

On a firm footing

Foundations | The foundations of a solar project offer multiple opportunities for driving down system costs. Arash Yazdani of PFI Engineering describes some of the key steps involved in investigating the specific conditions of a project site and developing a foundation design that will stand the test of time



Credit: PFI Engineering

The foundations of a PV power plant are quite literally that – the footing on which a project is built and, as such, a vital ingredient in its longevity and profitability, or otherwise. The foundation system provides the primary interaction between the site and its renewable energy

sources. If you are not familiar with geotechnical materials, you cannot order set soil properties; rather, your foundation must be designed to match the site's specific subsurface conditions. Optimising as the site varies could allow you, for example, to reduce the overall length or size of the foundations to save on material costs.

Foundations are an untapped source of cost savings in PV power plants

Climate considerations

Before investigating a site's soil conditions, we typically analyse the worst-case scenarios relating to a site's climate. For a solar project, three primary climate-related considerations can result in minor to severe damage: frost and wind uplift, snow accumulation on the system, gravitational loading (or the dead load) and seismic activity. Proper consideration of the loading stresses these can put on solar racking foundations can help prevent costly repairs or a complete rebuild.

For frost and wind uplift, the design principles that prevent them are largely the same. When frost or wind uplift loads increase, the two main ways to compensate are to embed the foundation deeper or increase the size of the foundation. Other measures to counteract frost uplift include the installation of a frost sleeve, which can help reduce the frost uplift to 30% and is an economical solution in a site with weak soils or where long colder winters are anticipated.

Gravitational loading is the result of the weight of the solar system and

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David Malone



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