

1,000 megawatts of solar power approved for California desert

Tiffany Hsu, Los Angeles Times, 9-29-10

The California Energy Commission approved nearly 1,000 megawatts of solar installations for the desert Wednesday, adding to a growing list of such projects that have marched in recent weeks through the permitting process.

Commissioners unanimously approved the 250-megawatt Genesis Solar Energy Project and the 709-megawatt Imperial Valley Solar Project on Wednesday, making them the fifth and sixth plants to get the go-ahead in the last five weeks.

Since late August, the regulatory agency has cleared plants totaling nearly 3,000 megawatts scattered across the desert regions. California is attempting to meet a goal for utilities to draw 20% of their power from renewable energy by the end of this year and 33% by 2020.

All projects are rushing to break ground before the end of the year in order to qualify for federal stimulus funding; most are still waiting for the Bureau of Land Management to begin approving construction on public land next month.

The Genesis project is being developed by a subsidiary of NextEra Energy Resources and will involve two facilities using parabolic trough technology. Curved mirrors will collect the sun's rays, heating fluid that will produce steam to run generators.

The installation will be set up about 25 miles west of Blythe in Riverside County, where Chevron Energy Solutions and Solar Millennium plan to soon start building a similar 968-megawatt plant. The plant will sprawl over 1,800 acres in an undeveloped area of the Sonoran Desert.

Tessera Solar's Imperial Valley project will utilize solar dishes, or SunCatchers, across thousands of acres in a region bordering Arizona and Mexico.

The two projects will result in nearly 2,000 construction jobs and more than 200 permanent jobs.

Like other proposed solar projects, the Imperial Valley effort has run up against environmentalists trying to protect the flat-tailed horned lizard and the endangered desert tortoise, whose habitats include the proposed site.

Tessera has agreed to avoid installation on dry creek beds, which play a role in flood control, whittling down the planned energy output from an originally-intended 750 megawatts.