

Carrizo solar projects are environmentally sound

The passive generating plants SunPower and First Solar have proposed could power at least 250,000 homes for more than two decades

Dawn Ortiz-Legg, San Luis Obispo New Times, 12-16-10

Ortiz-Legg is a 19-year resident of SLO County who earned a master's degree in public policy from the Johns Hopkins Paul H. Nitze School for Advanced International Studies. She's a paid consultant of First Solar.

California voters made clear they care about improving air quality and combating climate change by defeating Proposition 23. San Luis Obispo County has a historic opportunity to act on this mandate, with two large-scale solar power plants proposed for the Carrizo Plain. The significance of these projects calls for a response to the commentary by Patrick Veasart in the Nov. 4 edition of *New Times* ("Carrizo solar plants would harm California"), which contained multiple misstatements that require clarification.

SunPower's California Valley Ranch and First Solar's Topaz Farm will be sited on previously disturbed cropland. This is not camping land. It is not public land. It is private land that has been farmed and grazed for decades.

The area for both projects involves 5,500 acres dedicated to solar arrays; the remainder will be managed open space. The total amount of land equates to less than 3 percent of the 207,000 acres of the National Monument, which are miles away from the border of either project.

Veiasart presumes that any change in the habitat will harm the endangered species still managing to survive in the Carrizo area. That notion is an easy trap to fall into, but it reduces our thinking and activism to negative passivity instead of challenging us to imagine renewable energy projects that can actually improve and protect habitats. Indeed, ending or limiting destructive agricultural practices in the Carrizo area, which would be a benefit from building the solar projects, would be the best way to increase the populations of the endangered species still facing monster tractors and chisel plows.

The reseeded of native perennial grasses could enhance the habitat and boost the populations of sensitive plants and animals. These grasses are also excellent carbon sequestrers.

Only through government farm subsidies and crop insurance is farming in the Carrizo possible. This cropland does not have access to irrigation or sufficient rainfall. Consider this: One acre in the Carrizo currently produces, on average, 300 to 400 pounds of grain versus 8,000 pounds of grain per acre in the San Joaquin Valley. If the solar projects are denied, farming families would most likely look to other development alternatives for their financial survival.

If the projects are approved, ag land will be reclassified as "industrial," a term conjuring up images of churning stacks spewing black substances. How about "passive industrial" as a more appropriate term, offered by sustainability expert Ken Haggard? These are ways planners can begin to effectively address our 21st century climate problems.

If the projects are completed, panel arrays will generate 800 megawatts of electricity, enough to power more than 250,000 homes for at least two decades. As occurred with the Arco plant of the 1980s, nature will take over when the arrays are removed.

Veesart proffers the frequently voiced dream of large-scale solar facilities on the Westlands Water District before us. But, contrary to his assertion, there is nothing in either solar project's draft EIR that pronounces a project at Westlands "viable." And, regardless of environmental suitabilities, there are many known political and technical problems with Westlands.

Veesart's vision for a green future involves only rooftop solar panels, efficiency, and conservation. The draft EIRs for both projects address these alternatives. They use the language of distributed solar photovoltaics, demand-side management, and conservation. Both draft EIRs conclude that, however laudable, not one or all of these alternatives together can replace the projects and still meet the state's renewable energy goals. Haley Goodson, staff attorney at The Utility Reform Network (TURN), recently stated, "TURN organizationally believes a combination of large scale and distributive can meet our energy goals. We haven't seen any data that demonstrates that rooftop solar can get us to where we need in an affordable manner."

Veesart commented the project "is being touted as a project that would reduce GHGs ... but in fact would increase GHGs (DEIR page C.5-8)." He's either naive or disingenuous. He should know putting solar panels on a rooftop also generates greenhouse gases (GHGs) during construction. Similarly, constructing large-scale solar arrays requires energy, which produces GHG emissions.

Looking at the part of the draft EIR Veesart cited, Section C5 on "Climate Change/Greenhouse Gas," one finds the county estimates the SunPower project will produce about 50 times more GHG-free electricity than the GHGs needed to build and run the facility. This estimate is similar to a more thorough analysis First Solar commissioned on GHG expenditures and savings for the Topaz project. That analysis shows Topaz would produce electricity 50 times more efficiently than a coal-burning plant and 20 times more efficiently than a plant fired by natural gas. These are the sorts of levers we need to start retiring the oldest and dirtiest fossil energy plants now supplying us electricity.

Readers who want to help our county move forward on renewable energy projects can get involved by visiting sloplanning.org and clicking on the links for the two projects.