

60-megawatt solar project planned near Stratford

Eiji Yamashita, Hanford Sentinel, 3-9-11

Idle, unproductive farmland near Stratford may have a new use in the near future with the submission of plans by a New Zealand-based company to build a 480-acre solar farm.

Meridian Energy USA has filed an application with the Kings County Community Development Department for the utility-scale renewable project to be built off 18th Avenue between Kansas and Laurel avenues, about two miles east of the rural town on the county's sunny Westside.

The company made headlines last summer when it developed California's first grid-connected solar farm in Mendota. Building on that success, Meridian is now eyeing building an even bigger project in Stratford. The 60-megawatt Stratford project, if built as planned, would be 12 times the size of the 5-megawatt Mendota solar farm.

Sixty megawatts is enough to power about 19,000 typical households in the Valley, said Shaun Cornelius, vice president of project development with Meridian.

Cornelius said the Stratford solar farm, the Jacobs Corner Solar Project, is one of many projects the company is hoping to unveil in the western United States in the near future. There is no firm timetable for the project construction.

"It's one of a number of development opportunities we're pursuing, so we are simply moving the sites forward through the development process and progressing the permitting, connection and other aspects," Cornelius said. "We're not able to say exactly when we'll be able to commit to construction."

Local job creation is one of the things that the company touts in its project application.

"(The Mendota project) was unique in that Meridian was proactive in recruiting and training local residents to become solar installers, and will implement similar programs for the construction and operation of the Jacobs Corner Solar Project," the company says.

Kings County's Westside is on the way to becoming a solar powerhouse as domestic and international companies rush to invest in new projects. Meridian's proposal is the latest in a series of utility-scale solar farms that are in various stages of development in the region.

Nearing completion is a similar sized project in Avenal being developed by Japanese-owned Eurus Energy. The three-part Avenal project totaling 48 megawatts is expected to be complete by the summer, according to county Senior Planner Jeremy Kinney.

The GWF solar farm proposed for 990 acres of land south of Naval Air Station Lemoore has also been permitted for construction. Two other projects near Corcoran are in the environmental review process.

An application for the Meridian project in Stratford was filed March 2.

Cornelius said the Stratford site - with its easy access to transmission connection, low value as farmland and minimal environmental issues - offered an ideal site for the project.

The project site is designated by the Department of Conservation as low-value, non-prime farmland, and it requires minimal water use for the occasional washing of panels.

Meridian proposes to operate the project for at least 35 years. The project is designed so that the facilities will be removed, and the site can return to agricultural use at the end of its useful life, the company says.

The Stratford project would be interconnected with the PG&E's electric distribution grid via a new line being constructed by the utility.

County Senior Planner Sandy Roper said it is still too early to tell how long the approval process might take.

"We're sending out a request for comment to other county departments and other regulatory agencies, and at the conclusion of the comment period, those comments will be provided to the applicant," Roper said. "The applicant and his consultant will be preparing the (California Environmental Quality Act) document. That work has not been done yet, so it's premature to try to guess the time line to go before the planning commission."