

Four solar projects get county OK

Seth Nidever, Hanford Sentinel, 11-9-11

Kings County's abundant sunshine continues to attract large-scale solar power projects, with four more approved Monday night near Corcoran and Stratford.

The Kings County Planning Commission approved 643 acres worth of solar projects to generate a whopping 63.5 megawatts of electricity — enough to meet the average power needs of 63,500 homes.

“We're excited to be supporting these projects,” said Moira Geraghty, CEO of Solar Projects Solutions LLC, which is developing two sites near Corcoran. “They will help California meet its renewable energy-generating requirements.”

In addition to approving the two sites north of Corcoran, the Planning Commission also approved two sites between Lemoore and Stratford totaling 323 acres.

Construction on all four locations is scheduled to start next year. Total number of jobs provided? About 330, according to company representatives.

When built, the new solar farms will rival the size of a 39-megawatt, 420-acre spread near Avenal that is already operational.

Renewable energy companies are showing great interest in sun-kissed Kings County, which averages 300 sunny days a year in some parts.

“We have assembled a number of projects,” said Seth Israel, a vice president at Recurrent Energy, which is overseeing the 323-acre development north of Stratford.

Also in attendance Tuesday night were representatives of electrical contractors and unions hit hard by the loss of construction jobs as a result of the recession. They praised the projects, saying they would provide badly needed work.

“We have been decimated by the economy,” said Kevin Cole, business manager for the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers union branch in Fresno. “This is an excellent opportunity to get my men and apprentices back to work.”

Both projects are on property classified as grazing land within an agricultural-use zone. One project — the Recurrent development north of Stratford — is under Farmland Security Zone protection designed to keep it in farming.

The Farmland Security Zone is similar to the Williamson Act, which keeps cropland in production in exchange for giving tax breaks to growers.

Kings County considers solar projects to be allowed under the Williamson Act, said Jeremy Kinney, a county planner.

The increasing number of solar projects popping up around the San Joaquin Valley is causing concern among

some farm advocacy groups worried about lost growing acreage. Just last week, the California Farm Bureau Federation filed a lawsuit against Fresno County for allowing a solar project on prime farmland.

The Fresno County Board of Supervisors has since formed a working group to examine solar development and its placement in the county.

The Kings County Farm Bureau has also expressed reservations, remaining neutral on many local projects.

If a solar project is proposed for prime farmland in Kings County, the project would have to include offsets of other land to mitigate the loss. In the case of the 420-acre solar farm near Avenal, the company will allow continued farming between the rows of solar panels.

The California County Planning Directors Association is working on a model ordinance that will likely recommend a ban on any solar developments on prime farmland, but counties aren't required to follow that guideline.