

Hudson Ranch II geothermal plant approved

Alejandro Davila, Imperial Valley Press, 10-24-12

Hudson Ranch II, a 49-megawatt geothermal plant set for Niland, was approved for development despite an appeal from the Laborers International Union of North America.

As part of the decision, Simbol Calipatria Plant II also was approved. Simbol will be developed adjacent to Hudson Ranch II utilizing the brine from the geothermal process to extract minerals.

The Imperial County Board of Supervisors' decision comes about a month after the county Planning Commission gave its blessing to Hudson Ranch II and Simbol.

Both plants are expected to create dozens of jobs and bring millions of dollars in revenue to the county.

And yet, the laborers' union and two Imperial County residents appealed to the Planning Commission what they said were various environmental issues such as hydrology, loss of agricultural land and perhaps most important, compliance to the California Environmental Quality Act.

The laborers' union is in support of renewable energy projects, union attorney Christina Caro said. However, she said her clients support those projects as long as they are done in an environmentally responsible manner.

But both plants do bring negative impacts.

The plants impact air quality, biological resources, cultural resources and impacts from the use of hazardous materials, to name just a few, according to the environmental impact report on the projects.

However, consultant Christina Willis said negative impacts can be mitigated to less than significant levels.

Among various issues, Caro alleged errors in the environmental impact report that dealt with water and water discharge that could impact the Salton Sea.

But after back-and-forth comments between Caro and county staff and consultants, Willis noted that "we are dealing with disputes that come down to difference in methodology; differences in opinions between experts."

And when this occurs, Willis said, the discretion is left up to the lead agency.

That lead agency in this instance was the Board of Supervisors, which unanimously sided with the environmental impact report, the consultants and the staff that recommended the project's approval.

While Imperial County has long been a fertile ground for geothermal activity and the plants that mine that energy, Simbol Calipatria Plant II is a relatively new component to the process.

Simbol is set to extract resources such as lithium, manganese and zinc from brine pulled by Hudson Ranch II. These minerals are needed for batteries used in cars, laptop and cellphones.

Construction on the projects could start in late 2013 or the first quarter of 2014, said Larry Grogan, senior vice president of resources and development for Energy Source, the developer of the Hudson Ranch project.