

Lauded solar plan in San Bernardino County hits a snag

David Danelski, Riverside Press-Enterprise, 5-6-10

A 1,700-acre solar power development planned on former alfalfa fields west of Barstow is considered ideal by environmentalists and San Bernardino County officials because it would create jobs and provide clean power without destroying pristine wildlife habitat.

But Abengoa Solar Inc. faces a big hurdle: The California Energy Commission staff has recommended that the company acquire and protect 1,588 acres of farmland elsewhere in California, along with water rights so it can be irrigated.

The requirement is in keeping with the state's farm-preservation policies, which aim to protect farming and food supplies as agricultural land is lost to development.

Supporters of the solar project say the policies make no sense in areas already abandoned by farmers.

Abengoa's project manager, Scott Frier, said he was shocked by the recommendation, though he did not say it would kill the company's plans for vast rows of mirrors and a generating system that would produce enough electricity for more than 90,000 homes. The company is asking the state to reconsider, he said.

San Bernardino County Supervisor Brad Mitzelfelt said he may push for new county zoning policies that would qualify abandoned farms for renewable-energy development, so that companies wouldn't have to replace the land.

Using former desert farms to meet California alternative-energy needs has many pluses, county officials and environmentalists say.

Renewable-energy development pumps economic life into land that has been vacant for years, if not decades, mostly because of scarce water, said Mitzelfelt, whose district includes the solar property. Abengoa's \$1.2 billion investment could bring needed jobs to residents of the Victorville and Barstow areas, he said.

The company estimates its Mojave project would create 1,200 construction jobs and 80 permanent positions.

"This is exactly the kind of project I want to see more of," Mitzelfelt said.

It also avoids destruction of undisturbed public land inhabited by desert tortoises, which are threatened with extinction, and other wildlife.

"We already have more desert farmland than we have water for," said Elden Hughes, a Sierra Club member who has fought for decades to preserve unspoiled desert land.

Frier said the company now irrigates 128 of its 1,765 acres near Harper Lake. The rest hasn't been farmed for 10 to 20 years, he said.

Frier said acquiring 1,588 acres of farmland would cost the company more than \$11 million -- several times the cost of buying the same amount of wildlife habitat. Renewable-energy developers who build on public land are required to protect habitat elsewhere. Abengoa also would have to pay for water rights at a cost yet to be determined.

"The state's farm policy (is) misplaced," he said.

Hughes said the replacement requirement for abandoned farm land is a disincentive for developers. "It forces the use of pristine land, which is an absurdity," he said.

Saving farmland

Craig Hoffman, an energy commission project manager, said state officials are evaluating a proposal from Abengoa to replace only the 128 acres currently farmed at the company's site.

The state's original recommendation was based on several factors, he said. Asked in its application how the land would be used if the solar project wasn't approved, the company indicated that it would be farmed, Hoffman said by telephone.

The state analysis also found that the land has enough groundwater and sufficient soil quality to support farming and that the area has a long agricultural history, Hoffman said.

Charles Tyson, manager of California Farmland Conservancy Program, said the state had been trying since the 1960s to preserve agricultural jobs and secure food sources as farmland has been developed for homes and businesses.

From 1982 to 2006, California lost more than 1.2 million acres of farms to urban uses, Tyson said. From 2004 to 2006, Riverside and San Bernardino counties lost 23,268 and 9,419 acres, respectively, he said.

Carrie Hyke, a principal planner for San Bernardino County, said past farming at the Abengoa site was limited to growing alfalfa for cattle ranches that have mostly left the area.

Environmental documents submitted to the energy commission say the first cattle ranch in the area was established in 1872 and that a succession of land owners raised cattle and alfalfa near Harper Lake into the 1980s.

Lester Lockhart, who acquired the land with a partner in 1925, became a prominent farmer. In 1953, he set up a gas station and general store with a sign that boasted, "We sell everything."

Solar plant there

Part of the former Lockhart ranch already is producing solar energy.

A solar plant built there in the early 1990s is now operated by NextEra Energy Resources. The operation produces 160 megawatts with mirrors that concentrate the sun's energy. On a tour in March, state officials said it is the world's largest operating solar plant.

Abengoa, which is based in Spain and has local offices in Victorville and U.S. headquarters in Denver, wants to use similar thermal-concentration technology, in which curved mirrors focus heat on a liquid that creates steam to power turbines.

The Abengoa plant would be larger, with a capacity of 250 megawatts, and would cover other sections of the former ranch, including the ruins of Lockhart's store.

During the March tour, U.S. Interior Secretary Ken Salazar and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger visited the store ruins, where Frier had displayed a map of Abengoa's plan.

At the NextEra plant up the road, the governor signed a bill to help speed up alternative-energy developments on public land. The new law allows energy companies to pay into a fund to compensate for lost wildlife habitat. No one talked about compensating for lost farmland.