Local Companies Partner to Grow the SE Ohio Rooftop Solar Landscape (Athens, Ohio)

Dovetail Solar and Wind was founded in 1995, primarily as a construction company with an interest in renewable energy and since has become a full provider of renewable energy system design, installation and green building. Ecolibrium Solar was established just three years ago in 2010 with one goal in mind: to revolutionize the solar industry. Both Athens, Ohio-based companies are finding success in the growing renewable energy industry.

Dovetail is rapidly expanding with five additional offices in Cleveland, Toledo, Cincinnati, Columbus and southeastern Michigan. They have nearly 40 employees and are continuing to hire. Dovetail provides their services for all of Ohio, southeastern Michigan, northern Kentucky, Indiana, western Pennsylvania and West Virginia, placing an emphasis on providing performance-driven designs and buying from U.S. manufacturers.

“Most companies are offering the lowest priced products they can find,” said Matt Bennett, founder and vice president of engineering and technology. “We are committed to providing U.S. made products as much as possible.”

Ecolibrium targets a niche market—flat roof installations—with its patented EcoFoot mounting racks. The company is currently supported with pre-seed funding and professional board advisory from Ohio University’s TechGROWTH Ohio start-up program. Currently housed in Ohio University’s Innovation Center, they are eligible to receive such benefits as networking, coaching, training and advertising services, office space, and product discounts for entrepreneurs. Founder Brian Wildes has called these services “critical for our growing organization.” Ecolibrium’s mounting racks, the Ecofoot (released in fall 2011) and Ecofoot 2 (production began in fall 2012), maximize efficiency and minimize cost to make flat roof solar panels easier to install because of their light, durable materials and low part count.

“The Ecofoot is the first universal mounting system made entirely of polymers and the first mounting system with only one core component, which makes installations simple and fast,” Wildes said. “The Ecofoot 2 utilizes polymers to maintain the simple/faster/cheaper advantage, but has additional features like integrated wire management, integrated grounding, and a high-end engineering resin that more sophisticated installers appreciate.”

Start-up success
Ecolibrium has received crucial grant and pre-seed funding from TechGROWTH Ohio, an Ohio Third Frontier-sponsored technology start-up organization co-funded by Ohio University and private capital. TechGROWTH supports entrepreneurs through professional business counseling, grants to overcome commercialization obstacles, pre-seed investments, and access to follow-on capital
access providers. Ecolibrium’s follow-on capital came through the East Central Ohio Tech Angel Fund (ECOTAF) and from Columbus-based Ohio TechAngels Fund (OTAF).

“Ecolibrium is a key regional success story,” stated John Glazer, TechGROWTH director and Ecolibrium board member. “When Brian came to TechGROWTH’s doorstep with a first prototype, we expected he could go far. Now that he’s progressed all the way through our pre-seed and external follow-on angel funding, TechGROWTH is delighted to have enabled a true rising star among SE Ohio technology innovators.”

Community energy
Recently, the Dovetail and Ecolibrium partnered on a local solar project that showcased their technical strengths. Dovetail installed an 18.7 kilowatt solar array on the headquarters of real-estate firm Larry Conrath Realty, located at 280 East State Street in Athens. Ecolibrium’s Ecofoot was chosen as the mounting system for the panels. Don Linder, broker-owner of Larry Conrath Realty, credits Dovetail for a job well-done.

“We couldn’t be any happier. The installation and products were installed flawlessly and we have had no issues come up with the operation of the solar system since it was installed,” said Linder.

Dovetail’s Bennett said Ecolibrium’s product made the process easier. “The racking is lighter and easier to handle, it has fewer components to assemble, and it is modular which allows flexibility and efficiency in installation methods,” said Bennett.
Bennett said the company hopes to work with Ecolibrium on future projects, although despite doing some joint marketing they do not have an established partnership in place. Ecolibrium founder Brian Wildes also expressed interest in maintaining a good relationship with Dovetail.

“The project with Larry Conrath Realty was a complete success; not only did the installers love the simple, ergonomic installation, we also set a record in speed of install of 15 panels per person per hour,” Wildes said. “Dovetail is actively specifying the Ecofoot for proposals and we look forward to a long and fruitful relationship.”

Dovetail has successfully installed more than 200 other commercial solar electric, solar thermal, and wind projects, residential solar electric and solar thermal projects, and school and university solar electric projects. Their projects are about 50% commercial, 30% municipal or educational, and 20% residential. In 2012, Dovetail installed over 2 MW of photovoltaic solar power.

Bennett said amongst his favorites was the solar carport installed for the Athens Community Center. Because of a Power Purchase Agreement (PPA), the 224-kW solar PV system was installed for the City of Athens at no cost, yet still provides the benefits of lower energy costs and shaded parking for the community center.

Ecolibrium, in addition to the installation for Larry Conrath Realty, has supplied their Ecofoot technology for 54 projects in 18 states and counting with a 100% success rate, according to Wildes. The Ecofoot 2 was presold for 14 projects in 10 different states that are currently being built or will be built in the near future. Wildes said he anticipates significant growth in the company.

“We anticipate explosive growth in the next few years, as our company and our product line matures and becomes more attractive to risk adverse customers,” Wildes said. “We currently have 7 employees and plan to grow to 18 by the end of 2014.”

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-Austin Stahl, Voinovich School Scholar, Ohio University Voinovich School (updated February 2013)