

Another solar project approved near Avenal

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Solar farms just keep on coming.

There is a two-part, 39-megawatt solar photovoltaic array project already under way on a 420-acre spread of private farmland on the sunshine-blessed Westside foothills near Avenal.

The project just got even bigger.

On Tuesday, the Kings County Planning Commission unanimously approved a 9-megawatt addition to the two side-by-side projects approved earlier this year.

The three-phase project is being developed by Japanese-owned Eurus Energy on a piece of land leased from private property owner Donald Morris of Thousand Oaks. The property is mostly dry farmed and is not protected under Williamson Act agricultural preserve contracts.

Plans call for building a 180-acre Sun City project for 20 megawatts and 240-acre Sand Drag for 19 megawatts. Now, newly approved 86-acre Avenal Park project would bring in another 9 megawatts to the mix. All three sister projects will be integrated into the existing Pacific Gas and Electric Co.'s power grid serving Kings County, acting much in the same way as a peaker plant, according to documents filed with Kings County.

Sun City LLC, Sand Drag LLC and Avenal Park LLC are all part of San Diego-based subsidiaries of Eurus, which is owned jointly by Tokyo Electric Co. and Toyota Group.

The Eurus project, filed as three separate projects, was permitted by the California Public Utilities Commission this summer, said Jeremy Kinney, senior planner with the Kings County community development department. A county conditional use permit for Avenal Park was the last major hurdle before construction can begin, he said.

According to Eurus' application, construction is set to start on Oct. 15 and to be completed in early January, when the project is scheduled to come on line.

An attempt to reach Eurus' president Mark Anderson and Morris was not successful.

Kings County is all of a sudden finding itself becoming a hot spot for utility-scale solar energy interests, both foreign and domestic, reflecting an emerging nationwide trend of using solar to turn brown fields into green.

The situation is also unique here because solar energy is increasingly regarded as the new cash crop in Kings County's Westside, where the drought and drainage issues have hit farmers hard over the last several years. A federal tax credit, combined with state incentives, is also creating a favorable climate for clean-energy investment.

And even in the scarcity of water, Kings County has plenty of sunshine to offer - some 300 days of it.

But in the county where agriculture is the driving force of the economy, the influx of solar projects is also

raising some concerns. It is often debated whether solar farms are compatible with the county's agricultural base.

While recognizing situations where it might be advantageous for a farmland owner to turn to solar, the Kings County Farm Bureau advocates keeping the farmland as intact as possible.

"We want productive farmland to remain in production, and we want to preserve ag land. That's the position," said Diana Peck, the bureau's executive director. "And solar farms are not compatible with Williamson Act land."

The site for the Avenal solar project is considered prime farmland, but it is not a Williamson Act-contracted land, according to Kinney.

Eurus' Avenal project is just the tip of the iceberg.

Corcoran last year signed a land-lease deal with France-based enXco to allow the company to build a solar farm on a city-owned water well field spanning 114 acres.

Kinney says three other projects are under review by the county.

One is GWF's proposal to build a 125-megawatt solar farm on 990 acres south of Lemoore Naval Air Station. The other consists of two side-by-side 20-megawatt projects by SPS Corcoran, LLC and SPS Corcoran West, LLC on 560 acres of rangeland within the Corcoran Irrigation District, Kinney said.