A ‘solar spill’ is no disaster. It’s just a very nice day.

— Cherri Harper

The 2010 BP oil spill — identified by some as the worst environmental disaster in U.S. history — pumped an estimated 4.9 million barrels of oil into the Gulf of Mexico, killing 11 people and more than 8,000 animals and polluting 16,000 miles of coastline. Because of this risk associated with oil spill, Cherri Harper, vice president of the Flint Hills Renewable Energy and Efficiency Cooperative, said she prefers alternative sources of energy.

“A solar spill is no disaster,” she pointed out. “It’s just a very nice day.”

The group’s founders got started when a few founders to a mailing list of more than 100 people. Since then, members have been active in advocating against proposed Westar rate increases that would make it harder for homeowners to cut their electricity bills with renewable energy sources. Most recently, they opposed Westar’s efforts to institute significant increases to the customer charge portion of each household’s electricity bill — a flat monthly fee that doesn’t change no matter how much electricity a homeowner uses or doesn’t use.

“People really can’t afford that,” Harper said. “There’s no way it hurts the earth and now it hurts people.”

She said the panels typically pay for themselves in around eight to 10 years. An installation of 30 panels will produce about a third to a half of an average household’s electricity usage. The total initial cost of a 10-panel system, including hardware, fees, permits and electrical hookups, comes to a little less than $6,000. Homeowners with the option to supply as much of the sun’s energy to the power lines, however, any surplus back to the power company.

Once the panels are plugged into the power lines, however, excess electricity can be transmitted to neighboring houses. What’s more, the power company actually benefits from their energy production because it takes place primarily during peak load times when the sun is strongest and people are using their air conditioners, appliances and power outlets.

Not to mention it’s like having a huge tree over your backyard, Dorsett said, referring to savings on air conditioning that result from solar panels absorbing sunlight before it can transmit heat into the house. "It’s a great win-win," Dorsett said. "Rooftop solar makes all the sense in the world.

He said some power companies have started funding residential solar installations that they then lease back to the homeowners because the energy produced saves money for everyone involved.

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