

# Sustainability and Environmental Impact of IceCube-Gen2

## The IceCube-Gen2 Collaboration

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IceCube-Gen2 is a proposed next-generation neutrino facility at the South Pole, designed to expand upon the achievements of the pioneering IceCube observatory. This contribution provides a comprehensive review of efforts to ensure the sustainability of IceCube-Gen2 and minimize its environmental impact in Antarctica. Scenarios for overcoming logistical challenges in detector construction and operations are explored, including the potential use of renewable energy sources such as wind and solar. A cost-benefit analysis of energy sources for drilling will be presented. Efforts to optimize the IceCube-Gen2 drilling operations will be discussed, along with studies aimed at minimizing the power consumption of detector modules, and evaluating efficient power distribution scenarios and computing resource usage.

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## 1. Introduction

The IceCube Neutrino Observatory, located at the geographical South Pole, is the world's largest neutrino detector, consisting of a cubic kilometer of ultra-pure Antarctic ice instrumented with 5,160 digital optical modules (DOMs) [1], distributed over 86 vertical strings. Since its completion in 2010, IceCube has made ground-breaking discoveries, including the first detection of high-energy astrophysical neutrinos [2] and the association of a neutrino event with a known blazar (TXS 0506 + 056), a milestone in multi-messenger astronomy [3].

Based on IceCube's success, an extension to the observatory, IceCube-Gen2, has been proposed. IceCube-Gen2 combines optical, radio, and surface cosmic-ray detector components to increase the discovery potential for high-energy cosmic neutrinos by an order of magnitude and expand the energy range accessible to IceCube [4]. The construction of IceCube-Gen2 foresees the deployment of 120 additional strings of new optical modules into Antarctic ice, and deploying a surface array and a 500 km<sup>2</sup> radio array. The logistics of transporting 10,000 optical sensors to the South Pole, drilling more than hundred holes to 2600 m depth into the ice, deploying and operating the surface and radio array poses significant challenges [5]. Deep drilling operation for IceCube-Gen2 are expected to consume approximately 920,000 gallons of fuel over the construction period. The direct fuel usage per hole is estimated to be 6,000 gallons, which includes both deep and firm drilling activities [5], and indirect fuel consumption is around 20,000 gallons per season.

The construction and operation of the IceCube-Gen2 observatory pose significant challenges due to the extreme polar environment and temperatures, isolation, and limited seasonal access [5]. Generators have proven to be reliable for IceCube construction and their efficiency has improved significantly, for example, by using heat recovery [5]. However, accessibility to the South Pole and the associated logistical challenges for a construction project have worsened in recent years [6]. Supplementing power generation during construction with renewable energy sources could reduce the logistical footprint and offer potential cost savings. To be viable, such renewable systems must be low-maintenance, field-proven for use in extreme conditions, and highly reliable. If successfully deployed during construction, these energy systems could also help offset operational power demands in the future. Renewable energy systems could also reduce the environmental risk associated with power production, for example, by not requiring fuel storage [5, 7].

The South Pole offers favorable conditions for solar photovoltaic (PV) generation during the summer months, including high insolation (the amount of total solar radiation incident on a horizontal surface over a period of time), low cloud cover, and increased PV efficiency due to low temperatures (with silicon cells gaining 0.4% efficiency per °C drop). Additionally, the high surface albedo (the reflectivity of a surface) ( $\sim 0.7 - \sim 0.9$ ) enhances incident radiation through reflected light. PV has been utilized reliably in several Antarctic research stations, however the geographic South Pole certainly represents the most extreme environment.

One obvious option for the application of PV could be to supplement water heating for the hot water drilling infrastructure. Water heating only requires DC power, and due to limited flow rates, variations in the solar power output have minimal effects and could be compensated by ramping up generator power.

