

# Carrizo solar plants would harm California

*The push for centralized, large-scale solar and wind power generators has little to do with the environment*

**Patrick Veasart, San Luis Obispo New Times, 11-4-10**

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SunPower and First Solar, in cahoots with Pacific Gas and Electric, propose two huge industrial solar power plants that would sprawl over 12,000 acres of the amazing, irreplaceable Carrizo Plain. Their public relations machine has been in high gear trying to convince us we are going to burn in, well, California unless we get with their program.

What spurred those companies into a full gallop is the state mandate that 33 percent of California's electricity must be generated from "renewable" sources (solar and wind, for example) by 2020. That sounds like a laudable goal, but it could be accomplished in different ways with different outcomes. One way would be to shut down 33 percent of existing coal and oil ("bad") generation facilities and replace them with wind and solar. Another way would be to retain existing bad power generation facilities and increase total energy production by 50 percent—the increase to be made up with renewables.

The first scenario would reduce greenhouse gas emissions (GHGs), improve air quality, reduce our dependence on foreign oil, and be an incentive for greater efficiency and conservation. The second scenario (the one the utilities are trying to sell you) would lead to increases in GHGs, worse air quality, no reduction in oil imports, destruction of tens of thousands of acres of sensitive habitat and natural land (much of which is public) in California, and increased power consumption (which has an environmental price tag no matter how power is produced). Scenario two is a lot like buying a new Prius but continuing to drive a gas-guzzling SUV while claiming to be "green."

The real issue is who controls the resource and who reaps the profits. Remember, PG&E funded a recent ballot initiative (which fortunately failed) to kill community-generated power in California. Distributed power generation is viewed by the big boys as bad for business. The big push for centralized, large-scale solar and wind power generators has little to do with the environment—it's about big profits for the big players in California energy.

The Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR) for the SunPower project was released recently. In many years of following land use in SLO County, this is one of the most cynical projects I have ever seen. SunPower calls the proposed generator a "ranch," but it has nothing to do with ranching—and in fact would take ranch land out of production (DEIR page C.3-17). It's being touted as a project that would reduce GHGs and save the planet, but in fact would increase GHGs (DEIR page C.5-8). Wind and solar are supposed to improve air quality, but this project would worsen air quality (DEIR page C.4-8). It's touted as green, but would be built smack in the middle of an area that has the highest number of threatened and endangered species in California, including core recovery terrain for the San Joaquin kit fox and giant kangaroo rat—federally listed endangered species—with impacts that could not be fully mitigated (DEIR page C.6-23). In addition, this industrial power plant would have massive visual impacts to the Carrizo Plain National Monument, SLO County's world-class gem (DEIR page C. 2-5).

Proponents claim the environmental benefits of the project would result by offsetting future development of coal- and oil-fired facilities, thereby resulting in fewer GHGs in the future. Really? And what guarantees do we have this would come to pass? The impacts of this project would be real: They would occur right here in SLO

County and would not be mitigated because maybe someday, somewhere, somebody might not build a new coal- or oil-fueled power plant.

Even if you believe we must build gigantic solar projects to save the world, the SunPower and First Solar projects would be in exactly the wrong location. The Westlands Water District in western Kings and Fresno Counties has set aside 30,000 acres of fallow, selenium-tainted, totally “nuked” ag land for solar development. This is a viable alternative considered in the DEIR (page E-52), is the environmentally superior site in every way, but was rejected because it does not meet the Energy Element objective of being located in SLO County. Huh? I wonder who lobbied to include that policy in the Energy Element. Instead of exporting our resources while absorbing the environmental impacts, how about we site these projects where the power is actually going to be used, in a place that would suffer far fewer impacts?

If we really want a green future for California, we should develop a grid of non-centralized roof-top/parking-lot solar panels, coupled with an emphasis on efficiency and conservation. Subsidies should be spread out among homeowners and small businesses, not into the coffers of big corporations. More green jobs would be created with this approach than with centralized solar/wind. Not only is this the best approach for *Homo sapiens*, it’s also the best approach for other species. The wildlife on the Carrizo are making their last stand for survival. We can help them, or we can send them down the path to extinction. At some point, what goes around comes around.