

# First solar projects on ag land approved

**Jenna Chandler, Porterville Recorder, 9-23-1**

A Southern California-based alternative energy company received Wednesday the first special permits to install solar panels on more than 1,000 acres of dry, grazing lands between Alpaugh and Allensworth.

The permits were conditionally approved by the Tulare County Planning Commission, pending the adoption of developer agreements and reclamation plans with the Board of Supervisors. The criteria the Commission used to approve the permits were set by the Board Sept. 1 after months of collaboration with representatives from the green energy companies, land owners and agricultural community. The result was mainly to require the solar and wind generators to lie near an electrical grid and allow for the revival of agricultural production.

Solar Projects, LLC will lease six parcels from the Alpaugh Irrigation District, the Atwell Island Irrigation District and a private property owner to construct and install solar panels expected to produce a combined 150 megawatts of power. The developer will sell the energy output to PG&E, which owns a 115,000 volt line with the capacity for 130 megawatts, Bob de Korné, vice president of Enco Utility Services, a subcontractor to the mega utility provider, said.

“The combination of projects are going to take up all that capacity, which tells you there won’t be anymore solar development in that area,” de Korné said.

Kevin Couch, general manager for the two irrigation districts, which draws a majority of its water supply from below ground and delivers it solely for agricultural uses, said the money generated from the 35 year lease agreements will benefit the small labor force in the Alpaugh area, which relies heavily on farm-related work.

“These projects are very exciting,” Couch said. “They will benefit the entire ag community by driving down our existing water rates. During the length of the projects, we will see a one-third increase in our budget; it will go a long way in seeing the irrigation district’s long term success.”

But allowing solar and wind energy generators on farm and ranch land has created waves in the agricultural community, with farm bureaus statewide opposing their installation on lands under Williamson Act contracts. Property owners who sign Williamson Act contracts with the county voluntarily restrict their land to agricultural uses in exchange for reduced property tax assessments.

According to planner John Heiser all but 20 of the 1,216 acres of land in question are fallow due to inadequate access to water. The 20 viable acres currently produce cotton, and are part of a 40 acre parcel under a Williamson Act contract.

Another condition established by the Planning Commission Wednesday requires the Board of Supervisors to determine whether that Williamson Act contract needs to be cancelled.