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Home > EESI and GEA hold briefing on the state of the geothermal energy industry

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The Environmental and Energy Study Institute (EESI) and Geothermal Energy Association (GEA) held a briefing on the state of geothermal energy on both national and global scales. The speakers were Sakari Oksanen of the International Renewable Energy Agency, Meseret Zemedkun of the United Nations Environment Programme - African Rift Geothermal Development Facility, Benjamin Matek of the GEA, Doug Glaspey of U.S. Geothermal Inc., and Jack Thirolf of ENEL Green Power.

Much of the briefing focused on the technical, financial, and policy challenges faced by the growing international geothermal energy industry. Oksanen, Zemedkun, Matek, and Thirolf discussed the work of their organizations in improving and sharing data, skills, and technologies. Many of these organizations also provide or manage funding for new geothermal projects, especially in countries with emerging geothermal industries. Zemedkun outlined the rapid expansion of geothermal energy in East Africa, which currently generates only 630 megawatts but has potential resources of at least 20 gigawatts.

With a focus on U.S. issues, Matek, Glaspey, and Thirolf detailed the ways in which geothermal energy is unique among renewable energy sources, and therefore requires unique policy approaches. Particular emphasis was placed on the need for longer-term financial incentives to reduce the high up-front financial risk of geothermal exploration. This was justified by the reliability, durability, and small spatial footprint and visual impact of geothermal energy compared to other renewables.

Glaspey argued that low natural gas prices and improvements to solar energy have made it difficult for geothermal energy to compete economically in the United States. Despite this, the speakers provided many examples of the continued development of the national geothermal energy industry, including innovative technologies and increased funding from the U.S. Department of Energy's Geothermal Technologies Program.

A video recording of the briefing and copies of the speakers' slides are available on the EESI website.

Sources: Environmental and Energy Study Institute, U.S. Department of Energy
