

# 'Big Solar' Struggles To Find Home In California

by Andrea Kissack

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Morning Edition, NPR

Credit: Craig Miller, Andrea Kissack, KQED; Michelle Korpos, Solargen Energy

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*Second of five stories on renewable energy in California*

California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has set an ambitious plan that requires a third of the state's electricity to come from renewable sources by 2020. But a fight over where to build large clean-energy projects is slowing the green revolution.



Credit: Alyson Hurt, NPR

One of these battlegrounds is Panoche Valley, ringed by rolling, scrub-covered hills. Located in California's rural San Benito County, the area was used mostly for cattle grazing, and it has escaped the notice of many Californians. Until now.

Michael Peterson, CEO of Solargen Energy, was drawn to this slice of Central Valley ranchland because it gets almost as much sun as the scorching Mojave Desert. This valley seemed less controversial than the Mojave, which has become a nightmare for many solar entrepreneurs because of its protected national monuments and desert tortoises. For Peterson, the Panoche Valley seems perfect for large solar projects.

"When we had an engineer come who'd built a lot of different solar [projects] around [the region], we took him down to the property. And his comment was, 'Wow. God made this to be a solar farm,' " Peterson says, laughing.

Peterson wants to build one of the nation's biggest solar facilities of its kind. It would power about 120,000 homes. Another benefit of the project: Huge transmission lines already run right through Panoche Valley, making it unnecessary to build costly new power lines.

"It's key. It's everything," he says. "If you don't have it, the land is only as good as the ability to connect to the power."

### **More In The Series**

NPR and member station KQED are exploring California's ambitious plans to generate one-third of its electricity from renewable sources by 2020.



### **Part 1: Calif. Leads In Clean Energy, But Challenges Loom**

The state set high goals for renewable energy, but economic and political issues may get in the way.



### **National Renewable Energy Goals And Progress Facing Environmental Critics**

So far, five cattle ranchers have agreed to sell their land to Peterson's company, but not everyone thinks Solargen's plan is such a green idea.

"They would like to build an industrial project that extends the entire length of the valley," says Kim Williams, who moved to the Panoche Valley about four years ago to run an organic egg business called Your Family Farm. "Once you take the vegetation off the soil, the high winds are just going to be whipping up the topsoil and creating dust."

Williams is among several critics, including local chapters of the Audubon Society, that say the project would ruin the character of the valley and harm wildlife. Hints of lawsuits and requests to extend the environmental review process by some of these critics have slowed down Solargen's application.

It turns out this valley floor is teeming with creatures — some of them, like the blunt-nosed leopard lizard, are endangered. Solargen's investors have spent more than \$7 million gathering information for a required environmental impact report. They have hired more than 20 biologists to conduct wildlife surveys.

## **See The Panoche Valley**

Mike Westphal, an ecologist for the Bureau of Land Management, gives a brief overview of the Panoche Valley site and proposed plans for a solar farm.

Solargen has offered to buy another 11,000 acres adjacent to the proposed solar array. The idea is that animals, threatened by the project, could relocate to this land. But critics like Williams don't buy that argument.

"It would be impossible to ask the animals living on the floor to just move," Williams says.

## **Time Running Out**

Similar debates over land use are playing out across California, and that has created a juggernaut of big solar and wind proposals — more than 200 are waiting approval. Michael Picker, the governor's renewable energy adviser, is trying to hurry the process in order to obtain billions of dollars in subsidies.

"Everybody wanted to step up the pace in order to capture these federal stimulus dollars and to leverage the private investment from banks and from other kinds of investment," he says.

But time is running out — to qualify, projects must break ground before the end of this year.

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Heard on Morning Edition

August 17, 2010 LINDA WERTHEIMER, host:

It's MORNING EDITION from NPR News. I'm Linda Wertheimer.

STEVE INSKEEP, host:

And I'm Steve Inskeep. Good morning.

