**Solar panels**

Photovoltaic solar panels absorb sunlight as a source of energy to generate electricity. A photovoltaic (PV) module is a packaged, connect assembly of typically 6x10 photovoltaic solar cells. Photovoltaic modules constitute the photovoltaic array of a photovoltaic system that generates and supplies solar electricity in commercial and residential applications. Each module is rated by its DC output power under standard test conditions (STC), and typically ranges from 100 to 365 Watts (W). The efficiency of a module determines the area of a module given the same rated output – an 8% efficient 230 W module will have twice the area of a 16% efficient 230 W module. There are a few commercially available solar modules that exceed efficiency of 22% and reportedly also exceeding 24%. A single solar module can produce only a limited amount of power; most installations contain multiple modules. A photovoltaic system typically includes an array of photovoltaic modules, an inverter, a battery pack for storage, interconnection wiring, and optionally a solar tracking mechanism.

The most common application of solar panels is solar water heating systems. The price of solar power has continued to fall so that in many countries it is cheaper than ordinary fossil fuel electricity from the grid (there is "grid parity").

**From a solar cell to a PV system**

Photovoltaic modules use light energy (photons) from the Sun to generate electricity through the photovoltaic effect. The majority of modules use wafer-based crystalline silicon cells or thin-film cells. The structural (load carrying) member of a module can either be the top layer or the back layer. Cells must also be protected from mechanical damage and moisture. Most modules are rigid, but semi-flexible ones based on thin-film cells are also available. The cells must be connected electrically in series, one to another. Externally, most of photovoltaic modules use MC4 connectors type to facilitate easy weatherproof connections to the rest of the system.

Module electrical connections are made in series to achieve a desired output voltage or in parallel to provide a desired current capability. The conducting wires that take the current off the modules may contain silver, copper or other non-magnetic conductive transition metals. Bypass diodes may be incorporated or used externally, in case of partial module shading, to maximize the output of module sections still illuminated.

Some special solar PV modules include concentrators in which light is focused by lenses or mirrors onto smaller cells. This enables the use of cells with a high cost per unit area (such as gallium arsenide) in a cost-effective way. Solar panels also use metal frames consisting of racking components, brackets, reflector shapes, and troughs to better support the panel structure.

**Efficiencies**

Reported timeline of solar cell energy conversion efficiencies since 1976 (National Renewable Energy Laboratory) Depending on construction, photovoltaic modules can produce electricity from a range of frequencies of light, but usually cannot cover the entire solar range (specifically, ultraviolet, infrared and low or diffused light). Hence, much of the incident sunlight energy is wasted by solar modules, and they can give far higher efficiencies if illuminated with monochromatic light. Therefore, another design concept is to split the light into six to eight different wavelength ranges that will produce a different color of light, and direct the beams onto different cells tuned to those ranges. This has been projected to be capable of raising efficiency by 50%. Scientists from Spectrolab, a subsidiary of Boeing, have reported development of multi-junction solar cells with an efficiency of more than 40%, a new world record for solar photovoltaic cells. The Spectrolab scientists also predict that concentrator solar cells could achieve efficiencies of more than 45% or even 50% in the future, with theoretical efficiencies being about 58% in cells with more than three junctions.

Currently, the best achieved sunlight conversion rate (solar module efficiency) is around 21.5% in new commercial products[9] typically lower than the efficiencies of their cells in isolation. The most efficient mass-produced solar modules[disputed – discuss] have power density values of up to 175 W/m2 (16.22 W/ft2).

Research by Imperial College, London has shown that the efficiency of a solar panel can be improved by studding the light-receiving semiconductor surface with aluminum nanocylinders similar to the ridges on Lego blocks. The scattered light then travels along a longer path in the semiconductor which means that more photons can be absorbed and converted into current. Although these nanocylinders have been used previously (aluminum was preceded by gold and silver), the light scattering occurred in the near infrared region and visible light was absorbed strongly. Aluminum was found to have absorbed the ultraviolet part of the spectrum, while the visible and near infrared parts of the spectrum were found to be scattered by the aluminum surface. This, the research argued, could bring down the cost significantly and improve the efficiency as aluminum is more abundant and less costly than gold and silver. The research also noted that the increase in current makes thinner film solar panels technically feasible without "compromising power conversion efficiencies, thus reducing material consumption".

Efficiencies of solar panel can be calculated by MPP (maximum power point) value of solar panels. Solar inverters convert the DC power to AC power by performing MPPT process: solar inverter samples the output Power (I-V curve) from the solar cell and applies the proper resistance (load) to solar cells to obtain maximum power. MPP (Maximum power point) of the solar panel consists of MPP voltage (V mpp) and MPP current (I mpp): it is a capacity of the solar panel and the higher value can make higher MPP. Micro-inverted solar panels are wired in parallel, which produces more output than normal panels which are wired in series with the output of the series determined by the lowest performing panel (this is known as the "Christmas light effect"). Micro-inverters work independently so each panel contributes its maximum possible output given the available sunlight.

**Technology**

Most solar modules are currently produced from crystalline silicon (c-Si) solar cells made of multicrystalline and monocrystalline silicon. In 2013, crystalline silicon accounted for more than 90 percent of worldwide PV production, while the rest of the overall market is made up of thin-film technologies using cadmium telluride, CIGS and amorphous silicon

Emerging, third generation solar technologies use advanced thin-film cells. They produce a relatively high-efficiency conversion for the low cost compared to other solar technologies. Also, high-cost, high-efficiency, and close-packed rectangular multi-junction (MJ) cells are preferably used in solar panels on spacecraft, as they offer the highest ratio of generated power per kilogram lifted into space. MJ-cells are compound semiconductors and made of gallium arsenide (GaAs) and other semiconductor materials. Another emerging PV technology using MJ-cells is concentrator photovoltaics ( CPV ).