March 10, 2008 1:08 PM PDT

A dark side of solar power

Posted by Elsa Wenzel | 7 comments

The growth of the solar power industry is poisoning land in China, according to the *Washington Post*.

Polysilicon, which is widely used to make solar panels, is in short supply. In the rush to make it cheaply, a Chinese company reportedly is dumping toxic waste into the ground, killing wildlife and endangering human health.

The newspaper describes green fields in the nation's eastern central Henan Province that have turned snow white from the powdery waste of silicon tetrachloride, four tons of which result from every ton of polysilicon created. Toxic hydrogen chloride gas and acids waft from the waste.

The waste is allegedly coming from Chinese polysilicon maker Luoyang Zhonggui High-Technology, a supplier of rising solar power star Suntech Power, according to the *Washington Post*.

"In China, polysilicon plants are the new dot-coms," writes Ariana Eunjung Cha, reporting that new factories there are set to produce more than twice the amount of polysilicon as is currently manufactured in the world. Silicon tetrachloride can be recycled. But manufacturers reportedly can make polysilicon about two-thirds more cheaply if they ignore environmental protections.

Henan Province is in the eastern central part of China.

(Credit: Google Maps)

U.S. politicians and activists have been pushing for "green-collar jobs" to fill the gap left by the dwindling blue-collar economy.

"Green" drywall maker Serious Materials is pursuing building a U.S. plant. And Suntech Power has expressed interest in building U.S. factories, helping to avoid the high price of shipping solar panels. However, watchdog groups and environmental laws in the United States would likely aim to prevent or punish the kind of dumping Suntech's supplier has been accused of.

Other unanticipated side effects of new "clean" technologies include rising food costs linked to the growing of corn for ethanol as well as the clearing of Indonesian rainforests to grow palm for biofuels. And China's Three Gorges Dam is flooding enormous swaths of land to make possible the world's largest hydropower plant.