Environmentalists do not agree on whether a solar energy project will do more harm than good. The gigantic project is part of California's plan to get one-third of its

electricity from renewable sources. Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger wants that to happen by the year 2020.

But those massive solar panels have to be put somewhere. And that's the question we'll examine as we continue our series with our member station KQED on California's clean energy. Here's reporter Andrea Kissack.

ANDREA KISSACK: The Panoche Valley, in California's rural San Benito County is ringed by rolling, scrub covered hills. The area, used mostly for cattle grazing, has escaped the notice of many Californians, until now.

Mr. MICHAEL PETERSON (CEO, Solargen Energy): Im Michael Peterson, and I am the CEO of Solargen Energy.

KISSACK: Mike Peterson was drawn to this slice of Central Valley ranchland, because it gets almost as much sun as the scorching Mojave Desert. ♦ This valley seems less controversial than the Mojave. That desert has become a nightmare for many solar entrepreneurs because of its protected national monuments and desert tortoises. For Peterson, the Panoche Valley seems perfect for big solar.

Mr. PETERSON: When we had an engineer come, whod built a lot of different solar around - ♦ he came, we took him down to the property. And his comment was, Wow. God made this to be a solar farm.

KISSACK: Peterson wants to build one of the nation's biggest solar facilities of its kind. ♦ It would power about 120,000 homes. ♦ Another benefit of the project, huge transmission lines already run right through the valley making it unnecessary to build costly new power lines. ♦

Mr. PETERSON: Its key, its everything. If you dont have it, the land is only as good as the ability to connect to the power.

KISSACK: Five cattle ranchers have agreed to sell their land to Peterson's company. But not everyone thinks Solargens plan is such a green idea. ♦

Ms. KIM WILLIAMS (Your Family Farm): They would like to build an industrial project that would extend the entire length of the valley.

KISSACK: Kim Williams moved to the Panoche Valley about four years ago to run an organic egg business called Your Family Farm. ♦

Ms. WILLIAMS: Once you take the vegetation off the soil, the high winds that regularly come through there are just going to be whipping up the top soil and creating dust.

KISSACK: Williams is among several critics, including local chapters of the Audubon Society, that say the project would ruin the character of the valley and harm wildlife. Hints of lawsuits and requests to extend the environmental review process by some of these critics, has slowed down Solargens application. ♦

It turns out this valley floor is teeming with creatures, some of them endangered, like the blunt-nosed leopard lizard. Solargen's investors have spent over \$7 million gathering information for a required environmental impact report. They have hired more than twenty biologists to conduct wildlife surveys.

Ms MICHELLE KORPOS (Biologist, Solargen Energy): Im thinking three teams. So a team starts in back at the foothill down here.

KISSACK: Today, ♦in high winds, Michelle Korpos leads a team of wildlife biologists through a barbed wire fence out to the project site.

Ms. KORPOS: We found evidence of kit fox, badger, breeding burrowing owls.

KISSACK: Solargen has offered to buy another 11,000 acres adjacent to the proposed solar array. The idea is that animals, threatened by the project, could relocate to this land. But critics like chicken farmer Kim Williams dont buy that argument.

Ms. WILLIAMS: ♦It would be impossible to ask the animals that are living here on the valley floor to just move.

KISSACK: Similar debates over land use are playing out across California, and that has created a juggernaut of big solar and wind proposals more than 200 are waiting approval. Michael Picker, the governors renewable energy advisor is trying to hurry the process in order to obtain billions of dollars in subsidies.

Mr. MICHAEL PICKER (Advisor, Renewable energy, Governor Schwarzenegger): ♦  
Because everybody wanted to step up the pace in order to capture these federal stimulus dollars and to leverage the private investment from banks and from other kinds of investment.

KISSACK: But time is running out. ♦To qualify, projects must break ground before the end of this year.

For NPR News, I'm Andrea Kissack.

INSKEEP: And you can learn more about California's renewable energy plans and see a slideshow of photos of the Panoche Valley at our website, [npr.org/science](http://npr.org/science).

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