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UPDATE 2-U.S. rivals accuse China of dumping solar panels

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* China makers have more than doubled solar cell shipments-CASM

* Suntech, Trina cite change in key US program for yr-end surge

By Nichola Groom

Jan 25 (Reuters) - Chinese solar panel makers flooded the U.S. market with their products at the end of last year in anticipation of potential duties on those products, a coalition of American solar manufacturers said on Wednesday, a charge refuted by some top Chinese companies.

The Coalition for American Solar Manufacturing, led by the U.S. arm of German panel maker SolarWorld AG, said Chinese manufacturers including Suntech Power Holdings Co Ltd and Trina Solar Ltd have more than doubled shipments of solar cells and modules.

Citing data from the U.S. Customs and Border Protection's Port Import Export Reporting Service, the coalition said Suntech imports rose 76 percent in November compared with the previous month. It said Trina's imports rose 209 percent in the first half of December compared with the first half of November.

"This significant increase in imports demonstrates that the Chinese know they have violated U.S. and international trade rules and are trying to evade the consequences," Gordon Brinser, president of SolarWorld Industries America, said in a statement.

Suntech and Trina Solar cited a change in a key U.S. government program for solar installations at the end of 2011 for the year-end surge. The program had paid solar developers a cash grant of 30 percent of the cost of new products. This year it has become a tax-benefit program that allows solar power plant developers to deduct 30 percent of a project's cost from their taxes over several years.

"Strong U.S. market demand in the fourth quarter was driven largely by the anticipated expiry of the cash grant program," a Suntech spokesman said. "Suntech continues to grow steadily with the U.S. solar industry, and in 2011 we maintained our leading market share."

A Trina Solar spokesman said the company is opposed to any suggestion that its U.S. imports surged as the result of efforts to evade potential tariffs.

"Further, due to production cycle and delivery logistics, it's an established industry pattern to see the majority of any quarter's shipments occurring in the last month," the spokesman said.

OBAMA'S PLEDGE

CASM also said Miami-based importer Sun Electronics brought in 31,000 Chinese solar laminates on a single day in December, accusing the privately held company of stockpiling imports. The shipment consisted of "at least 77 shipping containers," the statement said.

Sun Electronics could not be reached for comment.

SolarWorld Industries and six other U.S. solar companies, who have chosen to remain anonymous, have accused Chinese competitors of receiving illegal government subsidies and selling their products in the United States at unfairly low prices.

The companies in October filed a case asking the U.S. Commerce Department to set duties of more than 100 percent on Chinese-made solar cells and panels. Another coalition of U.S. solar companies opposes duties, saying they would threaten 100,000 jobs in the industry by driving up prices and depressing demand.

The U.S. International Trade Commission voted last month to allow the case to proceed and for the Commerce Department to announce preliminary duties this year.

A preliminary decision is expected Feb. 13.

CASM's statement comes a day after President Barack Obama said in his annual State of the Union speech that he was creating an enforcement unit to crack down on unfair trade practices in China and other countries.

He did not mention the solar panel case specifically, but urged Congress to pass tax credits to create more U.S. clean energy jobs.

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