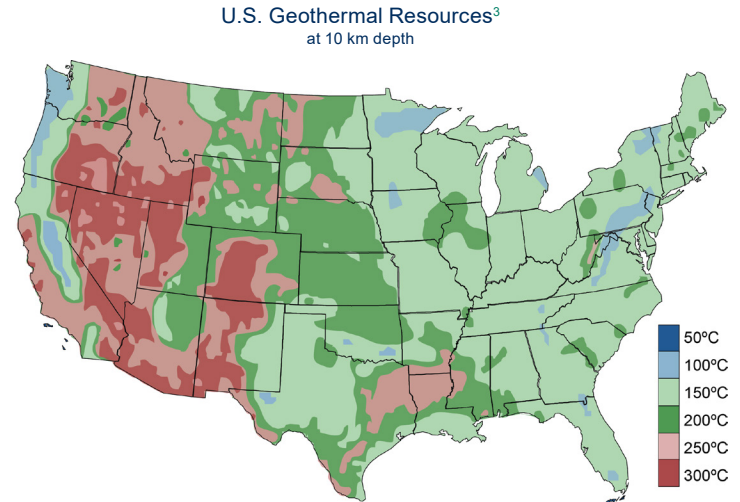


# Geothermal Energy

## Geothermal Resource and Potential

- Geothermal energy is derived from the natural heat of the earth.<sup>1</sup> It exists in both high enthalpy (volcanoes, geysers) and low enthalpy forms (heat stored in rocks in the Earth’s crust). Nearly all heating and cooling applications utilize low enthalpy heat.<sup>2</sup>
- Geothermal energy has two primary applications: heating/cooling and electricity generation.<sup>1</sup>
- Ground source heat pumps for heating and cooling use 75% less energy than traditional heating and cooling systems.<sup>4</sup>
- The U.S. has tapped less than 0.7% of geothermal electricity resources; the majority can become available with Enhanced Geothermal System technology.<sup>5</sup>
- In 2016, there were 3,812 MW of geothermal electricity plants in operation in the United States—the most of any country—and development has been growing at a rate of 2% per year.<sup>6</sup>
- Electricity generated from geothermal plants is projected to increase from 16 billion kWh in 2019 to 52.2 billion kWh in 2050.<sup>7,8</sup> In 2016, California, Nevada, Utah, and Hawaii were the states with the most installed geothermal energy capacity.<sup>6</sup>
- The U.S., Indonesia, Philippines, Turkey, New Zealand, and Mexico had 72% of global installed geothermal power capacity in 2019.<sup>9</sup>



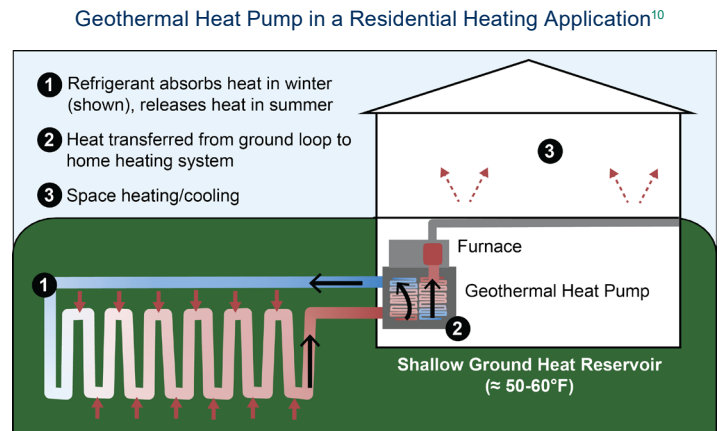
## Geothermal Technology and Impacts

### Direct Use and Heating/Cooling

- Geothermal (or ground source) heat pumps (GHPs) are the primary method for direct use of geothermal energy. GHPs use the shallow ground as an energy reservoir because it maintains a nearly constant temperature between 50-60°F (10-16°C).<sup>11</sup>
- GHPs transfer heat from a building to the ground during the cooling season, and from the ground into a building during the heating season.<sup>11</sup>
- Direct-use applications include space and district heating, greenhouses, aquaculture, and commercial and industrial processes.<sup>12</sup>

### Electricity Generation

- Geothermal energy currently accounts for 0.4% of net electricity generation in the United States.<sup>7</sup>
- The U.S. continues to generate the most geothermal electricity in the world: more than 3.5 gigawatts, mostly in Western states.<sup>13</sup>
- Hydrothermal energy, typically supplied by underground water reservoirs, is a main source of thermal energy used in electricity generation. The water is often pumped as steam to the earth’s surface to spin turbines that generate electricity.<sup>13</sup>
- Dry steam power plants use steam from a geothermal reservoir and route it directly through turbines, which drive generators to produce electricity.<sup>13</sup>
- Flash steam power plants pump hot water under high pressure into a surface tank at much lower pressure. This pressure change causes the water to rapidly “flash” into steam, which is then used to spin a turbine/generator to produce electricity. Flash steam plants are the most common type of geothermal power plants.<sup>13</sup>
- Binary cycle power plants feature geothermal water and a working fluid that are confined to separate circulating systems, or “closed loops.” A heat exchanger transfers heat from the water to the working fluid, causing it to “flash” to steam, which then powers the turbine/generator to produce electricity.<sup>13</sup>
- Enhanced Geothermal System (EGS) is a technology under development that could expand the use of geothermal resources to new geographic areas. EGS creates a subsurface fracture system to increase the permeability of rock and allow for the injection of a heat transfer fluid (typically water). Injected fluid is heated by the rock and returned to the surface to generate electricity.<sup>14</sup>
- According to the U.S. Department of Energy, there may be over 100 GW of geothermal electric capacity in the continental U.S., which would account for nearly 10% of current U.S. electricity capacity and be 40 times the current installed geothermal capacity.<sup>14</sup>



