

Plans for massive solar plant in Inyo County on hold

BrightSource Energy has suspended its application for the \$2.7-billion solar power plant in the Mojave Desert.

Julie Cart, Los Angeles Times, 4-10-13

BrightSource Energy has suspended its application to build a \$2.7-billion solar power plant at Hidden Hills, saying it needed to redesign the Inyo County project and the delay would lead to financial uncertainty.

With the project nearing final stages of approval from the California Energy Commission, BrightSource considered adding power storage to the 500-megawatt facility. But doing so would trigger another round of time-consuming and costly engineering and environmental analyses.

The company cited "changing dynamics in the California energy markets" for the decision, but added, "Hidden Hills is a good site to deploy solar thermal with storage technology."

BrightSource's decision comes amid shifts in the financial model for utility-scale solar power. Diminishing federal tax incentives and loans are taking a toll as companies are already scrambling to find private financing for multibillion-dollar facilities. At the end of 2016, the federal solar energy production tax credit will fall from 30% to 10%.

Another issue for the remote site 120 miles northeast of Los Angeles was the complicated and expensive construction of power lines to connect to existing transmission corridors. That process requires a separate set of permits and was made more tricky by linking to a transmission line across the Nevada border.

BrightSource may still move forward with the project at another time, after restarting the process with the state energy commission.

The Hidden Hills plant is the second large-scale solar project Oakland-based BrightSource has shelved this year. The company mothballed the Rio Mesa project near Blythe after unforeseen environmental analyses slowed development of the 500-megawatt project.

The Hidden Hills plant was to be built on 3,200 acres of private land in the Mojave Desert near the Nevada border, 45 miles west of Las Vegas. BrightSource estimated more than 2,300 jobs would be created at the height of construction, with 100 permanent jobs once the power plant began operation.

The project was designed with a revised version of the Power Tower technology, which is being used at BrightSource's plant nearing completion at Ivanpah just off I-15 at the Nevada border. At Ivanpah, three 450-foot towers are placed in the center of a field of mirror-like heliostats that reflect sunlight to a boiler on top of the tower, creating steam used to drive turbines.

Plans for Hidden Hills called for two 750-foot towers in fields of 85,000 heliostats. That method of generating power relies on the redirection and concentration of sunlight. It is a method in competition with cheaper, photovoltaic systems, which convert sunlight directly into electricity. Proponents of the concentration method say it can provide the ability to extend a plant's operating hours past darkness if the heat it produces is stored. Photovoltaic can deliver power only while the sun is up.

In addition to Ivanpah, BrightSource has another project underway in the state, the 500-megawatt Palen plant

near Blythe. BrightSource bought the project in August 2012 through the bankruptcy of Solar Millennium and applied to the California Energy Commission to convert the plant from trough technology to towers.