

Tulare County OKs first 6 solar farms

David Castellon, Visalia Times-Delta, 12-2-10

Tulare County Supervisors have approved some agreements to build solar farms on farmland in the south county.

Five would be built on land owned jointly by the Alpaugh and Atwell Island irrigation districts, while the sixth would be on 180 acres of privately owned ranch land, all in the Alpaugh area.

Solar Projects Solutions, LLC, of La Mirada is developing the projects to install rows of solar panels on a combined 1,202 acres.

Five of those facilities would each generate about 20 megawatts of power a year, while the largest solar farm — covering 390.5 acres — would generate 50 megawatts.

The five other solar farms would range in size from 160 to 172 acres.

Development agreements for the six projects were approved Tuesday during the weekly board meeting after the county Planning Commission approved special-use permits for the solar projects in September. That month, the board set criteria for permitting solar and wind farms on farmland in the unincorporated county.

Land restoration

As part of the agreement, the board accepted SPS's reclamation plan and financial guarantee to remove the solar panels and other equipment and restore the land for farming once the lease ends in 35 years.

County Resource Management Agency Director Jack Raper urged the supervisors to approve the majority of the agreement Tuesday and allow his office and SPS to continue negotiating on a fee that would be paid to the county based on the amount of electricity generated at each site.

Moira Geraghty, chief executive officer for SPS, told the supervisors the sticking point was the county wanted a \$200 fee for every 10 megawatts generated annually on the irrigation districts' land, while her company offered to pay \$100.

Since late last year, Tulare County has received several applications to build solar farms on farmland. Private companies funding the projects would sell the energy they produce to major energy providers.

None of the planned solar farm sites are prime farmland.