

# Huge solar plant proposed in Fresno County

**Kurtis Alexander, Fresno Bee, 11-29-11**

A subsidiary of the multinational Sharp Corp. is looking to build what would be one of the state's largest solar energy plants in western Fresno County.

The project would cover nearly 3,600 acres of retired farmland and generate up to 400 megawatts of power, enough to accommodate about 300,000 homes. The plant would have as many as 2.5 million photovoltaic panels.

While the proposal joins nearly three dozen other solar plants pitched in Fresno County, the venture by Recurrent Energy is by far the biggest and underscores the county's standing as a hotbed for solar development. Most of the county's proposed solar projects are a couple hundred acres or less.

Driving the interest are sunny weather and available land, on top of a rapidly expanding solar industry, said Gerardo Diaz, an assistant professor of engineering at the University of California at Merced.

The Recurrent Energy project near Tranquillity is still in its early stages. Recurrent is buying 30 parcels from the Westlands Water District, and Recurrent representatives are working with county planners on the necessary environmental review.

Unlike many solar projects, which have raised various concerns, the Tranquillity project avoids what has been the biggest sticking point for solar: building on protected farmland.

None of Recurrent's parcels are on land preserved by a Williamson Act contract. The parcels in the Recurrent proposal are loosely connected and encircle one privately owned parcel. While zoned for agriculture, the land has been taken out of production because of a lack of water.

"If we're going to have solar, that's where we'd like to see it: in an area that's not being farmed and can't be farmed," said county Supervisor Phil Larson, who has been critical of solar development on productive farmland.

As soon as January, the county Board of Supervisors will be asked to sign off on an environmental consultant to review the project site.

Because of its size, this is the first solar proposal to require an environmental impact report, an effort to make sure there are no issues with the land that would preclude development.

"We've done our homework on the project to understand our costs and how competitive we can be," said Seth Israel, director of permitting and site acquisition for Recurrent Energy. "We're excited to move forward. It's a project we believe in."

While the San Francisco-based company is building photovoltaic plants in other parts of the state, including Kern and Sacramento counties, the Tranquillity project is the largest.

Israel says the advantages of size are lower production costs as well as hastening California's transition from traditional power to renewable power.

State legislation requires major utilities to get 20% of their power from renewable sources by 2013 and 33% by 2020.

Recurrent has not secured a contract for selling the power at the Tranquillity site, as it has done with other projects, but Israel said he didn't expect any problems finding a buyer.

The Tranquillity project is slated to include a wastewater treatment plant, several roads, an operations building and an electrical substation. The power that is generated here will be sent to the grid via two PG&E power lines that run on the edge of the site.

Recurrent hopes to open the plant in 2015. Recurrent figures to have strong backing from Sharp, best known for its electronics manufacturing.

"There are big dogs coming here," said county Supervisor Henry Perea, who has been an advocate for solar and recently supported projects by Spain-based Gestamp Solar. "This continues the path to diversifying our economy, with the end result being more jobs for county residents and more power to the grid."