

Sensible solar

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California will never reach its clean energy goals if state regulators throw needless roadblocks in the path of progress. Demanding that a proposed solar power plant replace abandoned farmland sets bizarre policy. The California Energy Commission needs to drop that senseless requirement.

Abengoa Solar Inc. wants to build a 250-megawatt solar power plant on more than 1,700 acres in the San Bernardino County desert west of Barstow. A megawatt is roughly enough energy to power 1,000 homes. The company says its \$1.2 billion project would also create 1,200 construction jobs and about 80 permanent positions. The solar project is next scheduled for a hearing in June.

But the site sits on land used to grow alfalfa since the 1920s, though the ground now sits fallow. The energy commission staff report says state farm preservation policies require Abengoa to replace that agricultural land. So the document proposes that the company pay a land conservancy to acquire 1,588 acres of farmland, and the water rights to irrigate it, elsewhere in California.

Asking an energy developer to preserve cropland that farmers no longer use defies common sense, however. No one has farmed the acreage in question for a decade or more, which hardly suggests a vital agricultural asset for the state. Only 128 acres of the land is still irrigated, and the company is willing to replace that property.

The commission's approach obstructs a solution to one of the prime environmental dilemmas with desert energy projects. The desert, with its consistent, sunny weather, is an ideal place for solar energy. Yet the area is also home to numerous endangered species. Using already disturbed land for power plants eases the environmental consequences of those projects.

Yet Abengoa says the cost of replacing the 1,588 acres of old farmland would run to more than \$11 million -- several times the cost of buying the same amount of wildlife habitat. State policy should be steering renewable energy developers toward building on previously used land. California should not be providing economic incentives to site projects on sensitive habitat.

The commission report relied on guidelines used by the state Department of Conservation, which oversees farmland preservation. After reviewing the report, however, the conservation agency recommends that the panel require Abengoa to replace the 128 acres now being irrigated.

The energy commission should agree. A lengthy, complex and heavily bureaucratic permitting process is a central reason the state is unlikely to reach its goal of getting 20 percent of its power from renewable energy this year. Nor will the state meet Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's call for 33 percent clean power by 2020 without streamlining power plant approval.

That task will be tough, certainly, but here is a good place for energy regulators to start: Do not put ridiculous farmland requirements on clean power projects.