A combination of solar and wind might also be used to supplement power to the vast radio array with its proposed 500 km<sup>2</sup> footprint to reduce the power distribution and cabling challenges. Wind

energy is year-round available, however the extreme temperatures ( $-12^{\circ}\text{C}$  to  $-83^{\circ}\text{C}$ ), fine drifting snow have presented challenges for mechanical systems, and wind speeds (average 12 km/h) are typically below those at the Antarctic coastal areas (typical 20-40 km/h), where wind power has been extensively used.

A combination of multiple power sources, along with energy storage systems, could provide reliable year-round power. Recent techno-economic studies have shown that significant cost savings and nearly continuous, operations are achievable in the challenging South Pole environment. The feasibility study [7] indicates that a hybrid system combining solar, wind, and battery storage could substantially reduce fuel consumption, lower operational costs, and mitigate the environmental impact of a polar research station. However, the system proposed would have to be field tested to ensure it is a viable option.

The primary goal of this contribution is to review the environmental footprint of construction for IceCube-Gen2 and evaluate options for augmenting the well established diesel-based power production with alternative energy options with the potential to reduce logistics needs.

## 2. Model for solar power output estimation

We develop a system to predict the power output of a PV array at the South Pole and utilize historic weather data to explore the instantaneous and average power output of different configurations. We first describe the relevant meteorological data and how it is utilized to predict the power output of a single PV panel. We compare different orientations of a single PV panel and discuss their benefits and drawbacks. We then describe building a PV array and how combinations of different orientations can result in a relatively stable power output throughout the day. Subsequently we explore how many panels are necessary to use photovoltaics effectively for drilling and discuss practical mounting options to minimize logistic and maintenance needs. To predict the power output of a PV panel at the geographic South Pole location, we utilize historical solar irradiance data from NOAA<sup>1</sup>. Solar irradiance is the measure of solar power received per unit area at Earth's surface and is influenced by factors such as solar elevation angle, atmospheric aerosols, and ground reflectivity [8]. This irradiance is divided into multiple components depending on the source of the emission at the surface. For our simulation we specifically utilize direct, diffuse, and upwelling irradiance. Direct irradiance refers to the shortwave irradiance directly incident from the solid angle of the Sun disc [9]. Diffuse irradiance is the radiation received on Earth from sunlight isotropically scattered by the atmosphere, excluding the solar disk [9]. Lastly, upwelling irradiance represents the light reflected upward from Earth's surface. Note that the upwelling irradiance is measured as a diffuse component and does not include directional information, which is relevant for a highly reflective environment such as the South Pole, and for vertically mounted panels. To address the directional information, a field test is merited.

Figure 3 shows different practical solar panel configurations under consideration. Natural mounting orientations for PV panels at the South Pole are vertical or horizontal, as these options

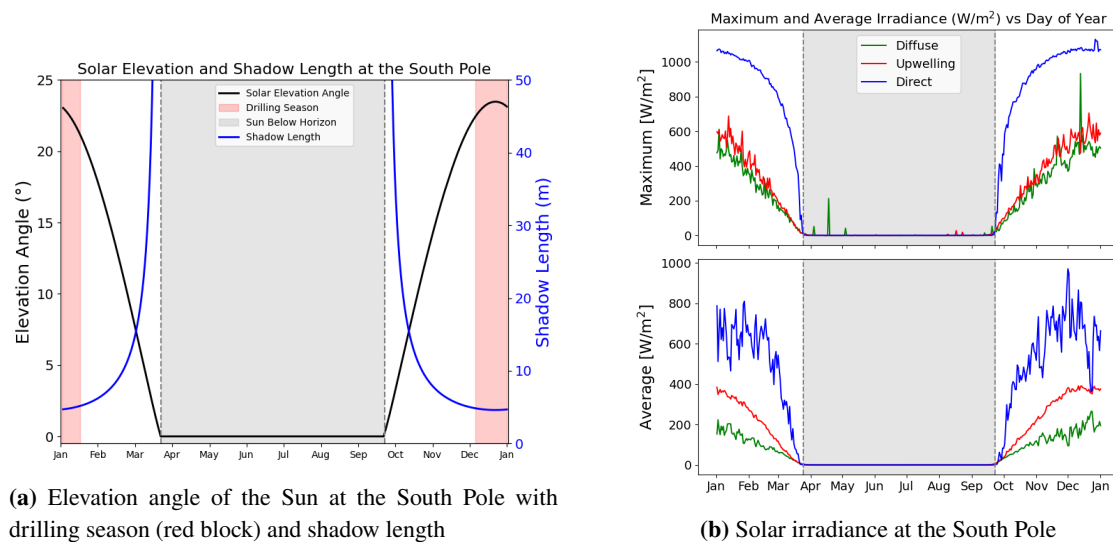
<sup>1</sup><https://gml.noaa.gov/aftp/data/radiation/baseline/spo/>

