

Environmental groups appeal Solargen decision

Connor Ramey, Hollister Free Lance, 11-10-10

Soon after the San Benito County Planning Commission approved the use permit for Solargen's 399-megawatt solar project in the Panoche Valley, seven environmental organizations issued a joint appeal, sending the approval of the project's use permits to the board of supervisors in a special meeting Wednesday.

The project was originally proposed as a 420-megawatt photovoltaic solar park that would rest in nearly 4,900 acres of land in the Panoche Valley. After a series of proposed mitigations, the project was reduced to 399 megawatts and reorganized, moving nearly four million panels to the north.

The board of supervisors approved the final environmental report and the cancellations of 12 Williamson Act contracts on Oct. 12 sending the approval of the project's use permit to the planning commission.

The planning commission approved the project's use permit on Oct. 20.

Quickly afterward, the group of environmental organizations issued an appeal to "challenge the solar project," according to a press release from the organizations. The groups include the Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society, Save Panoche Valley, Loma Prieta Chapter of the Sierra Club, Sierra Club National Office, Monterey Audubon Society, Center for Biological Diversity and the Fresno Audubon Society.

The basis of the appeal highlights "inadequacies in the environmental analysis provided by the county's planning department to inform decision makers." The groups also believe the mitigation measures presented in the EIR are not adequate to protect the endangered species they contend project could harm.

"The project might have irreversible impacts on the survival of several species, and it has the potential to significantly contribute to the risk of extinction of these species from our planet," according to the press release.

The reorganized plan would create a buffer between the project and neighboring homes and would reduce the impact to animals in the area, according to a presentation made by Solargen.

The appeal was expected and it will be the final action by the county, planner Byron Turner said.

"There is no further applicable action," Turner said.

The meeting will take place at 9:30 a.m. Wednesday.