

320-acre solar farm receives Imperial County Planning Commission approval

Elizabeth Varin, Imperial Valley Press, 8-26-10

Enough energy to power 14,000 homes may soon be coming out of the Niland area.

Lines of silver and dark blue panels will fill about 50 fields northwest of the township, utilizing 320 acres of unproductive farmland, said Tom Buttgenbach, president of 8minutenergy Renewable, the company that received unanimous approval by the Imperial County Planning Commission for the solar farm Wednesday.

“It’s been not very successful agriculture land,” he said. “We feel it would be an ideal area for photovoltaic solar panels.”

Photovoltaic is the conversion of light into electricity at the atomic level.

The Chocolate Mountain Solar Farm may start producing energy in 2012 or 2013, Buttgenbach said. The company is still discussing upgrades needed to start generating power for the Imperial Irrigation District’s energy grid.

Within the next 60 to 90 days the group should know more of what is needed to upgrade the system, he said. From there it will go before the IID Board of Directors for approval.

The Chocolate Mountain Solar Farm is one of a few projects the company is setting up in Imperial County, Buttgenbach said. The next solar project will be in Calipatria, and others are in the works southwest of El Centro.

“It’s a very efficient, very clean way of producing energy,” he said.

Discussions at Wednesday’s Planning Commission meeting centered on a fee for agriculture land conservation as well as on dust mitigation.

The current dust mitigation plan has a cover crop to keep dust down, said county Planner Richard Cabanilla. A change was made to the conditional use permit to reflect the possibility of saltgrass not growing on the land.

Other options have to be approved by the Air Pollution Control District, he said.

The other issue the company brought up was an agricultural in-lieu mitigation fee, which was up to 30 percent of the fair market value per acre of land.

The money goes to agriculture conservation and education, said Planning Director Jurg Heuberger as he and the company negotiated a percentage at the meeting. The company requested a 10 percent fee, and Heuberger “split the difference,” putting it at 20 percent, which was approved 9-0 by the commission.