

SLO County's first large-scale solar project approved

David Sneed, San Luis Obispo Tribune, 4-19-11

Citing the pressing need to address global climate change, San Luis Obispo County supervisors Tuesday approved a 250-megawatt solar project on the Carrizo Plain.

Greg Blue, project manager with applicant SunPower Corp., said the company will now concentrate on fulfilling 148 conditions the county is requiring before construction can begin by the end of August.

Conditions are steps the company must take to lessen the environmental impacts of the project. Many of the conditions were suggested through extensive public input over the past several years that has improved the project, Blue said.

SunPower recently received a \$1.2 billion loan guarantee from the Bank of Scotland that will finance construction costs. Construction is expected to take three years, and the plant will supply enough power for some 100,000 homes.

Three of the supervisors — Adam Hill, Bruce Gibson and Jim Patterson — spoke of the need for such photovoltaic plants in order to begin curbing society's greenhouse gas emissions, which are expected to dramatically disrupt global climate patterns.

"If you want to see parts of Bangladesh underwater because you are against solar panels on the Carrizo Plain, I won't join you," Hill said.

Supervisors also praised the work SunPower did to redesign the project in order to minimize undesirable effects, particularly in protecting endangered species such as the giant kangaroo rat.

"We are faced with the challenge of finding a balance," said Patterson, whose district includes the Carrizo Plain. "I think we struck that balance."

Supervisors approved the project unanimously. "There is no shortage of wind power up here," quipped Supervisor Frank Mecham after hearing the soaring rhetoric from his three colleagues.

The project received four appeals, three from environmental groups and one from Carrizo Plain resident Michael Strobridge. They all struck a similar theme: While renewable energy is a good thing, the Carrizo Plain is the wrong place for it given its high concentration of rare and endangered species.

Strobridge's attorney, Samuel Johnston, said the county has fallen victim to a solar gold rush. He encouraged supervisors to deny the project in favor of supporting solar panels on rooftops or moving it to more disturbed areas.

"This is the right project in the wrong place," Johnston said. "It's like fitting a square peg in a round hole."

Lawsuits are the only option available to opponents to try to stop the project.

A second, larger solar development is proposed several miles northwest of the SunPower project. First Solar has proposed building a 550-megawatt solar farm. It is currently being reviewed by the county Planning Commission.