

# Solar switch is still worth flicking

by: By Nhada Larkin

From: National Features Herald Sun

January 23, 2012 8:31AM

LOWER government subsidies may be causing people to hesitate about investing in solar power, but energy groups say with summer electricity bills likely to cause some nasty shocks, solar is still a smart purchase.

Australian Solar Energy Society chief executive John Grimes says a huge fall in solar panel prices and rising electricity prices mean there has "never been a better time to buy" solar panels.

"In the past 18 months prices have dropped by about 80 per cent," Grimes says. "There has been a winding back of government support but, even taking that into account, if you were to put in a metered system today it would be cheaper than it was, even with the higher level of government support in the past."

He says with ageing electricity infrastructure requiring government investment in the order of \$140 billion, there will continue to be upward pressure on electricity prices "well past 2020". Solar panels can vary widely in price. An Origin 2kW solar system installed in a capital city on a single-storey building starts at about \$6740, while a 3.4kW system starts at \$13,490.

Grimes says the average system currently being installed is about 2kW, but to supply all the electrical needs for the average family would require a 3.5-4kW system. "If people have the funds and want to make a longer-term investment it's a pretty smart thing to do," he says.

Origin energy efficiency advocate Anne Armansin says buying solar panels means consumers are "avoiding the cost of imported energy". "The cells you get today are going to be of benefit to you for at least 20 years and everything you generate means power you're not going to have to buy from the grid," she says.

"The potential benefits of getting a solar system far outweigh the initial dollar outlay." Richard Turner, chief executive of ZEN Home Energy Systems, says with electricity prices forecast to rise as much as 40 per cent over the next two years, the payback period for an investment in solar panels will decrease.

But consumers should be careful when making what is a major purchase. "There are a wide range of solar systems currently being advertised to Australian households but there are wide variations in the quality of the product and the experience of the various companies and installers," Turner says.

"Consumers should make sure they shop around and get an understanding of exactly what they are getting before committing to a purchase. Solar panels are a long-term investment and buying a cheap system or one that is not suited to your house may not deliver the savings or performance you anticipated."