minimize maintenance needs and/or could be easily integrated with existing structures. Potential scenarios for PV panels are: (1) Attaching panels to the walls of the drilling infrastructure such as the shipping containers has been considered, however the risk of damage to the panels during operations makes this less practical; (2) Panels mounted vertically on sleds placed near the drill camp have the advantage of not interfering with drilling operations and bifacial panels could generate power more evenly during the entire day; (3) horizontally mounted panels pointing upwards could be attached to existing structures such as the scintillator panels or come with their own structure ; (4) Panels pointing downward could generate power based on the upwelling and reflected radiation in the high albedo polar environment and could be mounted below the scintillator panels; (5) Bifacial panels could be mounted horizontally using their own mounting structure, collecting light from both sides.

The South Pole is one of the most remote and logistically challenging environments on Earth, where any new system must be carefully evaluated before deployment. To ensure low maintenance of any PV system, snow accumulation on and around the panels must be minimized, and the panels should be mounted in batches.

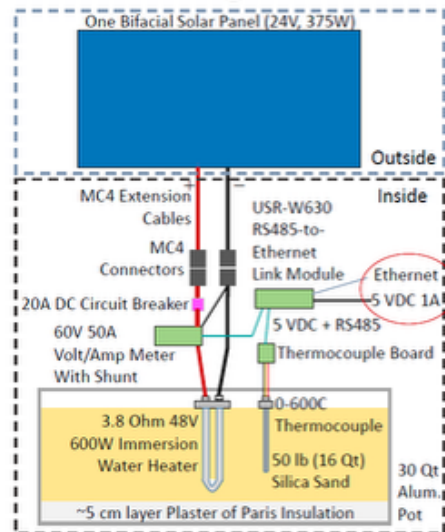
To predict the power output of a solar panel, we calculate the angle  $\gamma$  between the normal direction of the panel and the position of the Sun, the 'direct' power output scaling as  $\cos(\gamma)$ , and add the upwelling and diffuse components, respectively. This method does not account for the directional component of the upwelling radiation. To better understand the impact of this, we performed a field test in July 2022 at the Bonneville Salt Flats in Utah, where the terrain has an albedo of  $\sim 0.4$  [10] (see figure 3).

During the austral summer, from mid-September to mid-March, the Sun is always above the horizon, providing continuous daylight. This, combined with the exceptionally high reflective surface of the Pole [10] and low atmospheric moisture, creates ideal conditions for the use of solar energy. Previous field studies have shown reliable operation and structural integrity of solar panels in the extreme conditions over extended periods [11, 12].



**Figure 1:** Solar elevation angle and solar irradiance at the South Pole

Figure 1 (a) shows the solar elevation angle at the South Pole alongside the corresponding



**Figure 2:** Schematic of the proposed field test at the South Pole

shadow length, calculated for a 2-meter height (solar panel and mount). The red-shaded regions show a typical drilling season at the Pole which runs from early-December to mid-January. During this period, the length of shadow cast by the panel is low which is crucial for optimizing solar array design. Figure 1 (b) shows the maximum and average irradiance components - direct, diffuse, and upwelling - at the South Pole. As the Sun approaches the horizon, the irradiance decreases rapidly due to the large air mass [8].