## Installation, Manufacturing, and Cost

- The main stages of geothermal power development are resource exploration, drilling, reservoir/plant development, and power generation.<sup>16</sup>
- Capital costs for conventional geothermal power plants in the U.S. are approximately \$2,500 per installed kilowatt of capacity.<sup>17</sup>
- Although the development of geothermal power requires a large capital investment, geothermal has low operating costs and a high capacity factor (ratio of actual power production to production potential).<sup>16</sup>
- Geothermal electricity costs between 7.8-22.5¢ per kilowatt-hour (kWh) in 2016. As of May 2020, geothermal plants qualified for the federal Production Tax Credit.<sup>6</sup>

## Energy Performance and Environmental Impacts

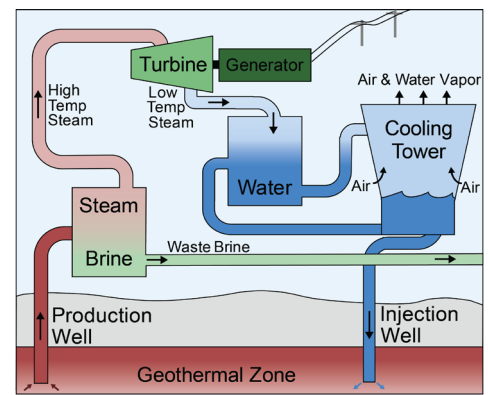
- An average U.S. coal power plant emits roughly 35 times more carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) per kWh electricity generated than a geothermal power plant.<sup>18</sup>
- Binary cycle power plants and flash power plants consume around 0.24-4.21 gallons and 1.59-2.84 gallons of water per kWh, respectively (compared to 15 gallons of water per kWh used by thermoelectric plants in 2015).<sup>19,20</sup>
- Each year, U.S. geothermal electricity offsets the emission of 4.1 million tons of CO<sub>2</sub>, 80 thousand tons of nitrogen oxides, and 110 thousand tons of particulate matter from coal-powered plants.<sup>18</sup>
- The U.S. DOE is actively funding research into combining carbon capture and storage with geothermal energy production, although the risks of long-term and high-volume geologic carbon sequestration are uncertain.<sup>21,22</sup>
- Some geothermal facilities produce solid waste that must be disposed of in approved sites, though some by-products can be recovered and recycled.<sup>23</sup>

## Solutions and Sustainable Actions

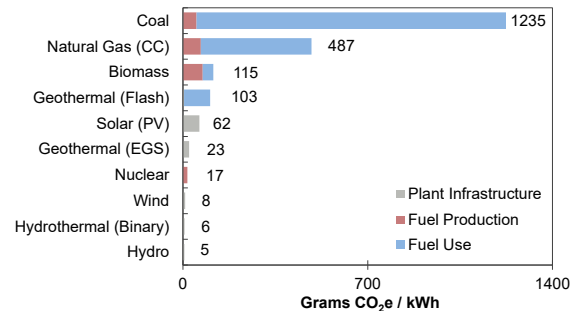
### Funding Opportunities

- There are currently 16 national laboratories and research institutions in the U.S. conducting research into geothermal energy technologies.<sup>24</sup>
- With a capacity factor of over 90%, geothermal electricity generation could offset coal, natural gas, or nuclear power as baseload supply in the electricity market.<sup>17</sup>
- Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory estimates that 45% of renewable energy growth in the U.S. can be attributed to state Renewable Portfolio Standards (RPS) that require a percentage of electricity be derived from renewable sources.<sup>25</sup>
- Renewable Energy Certificates (RECs) are sold by renewable energy producers in addition to the electricity they produce; for a few cents per kilowatt hour, consumers can purchase RECs to “offset” their usage and help renewable energy become more competitive.<sup>26</sup>
- A federal tax credit for homeowners covers 26% of qualifying ground source heat pump system costs in 2020, stepping down to 22% in 2021.<sup>27</sup>
- Around 850 utilities in the U.S. offer consumers the option to purchase renewable energy, or “green power.”<sup>28</sup>
- Many companies purchase renewable energy as part of their environmental programs. Google, Microsoft, Intel, Equinix, and Bank of America were the top five users of renewable energy as of April 2020.<sup>29</sup>

Flash Steam Geothermal Power Plant<sup>15</sup>



GHG Emissions from Power Generation<sup>30</sup> by Life Cycle Stage



Steamboat Hills Geothermal Power Plant<sup>31</sup>  
Steamboat Springs, Nevada



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31. Photo courtesy of National Renewable Energy Laboratory.