

Second solar plant on Carrizo Plain is approved

David Sneed, San Luis Obispo Tribune, 5-13-11

The San Luis Obispo County Planning Commission on Thursday approved the second of two large commercial solar plants proposed for the Carrizo Plain — a step forward in what the panel said establishes the region as a state leader in “green” energy.

Approval of the Topaz Solar Farm photovoltaic plant in the grasslands of southeastern San Luis Obispo County would add 550 megawatts of power to the state’s power supply. Combined with another proposed solar power station, the area would add a total of 800 megawatts, roughly enough to power 260,000 homes.

An appeal of the project to the county Board of Supervisors is probable, however. Last month, county supervisors gave final approval to a 250-megawatt project to the east of the Topaz plant.

Unlike the previous project, planning commissioners had to work out considerable differences of opinion among themselves about how the 3,500-acre Topaz project should be configured.

Two of the commissioners wanted to move all the solar panels to the north of Highway 58 in order to minimize the noise, glare and aesthetic impacts of the sprawling facility. The other three opposed that idea in order to avoid protected farmland and protect rare and endangered species.

Commissioner Dan O’Grady said he was troubled by the fact that the northern option was considered feasible in the environmental analysis, only to be ruled infeasible in the official findings the commission was about to approve.

“This is like ‘Alice in Wonderland’ where up is down,” he complained.

Tempers flared when Chairwoman Carlyn Christianson tried to pin O’Grady down on whether he could support the option favored by the majority of commissioners.

“Don’t try and put me in that box, Chairwoman Christianson,” he said. “That’s not fair.”

Eventually, O’Grady made a tentative motion to approve the northern alignment, but it died for a lack of a second. A second motion approving the other alignment passed 4-0 with O’Grady’s support. Commissioner Tim Murphy was absent.

All the commissioners agreed that the large project is a major milestone in the effort to turn San Luis Obispo County into a state leader in renewable energy.

Commissioner Ken Topping said his main motivation for approving the project was its contribution to reducing greenhouse gas emissions, which are contributing to the global problem of climate change.

Christianson said her main concern is green energy.

“This county really needs to move away from oil and foreign-based oil,” she said. “This is a great first step.”

Project applicant First Solar of Tempe, Ariz., hopes to get final approval of the project and break ground later

this year.

The company faces a Sept. 30 deadline in order to obtain loan guarantees from the U.S. Department of Energy.