

Large Solar Farms Concern Farm Bureau

Rick Elkins, Visalia Valley Voice, 5-20-10

With the number of solar farm permits in Tulare County growing, the Tulare County Farm Bureau has weighed in with concerns that the growth of that new industry could harm the ag industry.

Tulare County Planner John Heiser confirmed that the number of permits pending is up to more than 10, with more interest shown every day in developing large solar farms on the western and southern ends of the county.

“This dragon has about 19 heads,” said Patricia Stever, executive director of the Tulare County Farm Bureau. She said the Farm Bureau has many concerns with taking out hundreds of acres of farm land, especially if that land is presently under the Williamson Act ag land protection program.

“We are not in favor of permits being granted on land under Williamson Act,” Stever said, pointing out the state Department of Conservation has gone on record opposing solar farms on land in the ag preserve program. She said the Farm Bureau and the Department of Conservation have both said that where solar farms are placed, the land must be removed from Williamson Act protection.

Williamson Act is designed to preserve farm land and farmers who place their land in Williamson Act get a reduction in their property tax. Stever said it is a sometimes confusing formula, but that land can be taxed at a 25 to 75 percent reduction based on what the land is being used for. The land is assessed annually.

The issue is under review by both the Farm Bureau and the Tulare County Agriculture Advisory Committee.

Heiser said there are now 11 applications for solar farms being processed by the county planning department, but none are nearly ready to go to the county planning commission. Each is being processed as a Conditional Use Permit that will require environmental review and Heiser said much work still needs to be done before the planning body will get the first application.

“We're still working on policy issues,” Heiser said, admitting that one of the key issues is the compatibility of large solar farms in ag zones.

The applications range from 20-megawatt to 40 megawatt solar farms that would each take from 150 to 500 acres of land. A megawatt is 1 million watts and can power 1,000 homes for one hour. But, Heiser said, there has been talk of even larger farms.

Solar energy projects are attractive because of state mandates to increase renewable energy generation for state power users to 33 percent by 2030 and federal dollars that are available to companies.

“If there's federal dollars, there's a lot of interest,” said Heiser.

Most applications are for the Alpaugh and Allensworth areas near the large transmission lines that run along the west side of the county. Some are in the Ducor area, again near large transmission lines. It is key, said Heiser, for the solar farms to be located near the transmission lines.

The Farm Bureau has made it very clear it opposes solar farms on prime ag land, and Heiser said the county also is trying to steer them to marginal ag land or land that is not in production at all. He said not all of the

applications are for land in Williamson Act.

Tulare County is the No. 2 ag county in the world, second only to Fresno County. The value of ag commodities in 2008 was more than \$5 billion in Tulare County.

Kings County recently approved two solar farms on the same piece of land, a 19-megawatt and a 20-megawatt facility west of Avenal. That 420 acre project was approved on Williamson Act land and Kings County did not require the Williamson Act contract on that land be canceled.

Stever said the applications the Farm Bureau has been asked to review range from 100 to several hundred acres. “We're seeing 80-90 percent of the land being displaced (from farming),” she said. That is unlike the Kings County project that reportedly will use only 60 acres of the 420 acres for the solar project.

Stever said the Farm Bureau is not opposed to smaller, private solar facilities, such as one that is designed to power a dairy or a winery. “Those pose no threat to us,” she said.

“Then you have large for-profit companies looking up and down the Valley trying to secure 20-30 year leases on 300 to 600 acres,” she said. Heiser said the CUP would be good for the life of the lease if approved.

Stever called it a potential “slippery slope” in that it could mean the removal of farm land forever. “They're going to be pouring concrete foundations that will be there 20-30 years. We don't know if the land will be rehabilitated and ag land reclaimed,” she said.

In a letter to the county ag advisory committee, Stever pointed out that Farm Bureau sees the issue as being “significant” and “not one with an easy answer.”

She explained the rules for ag land define “electrical use” as a compatible use in ag areas, but she said it is not clear if that includes electric generation facilities, such as solar farms.

She also said the state may soon weigh in on the issue and that the state may make renewable energy projects such as solar exempt from zoning rules in ag areas.

In a letter from Christian Scheuring, managing counsel for the Farm Bureau, on three specific applications, he points out the projects “would compromise, displace or impair long-term productive agricultural capability or operations on 69, 81 or 93 percent of the respective parcels.”

He said because of that, the Farm Bureau believes the Williamson Act requires denial of the applications.