from the original developer, TurningPoint Energy, and will operate and maintain the 200-megawatt solar plant when it starts generating electricity late next year.

Tri-State will buy the juice, so Escalante will still help feed the Continental Divide Electric Cooperative's service territory along with all of Tri-State's other members, including 10 others in New Mexico.

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“It’s meaningful that the first solar project to start construction as part of the Responsible Energy Plan we announced in 2020 will be built alongside our retired coal plant,” Tri-State CEO Duane Highley said. “We continue to reinvest in the local community and advance our goal of having 50% of the energy used by our members coming from renewable resources in 2025 and meeting the 2030 renewable energy requirements of the Energy Transition Act five years early.”

While the solar plant is expected to need just four to six full-time workers when it’s up and running, construction on the conversion is expected to need up to 400 employees. The contractor for the job is Albuquerque-based GridWorks. Roughly 500,000 solar panel modules will be installed, to power an estimated 40,000 homes.

McKinley County commissioners approved an industrial revenue bond worth up to \$280 million for the project in April. The county expects to receive about \$7.1 million in taxes over the life of the project, with another \$2.4 million going to Gallup-McKinley County Schools.

“Tri-State’s investment in Escalante Solar is vital for the community,” CDEC CEO and general manager Robert E. Castillo said. “While the solar project cannot replace jobs at the retired coal plant, the addition of a new tax base for McKinley County and our local school district is impactful, and we appreciate Tri-State and the project partners for bringing Escalante Solar to our region.”

Separately, a concern called Escalante H2Power plans to retrofit part of the plant to use blue/green hydrogen technology to generate and store power. Tallgrass Energy, based in Kansas, owns a 75% membership interest in that partnership; the other 25% is owned by Texas-based Newpoint Gas, LLC.

Neither Gridworks nor Escalante H2Power responded to inquiries about when and what jobs would be available at the site, but Gridworks lists its open positions on its website, [gridworks.com](https://www.gridworks.com).

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