

Controversy over San Benito County solar farm proposal heats up

Kera Abraham, Monterey County Weekly, 8-26-10

Controversy over a proposed large-scale solar farm southeast of Hollister is reaching the boiling point.

The 420-megawatt Solargen project would plunk up to 4 million pole-mounted photovoltaic panels on almost 5,000 acres in San Benito County's rural Panoche Valley. But the community's small-scale farmers want the land preserved for agricultural use, while environmentalists worry about impacts to threatened species.

Those critical voices are even louder now, during the public comment period on the project's draft environmental report. At a crowded meeting before the county's Planning Commission in July, 30 of 32 speakers opposed the project, according to *The Hollister Free Lance*.

The DEIR identifies 86 environmental impacts, eight of them – including habitat loss for the blunt-nosed leopard lizard, giant kangaroo rat and San Joaquin kit fox – considered significant and unavoidable. A preferred alternative would mitigate the biological impacts but reduce the project to less than 1,000 acres and 120 megawatts. Another option: Move the project to the alternative “Westlands” site, considered a lower-quality habitat between King and Fresno counties.

Solargen CEO Mike Peterson says he disagrees with some of the DEIR's findings, but declines to elaborate. While he's open to project revisions setting aside more land for protection, he's not keen on the Westlands alternative: “The land doesn't have power lines to it. There are a lot of obstacles.”

The strong public opposition expressed so far doesn't surprise him. “The comments and the scoping meetings are primarily for people to voice their concerns,” he says. “The process is going as it should.”

The San Benito County Board of Supervisors is expected to consider the DEIR in October.

But first, a county committee will make a recommendation about whether to cancel the project site's contracts under the Williamson Act, which provides tax breaks for farmland conservation.

The Williamson Act cancellations would probably be necessary for the project to move forward, although Peterson maintains the solar farm – which incorporates sheep-grazing under the panels – could be considered compatible with agricultural uses. The committee is scheduled to take up the issue Sept. 2.

“There seem to be a lot of things in our favor, but we don't want to get too confident,” says Kim Williams, a small-scale farmer with the opposition group Save Panoche Valley. “We're on hold to see what's going to play out.”