

Are solar farms compatible with ag land?

Roger H. Aylworth, Chico Enterprise-Record, 4-27-11

OROVILLE — Sometimes solar voltaic systems are referred to as energy "farms," and Butte County is trying to determine just how compatible such farms are with regular agriculture.

Tuesday afternoon, during a workshop on the draft zoning ordinance that accompanies the new county General Plan, the Board of Supervisors heard an extended discussion on ag-related solar power systems.

The systems range from small units that would power a single pump, to commercial arrays meant to grow power as a cash crop.

County senior planner Dan Breedon said the General Plan 2030 both had unwavering protection of prime agricultural land, and encourages the use of solar power and other renewable energy sources within the county.

At the same time there are no permitting rules or regulations in the existing county codes on the topic of solar power.

Breedon said the Department of Development Services staff has tentatively divided solar power into two categories. Small systems would be ones used to run a pump or power a farmer's home, and "solar stations" would be larger facilities that would exist for generating electricity for sale to Pacific Gas and Electric.

Breedon said the county has been approached by solar electric companies who would be interested in creating solar arrays a half-acre in size on ag property as power stations.

Tim Snellings, director of development services, said the county could "incentivize" these half-acre solar programs by making them allowed "by right" in an ag zone, meaning they could be put up with little more than a building permit.

He then asked where the line is between encouraging such businesses and hurting prime agriculture in the county?

Snellings said in Kings County 1,400 acres of former ag land are now under power arrays.

Jason Bougic of 2COR9 Energy of Roseville, told the board it has very little control over solar power plants regardless of what they may want.

He claimed the state has pre-empted the field when it comes to solar power regulation, saying, except for specific issues of health and safety, the state holds sway.

County Attorney Bruce Albert said after the meeting he would have to research Bougic's claim.

Supervisor Steve Lambert, who chairs the board, said he has been approached about the possibility of putting a solar power system on the cattle ranch he owns west of Oroville.

He said the potential revenue involved in such an enterprise is attractive enough that it will become an important issue in the farming community.

Chico Supervisor Maureen Kirk said she was entirely in favor of the small systems for individual ag uses, but she had some concerns about significantly larger systems.

On an unanimous vote the supervisors directed staff to get input from the Butte County Farm Bureau and the Butte County Cattlemen's Association to get a sense of what the ag community wanted. The board also directed the staff to look into how other counties were dealing with solar power.

The supervisors also want to know how things work out on the question of state versus local regulation of such facilities.

The draft zoning ordinance will be the topic of continued discussion and hearings, as well as an environmental impact review. If all goes as planned, the ordinance will go before the supervisors for adoption sometime this fall.