

Solar -- not everyone is on board

Santa Cruz Sentinel, 2-12-15

First Solar is planning for a huge solar farm in a remote area of Monterey County, and Apple has announced that it will purchase electricity from it to power its new headquarters in Cupertino, as well as all of its California retail stores.

Much of the reaction to the news from environmentalists is positive, but others in the movement are opposed.

Opposition — or at least concern — has come from groups like the Sierra Club, Audubon California and the California Native Plant Society. A spokeswoman from the San Francisco-based Center for Biological Diversity said that not enough study has been done to discover whether the project would endanger California red-legged frogs or golden eagles, arguing that construction of the solar plant should be put on hold.

The project calls for the solar plant to be built on about 3,000 acres of grassland in southeastern Monterey County, near the border with San Luis Obispo, Kern and Kings counties. The Monterey County Board of Supervisors gave its blessing to the plan this week, and at least one opponent has promised to delay the project, which also needs state and federal approvals.

Just imagine what the opposition would be like if the project had been proposed nearer to a populated area.

Therein lies a problem with production of energy — conventional or alternative. We all place demands on the power grid, but most of us don't want to be anywhere near a plant that produces it. Most people support the idea of solar and wind power as a replacement for oil and gas, but just try to find an acceptable location for massive photovoltaic arrays or wind turbines.

Such a discrepancy explains why the United States has had such a difficult time in coming up with any sort of rational energy policy. It's true that any source of energy — oil wells, fracking sites, solar farms — has a downside. Our use of energy brings with it a negative impact on someone or something — which can be seen in the intense opposition to fracking, even though the technology has produced lower fuels costs for consumers. Even so, most people — even those who have found a way to live off the grid — drive cars and heat their homes.

What's missing is a coordinated energy policy that acknowledges the need and describes environmental impacts that are acceptable even if they're not preferable to some. We welcome the construction of the solar farm; the benefit will far outweigh the impact and Apple's participation should prove significant in releasing alternative energy production from the clutches of government subsidies.

Even so, alternative energy sources like this one are not going to change the country's energy needs overnight. We still rely on oil and gas even while we look for ways to reduce the environmental impacts. Blind opposition to every sort of energy production proposal doesn't help in the development of a rational energy policy.