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Illinois Solar Project Demonstrates Path Around Grid Interconnection Bottlenecks

GIBSON CITY, Illinois (Sept. 1, 2026) — The 346-megawatt DC Gibson City Solar Project, developed by [Earthrise Energy](#) and delivered by engineer-procure-construct (EPC) contractor [Burns & McDonnell](#), achieved commercial operation using Earthrise Energy's surplus interconnection strategy. By connecting through the existing switchyard of an adjacent natural gas-fired peaking facility, the project leveraged available grid capacity rather than requiring a new interconnection, illustrating one approach to accelerating renewable energy deployment while maintaining grid reliability.

As utilities and renewable energy developers across the United States face growing delays connecting new generation to the electric grid, this project demonstrated faster ways to bring renewable generation online using existing assets. In addition to the innovative grid interconnection strategy, Burns & McDonnell paired advanced construction technologies and terrain-following solar trackers to reduce environmental impacts and improve construction execution.

"Interconnection has become one of the defining challenges for new energy projects," says [Jami Stone](#), construction project manager for Burns & McDonnell. "Projects like Gibson City demonstrate how developers can take advantage of existing infrastructure while combining innovative construction methods to deliver new renewable generation more efficiently. It's an example of how the industry can rethink traditional approaches to meeting growing energy demand, and we applaud Earthrise Energy for this creative solution to help bring clean power online faster."

Spanning approximately 1,700 acres across McLean and Ford counties, the facility is expected to generate enough renewable electricity to power approximately 46,000 homes.

The scope of work for Burns & McDonnell spanned EPC services. Procurement responsibilities included trackers, piles, cable, inverters and all electrical balance of plant equipment. [AZCO](#), a construction subsidiary of Burns & McDonnell, self-performed construction of underground electrical systems for a portion of the project, drove piles, and installed trackers and modules. The project team also provided environmental support, constructed a 34.5-/138-kilovolt collector substation featuring a two-transformer station, and built a gen-tie line connected to a new line position in the existing Gibson City energy center substation. The site was built with union labor under the National Maintenance Agreement.

Burns & McDonnell worked with [NextPower](#) to provide the terrain-following trackers, [Shoals](#) to provide the aboveground collection system, and [SMA](#) to supply the inverters for this project. Earthrise procured [Runergy](#) solar modules, high-voltage breakers and transformers.

The project was developed to serve multiple power purchase agreements. To support this coordinated operation, Burns & McDonnell designed and commissioned the project's supervisory control and data acquisition (SCADA) systems, providing the controls needed to safely manage both generating resources.

A Testing Ground for Autonomous Construction

The Gibson City site also served as a testing ground for next-generation construction automation. Burns & McDonnell deployed AI software from Gritt to install a portion of the solar modules on-site. [Gritt](#) combines AI and robotics to automate heavy labor on construction sites, building intelligent systems that can be attached to standard construction equipment to autonomously handle tasks like assembling solar arrays, pouring concrete and laying rebar.

Reducing Environmental Impact

The project also demonstrated how engineering and technology can substantially reduce construction impacts.

Using NextPower terrain-following tracker technology, the design follows the site's natural contours, limiting grading to fewer than 40,000 cubic yards across the project's footprint. Compared with conventional utility-scale solar construction, the approach reduced grading requirements by as much as 90%, helping preserve existing landscapes, minimize erosion risks and reduce reseeding requirements. Burns & McDonnell also worked with the owner to establish a native seed mix and start growth before mobilizing to the site, enhancing the appearance of the finished project.

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