

RRG, SunPower woo community

Cathy Perfect, Lake Isabella Kern Valley Sun, 6-1-10

Renewable Resources Group co-founder Ari Swiller and Renee Robin, of SunPower Corp., entered the belly of the beast to unveil their plans for the Weldon Solar Ranch. More than 100 people, primarily South Fork residents, filled the South Fork Middle School gym for the May 19 meeting.

Swiller spoke briefly of acquiring the 68,000-acre Onyx Ranch from the Rudnick Trust in 2008. “That was an interesting process,” Swiller noted. “Since that time, we’ve been bringing ag and grazing back into production on the property,” Swiller said. “We’ve spent a lot of energy and resources trying to get the ranch back to what is was a couple of decades ago,” he said. “Some of the areas required more water, including the drainage systems and ditches.

“We’ve also worked with some of our neighbors to improve the farming that’s going on, and we have some new grazing projects going on with some of our neighbors, as well,” Swiller said.

“We’ve heard from some in the community that our original proposal of a 500-acre project is just too big. So we’ve reduced the size of the project to 300 acres, (300 acres be will within the original 500 acres) to provide setbacks and more buffer zones against highway and neighbors

Greening Up the Grid

In 2008, Governor Schwarzenegger issued an Executive Order requiring 33 percent of the state’s energy be renewables by 2020. Today, about 13.5 percent of California’s power is renewable, according to the California Energy Commission. “Currently, oil consumption is more than double what’s contained in newly discovered fields,” said Swiller.

“Our goal is to reduce the state’s dependence on fossil fuels and foreign oil. Fossil fuels are responsible for 99 percent of CO2 in the United States, and they are finite. They will run out,” said Swiller. “The Weldon Solar Ranch will use photovoltaic (PV) panels, the same technology commonly seen on homes and schools. This will avoid 150 million pounds of CO2 yearly,” said Swiller. “This is equal to planting 15,000 trees or taking 12,000 cars off the road.”

RRG’s partner, SunPower Corporation, an industry leader that designs and manufactures high-efficiency crystalline silicon photovoltaic cells, roof tiles and solar panels based on a silicon all-back-contact solar cell invented at Stanford University. SunPower solar can produce up to 50 percent more power than other solar systems, according to the company website. Additionally, solar power is proven, clean, quiet, safe, pollution-free and does not generate heat.

Three questions came up repeatedly: Why place the project in the middle of pristine farmland? Where is all this electricity going, anyway? You’re going to sell the water and turn us into the Owens Valley, aren’t you?

Location

Swiller read a laundry list of areas that, on the surface, appear ideal, but are not available for solar development. “Those include species-protected areas, BLM conservation land, state and national parks,” he said.

Why Onyx Ranch? “It’s private property. It’s flat. And most important is access to transmission, the source runs

right along Hwy 178, and eliminates the need to build new transmission. We can tap right into that line.” Swiller said.

Where is all this electricity going, anyway?

“The energy generated by the project is fed into the state’s power grid and is used where there is the greatest demand,” Swiller explained. “Currently that is Los Angeles and San Francisco, but you import electricity, too, when the demand is high.”

You’re going to suck the water out of the valley and sell it, aren’t you?

“We have no anticipation of selling the water,” said Swiller. Dave Derr, of Kernville, countered that he was certain the developers were determined to suck the valley dry and turn the Kern River Valley into the Owens Valley.

“I think it could be a net gain for the valley,” said Kern River Watermaster Chuck Williams. They’ll probably be using less water than they do now.

“It isn’t a confusing issue. The water is pumped to irrigate the vegetation and returns to the groundwater of runs into Isabella Lake,” he said. “We’re watching the project. Now, if they pumped a bunch of water and piped over Walker Pass to connect with the aqueduct, that would get my attention. But that’s not like to happen.”

As Wednesday’s plotted along, some in the audience expressed their frustrations and fears with hostile questions and rude accusations. This resulted in some, like Kathleen Creighton Fuchs of Weldon, to get up and leave.

“The KRV doesn’t countenance shouting and rudeness,” she said. “We’re angry, but we don’t have to be rude.”

As he left the building, Mike Zagon, of Weldon, said, “I think a lot people came here tonight with their minds already made up. We have to keep an open mind and listen to what they are saying.”

Debi Creighton, also of Weldon, said, “I was impressed with the professionalism and restraint shown by Sun Power and RRG. I feel they are trying to hear the concerns of the valley. Some of the behavior I saw was totally inappropriate.

“I am grateful for the opportunity to have a dialogue with the company. They were professional and open to dialogue; they were never heavy-handed in their dealings with us,” she said.

“We have to think about the future, and solar power is here, Creighton said. “But in reality, my heart breaks whenever prime agricultural land is taken up with other projects.”

The public meeting in Lake Isabella the next evening was a basic repeat of the May 19 meeting; however, the crowd, numbering about 50, ratcheted up the “rudeness factor” a notch or two. Raised voices declaring, “We don’t like you here.

SunPower recently announced it plans to compete with retail electric rates by reducing system cost by 50 percent by 2012, according to their website.