



Facilities

Prairie grasses, solar panels yield big savings for DC operator

Richard Murphy has installed high-tech solar panels at two of his warehouses, but he's more excited about a decidedly low-tech green initiative: replacing standard grass with prairie grass.

Murphy is president of Murphy Warehouse Co., a third-party logistics provider with nine facilities in the Minneapolis area. In 1994, he replaced the lawn at one of his DCs with native prairie grass, and he was shocked by how much the simple move saved.

"The significant savings was absolutely astounding," Murphy says.

Ripping out lawns at two of his facilities in the 1990s has resulted in \$829,000 in savings in 14 years. Prairie grass has deeper roots than lawn grass and is far heartier, which means the native grasses need far less maintenance.

"They don't need cutting every week, they don't need sprinkler irrigation, they don't need fertilizer," Murphy says. "Why would you cut grass on acres and acres of land when it just doesn't make sense?"

The annual cost of maintaining six acres of prairie is \$4,240, compared to \$21,650 for taking care of 4.2 acres of lawn, Murphy says. The savings are so compelling that Murphy doesn't understand why more DCs haven't ripped out their ornamental grass and replaced it with native vegetation.

Murphy doesn't let the native vegetation simply take over. His landscaping is still profes-

sionally maintained, but the low-maintenance nature of prairie grass means the costs plummet. The native grass also produces a plethora of wildflowers.

Prairie grass is cheap to plant, and he says the installation pays for itself in 1.3 years. Murphy offers only one caveat: Prairie grass needs about three years to fill in.

"You've gotta have some patience," he says.

New Jersey DCs add rooftop solar panels

Two more DCs are adding rooftop solar plants in New Jersey, which has some of the nation's most generous credits for solar projects.

Gloucester Marine Terminal has partnered with Sun-Power Corp. to build what it calls the largest rooftop solar installation in North America — a 1.1 million-square-foot project on the roof of the terminal's refrigerated warehouse on the Delaware River in Gloucester City, NJ.

The \$42 million project calls for the installation of 27,528 photovoltaic rooftop solar panels that will generate nine megawatts of electricity. The project is expected to generate nearly 80 percent of the terminal's power demand.

Meanwhile, UPS installed a rooftop solar array at its 70,000-square-foot facility in Lakewood, NJ. The 250-kilowatt project will generate about a third of the building's energy needs, although UPS will rely on the traditional electrical grid for its nighttime power needs.

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Prairie grass tops solar panels

Murphy also has installed solar panels at two of his facilities, but he's not as bullish about solar just yet. That's because installation costs are steep — unless you can cash in grants from the government and your utility.

Murphy says grants from the federal and state governments and his utility cut the cost of a solar installation from \$1 million to \$100,000. That shortened what would have been a decades-long payback period to only four years.

While the investment only makes sense with government assistance, Murphy has been pleased

by the power output from solar panels. Solar panels that cover 2 percent of the roofs at two of Murphy Warehouse's DCs produce 50 percent of the power used by the facilities, he says.

While you wouldn't think of Minnesota as a solar hot spot, Murphy says solar panels run more efficiently when they're cold. And he hopes the economics of solar energy shift to the point that the panels become a viable energy source for DCs.

"We have these huge buildings with flat roofs, and they just sit there and bake," Murphy says.

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