

# Several Tulare County farms could become solar, wind energy producers

**David Castellon, Visalia-Times Delta, 7-6-20**

Erika Carette is ready to make a change on her 40-acre farm southeast of Visalia.

Nearly half of her farm is covered with lush, green walnut trees while the other half is mostly barren, overgrown with brush and dead trees.

She can afford neither to clear the land nor plant a new crop.

What she might do is allow her land to become a solar farm.

Charette's property is one of more than a dozen in Tulare County where renewable-energy developers want to establish rows of solar panels to collect sunlight and generate electricity. Charette's parcel, even when combined with others next door under a lease agreement, would be among the smallest of the proposed solar farms.

The average size of the 11 properties for which special-use permits have been sought: 160 acres. The largest site, northeast of Alpaugh, would be more than 390 acres.

Permit applications have been coming in since November, said John Heiser, a planner with the Tulare County Resource Management Agency.

By the end of the year state's three largest utility companies, Southern California Edison, Pacific Gas and Electric and San Diego Gas and Electric must produce 20 percent of their power from renewable energy sources, said Andrew Kotch, a spokesman for the California Public Utilities Commission. In November 2008, the governor signed an executive order setting a goal of 33 percent by 2020.

Such goals — plus the availability of federal stimulus dollars — have triggered a race to develop solar- and wind-generated "green" energy.

Technological improvements have made solar farms less costly to develop than in years past, said Douglas Carter, chief executive office of Colorado-based SolarGen USA, LLC, one of four developers that have filed for Tulare County special use permits to build solar farms. SolarGen and other private companies would sell their power to the utilities.

Such contracts are being signed "an unprecedented rate," according to a January state PUC report. Investor-owned utilities requested state approval of more than 50 contracts in 2009, twice the number from the previous year, the report said.

Carter said he's filed for permits on three Tulare County projects but for two others, the one on Charette's land and another on 160 acres of farmland near Ducor. It's not clear how many solar projects are being developed by other companies.

Most of the proposed solar-farm developments are in the Ducor, Alpaugh, Terra Bella and Allensworth areas in southern Tulare County. All are on non-prime farmland that's difficult to irrigate — the kind of property the county is steering developers toward, Heiser said.

On June 8 the Tulare County Board of Supervisors changed zoning definitions for public and private "utilities structures" to include solar- and wind farms, but the board must vote on whether such projects could be built in prime farmland. Special-use permit applications have been put on hold while supervisors await a recommendation from the county's Agriculture Advisory Council, which is expected to weigh in next month.

Supervisor Phil Cox said most council members favor allowing solar farms, but not on prime farmland.

"I'd hate to see good, productive land taken out of production to put a solar farm in," he said.

Marilyn Kinoshita, Tulare County's agricultural commissioner/sealer, said in an interview earlier this month that she's also concerned that solar farms might take good farmland out of service. A 160-acre solar farm could house about 100,000 solar panels — each about 3-by-4 feet — on concrete bases and metal platforms 4-6 feet tall, Carter said.

"And that's almost scary, because that covers up good farmland — and they're getting 30-year leases," Kinoshita said. "What are the guarantees these companies will be here in 20 years to remove those panels and concrete bases?"

That shouldn't be a concern, Carter told members of the Tulare County Farm Bureau Thursday. Solar developers are bonded, he said, so funds will be held to remove the equipment after the leases expire — unless the solar developers and landowners decide to extend them.

"It's not like paving [farmland] over and building houses on it and," he said. "We preserve the integrity of the farmland."

Charette said that when her 30-year lease is up, her sons will have cleared, level farmland on which to plant a new crop if they like.

Until then, supporters say, farmland owners will earn much-needed extra income.

"[I] don't have a problem in the world with solar farms," Craig Knudson, a Badger farmer and former county Tulare County Farm Bureau president, said at Thursday's meeting.

Neither does Rob Roberts, a farmer northeast of Visalia. He has a lease agreement with a solar developer to use 65 of his 177 acres.

He just hopes county officials will allow the agreement to stand.

"I'm sure their definition of prime land is different from mine," he said.