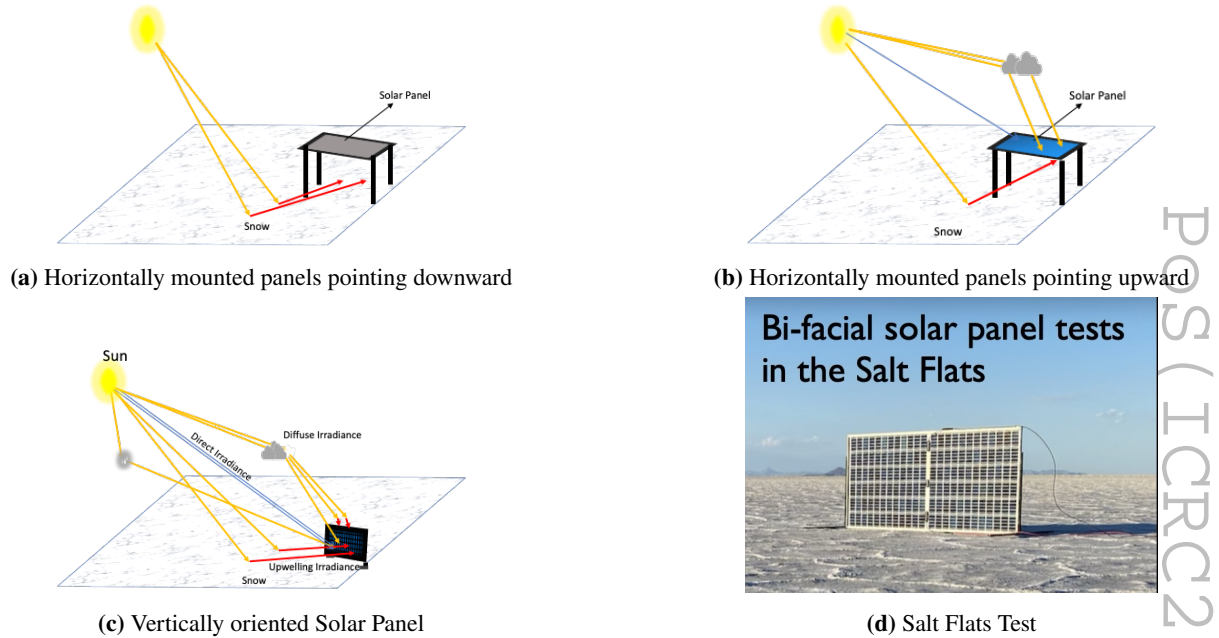
To better understand the impact on solar panel output, we have proposed a field test setup at the South Pole. This setup features two bifacial solar panels (CanadianSolar BiKu Module, 375W range), a resistor (4 $\Omega$ -500W braking resistor) and 48V-600W cartridge heaters integrated to provide a small thermal contribution to the drill camp. A PZEM-17 RS485 volt/amp meter will be used for continuous monitoring of system output. We will conduct a continuous measurement of the power output from these solar panels throughout the austral summer. A simplified system schematic is shown in Figure 2. It illustrates the key components, including power routing, heating elements, and data logging setup used for the field test.

Wind energy is also being explored for autonomous power generation at the South Pole. The collaboration has started field tests with commercial vertical axis wind turbines (LE-V150 12V Extreme Turbine), including one installed on the roof of the IceCube Laboratory (ICL). This turbine is continuously logging data on voltage, current, rotation speed, and wind speed to evaluate its performance. Additional tests are being conducted with other turbines at RNO-G stations in Greenland.

