

Campo Verde Solar project construction begins

Alejandro Davila, Imperial Valley Press, 1-11-13

The construction of Campo Verde Solar project, a 139-megawatt solar plant west of El Centro, has begun, the developer announced Thursday.

The announcement comes as the project faces two lawsuits. Yet Campo Verde Solar is expected to be completed this year, according to First Solar, the project's developer.

The project will create about 250 construction jobs and about five to eight maintenance jobs thereafter, according to First Solar. In addition, the project will produce about \$230 million in economic activity and energize some 50,000 homes.

Moreover, county officials have said that public benefit agreement will bring at least \$1.9 million for agricultural benefits, \$1.5 million in community benefits and more than \$6 million in guaranteed sales tax.

But Campo Verde Solar's road to construction hasn't been a smooth one.

The project is facing two lawsuits, one by the Laborers International Union of North America and one from Protect Our Communities Foundation, an organization headed by activists Donna Tisdale and Carolyn Allen.

Tisdale and Allen are known to oppose renewable energy projects over environmental concerns, and dislike the conversion of agricultural land for the use of renewable energy projects as it not only displaces land use but also workers, they say.

Both lawsuits are very similar, said Katherine Turner, senior deputy county counsel, who explained allegations relate mainly to the permitting documents as well as environmental concerns.

And while a request by the labor union to stop the project's construction with an injunction was refused by a judge Monday, Turner said the lawsuits remain and could go before a judge in three to four months.

If that happens, Turner said Campo Verde Solar would be the first county-approved solar project to go before a judge over California Environmental Quality Act issues.

CEQA is a statute that requires the state and local agencies to identify significant environmental impacts of their actions and how to avoid or mitigate those impacts.

Meanwhile, Campo Verde Solar is now one of four solar projects under construction in the county with many more expected to follow.

Some 15 solar projects have been approved by the county so far, according to a county Planning Department report.

Many of these projects have faced lawsuits, said Andy Horne, deputy county executive officer, who noted none have been stopped except for a project near Calipatria that lacked an environmental impact report.

environmental impact report attached to them.

He also said he believed the county Planning Department has been doing “a very good job in getting the projects approved and addressing all the issues required in the permitting process to make sure that there aren’t any weaknesses in the approval process.”

However, it remains to be seen whether a judge feels otherwise.