

Solar installations go through the roof despite Victoria's lockdown

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A near-record number of rooftop solar systems were installed in Australia last month, despite a plunge in Victorian installations during COVID-19 restrictions and lockdown.

And Victorian installations are likely to increase rapidly when restrictions ease, with some solar installers saying they are already booked out until March next year.

Nationally, 250 megawatts of electricity were added in September – the second highest monthly level on record – despite Victorian installations plummeting as a result of Melbourne's stage four COVID-19 lockdown. This is more than 43 per cent up on a year ago.

Despite predictions the pandemic would dent demand for new solar systems because of the economic downturn and disruptions to the building sector caused by social distancing, the opposite has been true, said Tristan Edis, the director of Green Energy Markets.

“Home improvement, including solar, is doing very well out of COVID-19,” Mr Edis said.

“People who are working and aren't able to spend money on restaurants or holidays have directed that money to home improvement.”

Although the installation fall in Victoria was sharp, there were record highs in other states including NSW, Western Australia and South Australia.

Should the pace of the past year be maintained, Australia will by 2025 have more rooftop solar capacity than the country's ageing fleet of coal-fired power.

An Australian renewable energy record was set last week when roof-top solar, large-scale solar and large-scale wind, with some hydro, supplied almost 53 per cent of demand on the national grid on Friday (which does not include the Northern Territory or Western Australia).

Australia has among the world's highest penetration of rooftop solar, thanks in part to high retail power prices but also the country's rich renewable energy resources.

Prices of panels are likely to continue to fall as producers, particularly those in China, continue to expand output.

That country recently completed work on the world's second-largest solar farm, built in just four months.

Matthew Wright, the director of Melbourne-based solar business Pure Electric, said new customers wanting to install solar panels on existing homes would have to wait until March.

During the first Melbourne lockdown solar installation businesses were able to operate, but stage four restrictions has reduced operations to five people working on an unoccupied building site, meaning new building sites have been the priority.

“People have been housebound and decided they are going to do improvement projects,” Mr Wright.

“I've had feedback from some saying they've just got a big bill from being at home all winter and they want to save money.”

The Australian Energy Market Operator, which oversees eastern Australia's power grid, has said it expects renewables will supply as much as 90 per cent of electricity at times by 2035.

Feed-in tariffs in Victoria range from 10.3 to 14 cents per kilowatt hours.

Information on the number of solar system installations is provided by the Clean Energy Regulator.