



A California company has begun using solar power to squeeze oil out of an old oil field, flooding the underground rock with steam that comes from the sun's heat instead of from burning natural gas.

The technique was tried in the 1980s by the Atlantic Richfield Company, but GlassPoint Solar, of Fremont, Calif., which cut the ribbon on a pilot project Thursday, says its plant is the only one of its kind now operating. Other companies have discussed such projects.

The process is cheaper than using natural gas, even at today's depressed prices for that fuel, and trims the carbon footprint of the gasoline, according to GlassPoint. The pilot plant, completed in January in Kern County, is very modest, occupying less than an acre and producing only about a million B.T.U.'s per hour. But the company says it could quickly be replicated on a larger scale and could eventually displace 80 percent of the natural gas used to produce a barrel of oil.

GlassPoint said that at a full-size plant, its technology could produce steam at a cost of \$3 per million B.T.U., compared with a market price of gas today of around \$4 per million B.T.U.

Whether GlassPoint can get that far remains unclear. The company has no track record in the oil industry and has had three different business strategies in less than two years. Formerly known as CleanBoard, GlassPoint changed its name in October 2009 when it abandoned plans to use a solar-powered factory to make gypsum-based wallboard and said it would work with other wallboard manufacturers. Last year, it refocused its business yet again on using solar power to extract oil.

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