

Solar farm sparks heated debate in California's Panoche Valley

San Benito County officials support a proposed Solargen facility just south of San Francisco Bay, but local farmers and ranchers say it will ruin their livelihoods and further endanger some species.

Louis Sahagun, Los Angeles Times, 11-1-10

A kind of family feud has erupted in San Benito County's rich slice of Central California farmland over plans to build a massive solar power facility in a valley shared by 20 ranchers and organic farmers and some of the rarest creatures in the United States.

Both sides of the dispute insist they are fighting for the same things — protecting the environment and growing the local economy.

County officials — some of them farmers themselves — believe Solargen Energy Inc.'s proposed 400-megawatt solar farm on 5,000 acres just south of San Francisco Bay will be a key part of a new future based, in part, on green technology.

But the small-scale ranchers, farmers and horse trainers who live and work in the misty pastures and furrowed slopes of Panoche Valley believe the old connotation of "green" is worth more.

"They are selling us and a unique landscape out for a measly 50 long-term jobs and \$24 million spread out over 20 years," said Kim Williams, who raises grass-fed pastured chickens in the valley. "That's pathetic."

In an effort to hasten construction of the plant, the county recently approved a final environmental impact report that opponents say was faulty.

In addition, despite opposition from the California Farm Bureau, county leaders and the San Benito County Farm Bureau approved the withdrawal of about 6,500 acres in the Panoche Valley from pacts intended to keep that land in agriculture for 10 years, in return for tax breaks under the state's Williamson Act.

The San Benito County Board of Supervisors was expected to approve a conditional use permit for the project, which would cover nearly a third of the valley floor, within a few weeks.

County officials say they are not fast-tracking the project, as detractors suspect.

Many county officials suggested that the valley's land was of marginal agricultural value, and that concerns about the solar panels' effect on habitat crucial to the survival of three federally endangered species —the giant kangaroo rat, the San Joaquin kit fox and the blunt-nosed leopard lizard — were overstated.

"The photovoltaic plant looks like nothing more than a vineyard, so the risk to the creatures is insignificant," said Greg Swett, president of the San Benito County Farm Bureau. "If the blunt-nosed leopard lizard is a standard lizard, it will get out of the way."

Nancy Martin, president and chief executive officer of the San Benito County Economic Development Corp., would not go that far. But she likes to say, "Now is the time to reinvent ourselves and take advantage of a confluence of opportunities. We cherish our environment, but we also must cherish the people who live here. If

we weigh the needs of the lizard against the needs of the people, I think the people win."

Sensing their pastoral community is slipping away from them, Panoche Valley residents have been studying their legal options in a case that also is being watched by environmental groups, including the Defenders of Wildlife and the Center for Biological Diversity.

The arid, wind-whipped Panoche Valley is a checkerboard of vineyards, pistachio orchards and range lands scented with sage and pungent vinegar-bush. Long-eared owls and ferruginous hawks roost in the cottonwood trees edging a perennial stream. Cattle and horses share the flatlands with foxes, badgers, tarantulas, gopher snakes and the blunt-nosed leopard lizard, a large, multicolored reptile with bright stripes on its back and a penchant for dashing hundreds of yards at the sound of human voices.

"For years we thought we were far enough away from the powers that be that they would leave us alone," said Panoche Valley cattle rancher Nnette Corotto, 74. "Now, it seems the county is going down a new rail. It's a new ball game and we have to survive it."

United under the banner Save Panoche Valley, the small-scale ranchers and farmers argue that building something on the scale of the Solargen power plant will kill wildlife, spook valuable livestock and clog the valley's narrow dirt lane — which is subject to flooding after even modest rain — with heavy traffic.

"I have never seen a process as rushed as this one, and it's happening in the face of real environmental impacts," said Mike Westphal, a Bureau of Land Management herpetologist. "Those species will not recover if this area is lost."

While Panoche Valley ranchers rally around their embattled landscape, related pressing issues have been unfolding in the offices of state and federal regulatory agencies in Sacramento and Washington.

Before construction can begin, the project must be permitted by the California Department of Fish and Game and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, a process expected to take several months. It remains unclear whether the project would be eligible for federal loans and stimulus programs scheduled to expire Dec. 31.

In August, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger dispatched a letter to the Obama administration urging that it help find a way to expedite endangered species reviews by the Fish and Wildlife Service for several renewable energy projects trying to break ground on private land this year, including Solargen's. "We need immediate action if these projects are to have a chance of receiving a permit in time to meet this deadline for groundbreaking or the deadline for the Department of Energy loan guarantees," Schwarzenegger said.

Mike Peterson, president and chief executive officer of Solargen, said the project can be built without federal subsidies. He said the power plant is an ideal fit for the valley, one of the sunniest spots in Central California with direct access to local Pacific Gas & Electric transmission lines. Beyond that, he said, the company has developed a generous mitigation plan, which includes setting aside 23,000 acres as a permanent grazing easement and habitat, most of it outside the valley.

"I believe we will be a benefit to these endangered species," Peterson said. As for Panoche Valley ranchers and farmers, Peterson said, "I understand their concerns. The sacrifice for them is that the valley will have a change. Truth is, they may have to go out of business."

That kind of talk rankles Panoche Valley dairyman Ron Garthwaite, co-owner of 4-year-old Claravale Farm.

"You don't destroy a group of people and their way of life just because you stand to make a little money off of something like this," Garthwaite said. "County officials are either incredibly stupid or incredibly disingenuous. I suspect the latter. I think they believe that, as individuals, they will somehow gain politically or financially off it. Otherwise, it makes no sense."

San Benito County Supervisor Reb Monaco, whose district includes Panoche Valley, said Garthwaite missed the point.

"Our small rural county has discovered a new marketable commodity: sunshine," he said. "Is it risky? Yes. But there are also potential benefits for the county and the world."