

Solar project in east San Luis Obispo County dimmed by planners

They cite environmental and agricultural reasons in recommendation; company still wants full proposal

David Sneed, San Luis Obispo Tribune, 11-2-10

A county planning report recommends that the 550-megawatt Topaz Solar Farm proposed for California Valley be scaled back to 400 megawatts in order to protect farmland and reduce biological and other impacts.

The environmental impact report released last week contains two “environmentally superior” alternatives that, if selected, would each cut the size of the plant by more than a quarter.

“These alternatives have been selected because they would avoid all impacts south of Highway 58, increase the project’s setbacks from Highway 58 and the rural residential homes along it, increase setbacks from the Carrisa Plains Elementary School, and decrease the length of project construction,” the report states.

The report also examines two configurations proposed by First Solar that would keep the size of the project at 550 megawatts. Each would cover about six square miles of land with photovoltaic panels at Highway 58 and Bitterwater Road in the northern part of the Carrizo Plain.

One configuration, called the Southern Option, would put some of the photovoltaic arrays south of Highway 58 in order to avoid protected farmland.

The other configuration, called the Northern Option, would keep almost all of the arrays north of the highway. It includes 1,795 acres of farmland protected by the state Williamson Act, which gives farmers tax breaks in order to keep land in long-term agricultural production.

Alan Bernheimer, spokes-man for First Solar, said the company wants to keep the project at 550 megawatts. It will ultimately be up to the county Planning Commission and Board of Supervisors to decide the plant’s size.

“Obviously, a smaller project would mean reductions in terms of the power output and economic benefits,” Bernheimer said.

At 550 megawatts, the plant would produce enough power for 160,000 homes and inject \$3 million to \$4 million a year into the county’s economy.

The recommendation to scale back the project came as no surprise, Bernheimer said. Planners recommended that another solar project, proposed by SunPower Corp. for the eastern edge of California Valley, be reduced from 250 megawatts to 175.

In addition to protecting farmland, the report identifies significant impacts on aesthetics and wildlife of the Topaz project.

Installing six square miles of solar panels would “result in a dramatic change to the landscape of the Carrizo Plain,” the report said. “It would introduce structure contrast, industrial character, view blockage, skylining, and glare.”

The panels could also interfere with migrations patterns of the endangered San Joaquin kit fox, tule elk and pronghorn antelope. Vernal pool and longhorn fairy shrimp, golden eagles and burrowing owls would also be affected.

First Solar has designed the project with wildlife migration corridors through it. Bernheimer said the company has tried to design the plant in a way that would better serve kit fox habitat than the tilled soils that are there now.

The public has until Jan. 3 to submit written comments on the project. The Planning Commission is scheduled to hear the project March 24. If approved, construction could begin before the end of 2011.

All of the environmental documents for the project are available on the county planning department's website at www.sloplanning.org. Type "Topaz" into the search engine to access the documents.