

Public weighs in on solar plant in California Valley

David Sneed, San Luis Obispo Tribune, 1-28-11

The county Planning Commission on Thursday began the lengthy process of deciding whether a large commercial solar plant can be built in the Carrizo Plain without destroying the unique and cherished environment.

SunPower Corp. has proposed building a 250-megawatt photovoltaic plant on the eastern edge of the plain, an area teeming with endangered giant kangaroo rats. Those rodents are one species on a long list of rare and endangered plants and animals that make the Carrizo Plain one of the most ecologically sensitive places in California.

The commission will tour the plain Wednesday to see not only the SunPower proposal, but the site of a second, larger photovoltaic plant planned nearby — a 550-megawatt plant proposed by First Solar.

Commissioners will hold another daylong hearing on the SunPower project Thursday. A decision by the commission is possible on that day.

Most of Thursday's hearing was taken up by public comment. Dozens of county residents testified for and against the project.

Unionized electricians and business people urged approval of the project in order to realize its estimated economic benefits. These include a boost of more than \$300 million to the county's economy and hundreds of jobs in trades hard hit by the recession.

"We really need this project; we need the jobs," underemployed electrician Rodney Edwards said.

Some speakers said that the project will help the state reach its ambitious goal of having a third of its power come from renewable sources — rather than fossil fuels — by 2020. Reaching that goal reduces greenhouse gas emissions responsible for global warming and reduces the nation's dependence on foreign oil, they said.

Others, some of them residents of the Carrizo Plain, said the economic and other benefits would not outweigh the environmental degradation the project would cause, particularly to rare species such as kangaroo rats and kit foxes.

"This is a solar project, but it's not green," said Joey Racano of Los Osos.

David Chipping, president of the county chapter of the California Native Plant Society, said the environmental analysis of the project has not put enough emphasis on the plants that live in the area.

Hundreds of acres of some of the state's most spectacular wildflower fields would be lost, he said.

Many critics of the project said it should be built on retired farmland in nearby Kern County that has no such environmental issues. One key reason that SunPower and First Solar want to locate in the California Valley is its close proximity to PG&E power lines.

County planning staff is recommending approval of the project. The project is appealable to county supervisors. If approved, construction could begin later this year.