

Second solar project gets first look

Aaron Crutchfield, Atascadero News, 4-7-11

The San Luis Obispo County Planning Commission got its first look Thursday at the Topaz Solar Farm, a 550-megawatt solar project that would place about 9 million solar panels on the west side of the Carrizo Plain.

The hearing was relatively brief, taking up about two hours of a nearly seven-hour meeting, but there will be another hearing on April 18, with the whole day dedicated to the topic.

Speakers on both sides of the issue addressed the commission on Thursday. Critics said the project's environmental downsides are insurmountable.

"There are no overriding considerations which justify the environmental losses and the loss to public resources involved in this project," said Sam Johnston, attorney for Carrizo Plain resident Michael Stribridge.

But proponents said using the area as a solar farm would be a better use of what's classified as prime agricultural land than farming barley every other year because of the lack of water to farm other crops.

They also pointed to the project's overall environmental benefits on a larger scale.

"If we don't support these energy sources, we are bound to enter a stage of high-risk development of off shore drilling, seismically prone nuclear reactors and carbon emissions from coal," said John Kammer of GeoSolutions in SLO. "These alternatives have a high potential for species decline or extinction."