Business and government officials on Friday cut the ribbon on a solar array in Arizona that uses giant parabolic dishes to generate electricity from the sun.
Solar plant developer Tessera Solar installed 60 solar collectors, called the SunCatcher from Stirling Energy Systems, in Peoria, Ariz. Each dish is rated at 25 kilowatts and the entire facility will have a capacity of 1.5-megawatts of generation.

Utilities installing large-scale solar power generation are typically using arrays of flat photovoltaic panels or concentrating solar power systems, where mirrors or reflective troughs create heat to make electricity.

The Stirling Energy Systems technology also captures heat by using a mirred parabolic dish that moves to track the sun. But instead of heating a liquid to make steam for a turbine, the heat is directed at a hydrogen gas-filled piston, which drives a Stirling engine to make electricity.

The company claims its technology delivers electricity more efficiently and uses less water than other technologies. Inifinia is another company that has built a solar-powered Stirling engine using a parabolic dish, although it is smaller.

Tessera Solar said that it has contracts to install as much as 1,600 megawatts' worth of capacity in California and Texas.

*Updated with correction at 1:15 p.m. PT.*

Martin LaMonica is a senior writer for CNET's Green Tech blog. He started at CNET News in 2002, covering IT and Web development. Before that, he was executive editor at IT publication InfoWorld. E-mail Martin.