

Solar Cup encourages competition, learning



Frank Bellino / Special to The Press-Enterprise
Alesis Kosky skippers Paloma Valley High's solar-powered boat during last May's Solar Cup at Lake Skinner.

Special to The Press-Enterprise

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Nearly 700 students from 42 Southern California high schools -- including students from Riverside and San Bernardino counties -- will launch Metropolitan Water District's ninth annual Solar Cup program today, as they build hulls for the solar-powered boats they will equip and race.

The seven-month program, which began in 2002 with just eight teams and about 80 students, has become the nation's largest solar-powered boat competition.

Beginning at 8 a.m., about half of the teams will gather at Three Valleys Municipal Water District headquarters in Claremont to build identical, canoe-like hulls out of kits of pre-cut, marine-grade plywood.

The remaining teams will gather at Three Valleys on Nov. 13.

Once the hulls are completed, the teams take them back to their schools to equip them over the next seven months with motors, batteries, solar-collection panels, rudders and steering systems. Often, they add an eye-catching paint or varnish job.

The program concludes with the Solar Cup competition May 13-15 at Lake Skinner near Temecula, where the teams will compete in endurance and sprint races. The event is open to the public.

Through the years, Solar Cup has encouraged many participants to attend college and to pursue careers in engineering, science, environmental issues and communication.

"Solar Cup is one of the most successful education programs of Metropolitan, its member agencies and local water agencies," said Metropolitan General Manager Jeffrey Kightlinger.

"It gives Southland high school students hands-on lessons in engineering, math, science, renewable resources and environmental education and communication, and informs them and their families about the sources of California's drinking water and the continuing need for conservation."

As part of the education program, Metropolitan provides the hull kits and tool boxes and sponsors technical workshops for the teams and their teachers or advisers.

Metropolitan's member public water agencies and, in some cases, local water retailers, sponsor the teams to help equip their boats.

The 2011 Solar Cup program includes 12 first-time teams. Another 30 returning teams must build new hulls but may re-use parts from previous years.

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