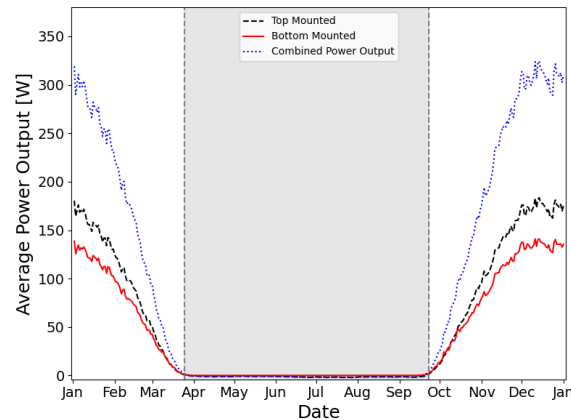
### 3. Results

We have explored one of many possible renewable energy solutions for the South Pole. In this section, we will focus primarily on the solar panel system. We investigated different panel orientations, and one of the primary designs explored was vertically oriented bifacial solar panels, allowing capture of sunlight from both sides. This design is particularly well suited for the South

133 Pole, which has a high surface albedo. Analysis of power output from this configuration showed  
 134 promising results, indicating that these vertically oriented panels can effectively harness energy  
 135 even when the Sun remains low on the horizon.



**Figure 3:** Conceptual diagrams of various proposed configurations for solar panel deployment: (a) panels positioned at the bottom of a scintillation detector to (b) panels mounted on top of a scintillation detector, and (c) a vertically oriented solar panels setup.



**Figure 4:** Expected power output from panels mounted on scintillation detector

136 However, vertical panel installations come with several logistical challenges. They require a  
 137 supporting structure that can withstand the frequent strong winds and snow accumulation at the  
 138 pole. Furthermore, the long-term survival of these thousands of panels during the dark and harsh  
 139 polar winter remains uncertain. Considering this, we explored other possible mounting solutions  
 140 for the solar panels. As shown in Figure 3, mounting solar panels on top or below a scintillation



detector or similar structure units for the surface array could be alternative options. They do not need additional infrastructure, and top-mounted solar panels can take advantage of both incoming solar irradiance and reflected irradiance from the snow surface, while bottom-mounted panels receive plenty of reflected radiation due to high South Pole albedo. As shown in Figure 4, the average power output from a single solar panel remains above 100 W from mid-November to mid-February, for both configurations. Although a configuration with horizontal panels is not as efficient as one with vertically oriented bi-facial panels, lack of additional requirements makes it logistically simpler and a compelling option for power support.

**Table 1:** Comparison of Fuel-Based vs. Solar-Based Energy Generation (Per Season)

Metric	Fuel-Based System	Solar Panel System
Fuel/Panel units used	92,000 gallons	1,000 panels
Total energy generated	1,288,000 kWh (14 kWh/gallon) [7]	492,000 kWh
Emissions	High (fossil fuel)	None (renewable)
Energy availability	All-weather, 24/7	Seasonal (summer only)
Maintenance complexity	Moderate to high	Low to moderate

#### 4. Conclusions

The integration of renewable energy for the IceCube-Gen2 operation offers a compelling opportunity to reduce both environmental impact and long-term logistic costs. One promising approach we have explored is augmenting hot water drilling with solar power, which has the potential to significantly reduce cargo needs and offer a favorable long-term cost advantage compared to traditional fuel use. The system is designed to be scalable, allowing for increased power generation by expanding the number of solar panels as needed. Vertically mounted 1,000 bifacial solar panels could provide up to 492,000 kWh of clean energy per season during the austral summer, which could reduce the reliance on diesel fuel for drilling operations. In addition to solar energy, wind energy could also be a good candidate at the South Pole and is being actively explored for the South Pole application. These renewable systems could eventually be integrated into the main IceCube computing and detector infrastructure, supporting autonomous operation, and reducing fuel logistics.

Future work will focus on optimizing the design of the array and the orientation of the panels to best utilize solar conditions and the minimum logistic requirement for the deployment of these renewable energy sources. In addition, a more comprehensive cost-benefit analysis will be performed with various hybrid renewable configurations including a solar PV system, wind turbines, and a battery storage solution.

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