

# Fewer solar sites saves ag land

Visalia Times Delta, 3-1-13

There will be fewer farms permitted in Tulare County now that the Board of Supervisors has reduced the acreage of permitable land.

Solar farms, that is.

Perhaps that is as it should be. If anyone understands the importance of preserving valuable land — that is, land that produces crops that feed people, land that keeps people working and land that contributes to this county's economic output — it is the farmers in Tulare County. Or at least the organization that represents them, the Tulare County Farm Bureau.

The Farm Bureau doesn't seem to have issues with solar farming per se, as the power produced goes back into the grid to power all sorts of things, including, presumably, their own pumps, wells and irrigation systems.

It's the hierarchy of land value that the supervisors unanimously agreed with.

What the Bureau pushed for, and the supervisors agreed with, was increasing the supply of farmland by 283,799 acres. In effect, that restricts solar farms to close to 188,000 with exceptions at the urban growth and development boundaries and the county's citrus belt.

The decision removes the ability for solar farming enterprises to seek locations within the county on a case-by-case basis and provides a clearer foundation for the county's primary industry.

Solar farms can use sizable tracts of land, but they have no special needs when it comes to acreage and they require little maintenance. They can and should be relegated to areas with poor soil and limited access to water.

The decision to restrict land allocation for solar farms won't impede the state's overall push to achieve a goal of 33 percent renewable energy production by the year 2020. Renewable sources of energy include biomass, wind, geothermal and hydroelectric power in addition to solar power.

The push to expand private solar farms over the previous five years may have waned, so the zoning tweak may not have been much more than an exercise.

In either case, firming up the county's solar policy reinforces the county's commitment to protecting agriculturally viable lands.