

Tribal Solar plans meet with opposition

Julie Fairman, Mohave Daily News, 5-27-16

LAUGHLIN — All Tri-state residents who spoke during the Fort Mojave Solar Project scoping meetings were in favor of the clean energy generated by the sun. None who spoke were in favor of siting a utility-scale solar production plant on 3,200 acres of agricultural land adjacent to the Colorado River.

“We are the Mojave. This is our land and we don’t want to see it desecrated like this,” said Jeanette Stillman Otero, elder of the Mojave Indian community and one of about 50 people in attendance at the meeting Wednesday at the Tribe’s business offices.

“In my view we do not need this because we are an agricultural tribe,” she continued. “Everything has been taken away from us already. What are the ramifications of all these things that are happening? What’s going to be left for my children and my children’s children? No, we do not want this.”

The proposed solar energy production facility would be built by Tribal Solar, a wholly owned subsidiary of First Solar, an American manufacturer of solar panels and provider of utility-scale photovoltaic power plants. The plant, which was proposed by the Tribal Council, will have a capacity of 332 megawatts and be located on tribal land in Mohave County between Jerome Avenue to the south and roughly 5.5 miles north to Valencia Avenue. The project will also include electric substations and transmission lines that will cross the Colorado River as well as Tribal, Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Reclamation, county and private lands in Clark County. Details of the project were printed in the Federal Register in April.

First Solar revealed earlier this year that Southern California Edison, one of the four owners of the Mohave Generating Station in Laughlin, has agreed to purchase power from Tribal Solar for the next 20 years. None of the electricity generated at the Fort Mojave plant would be diverted for use in Arizona or Nevada.

It’s anticipated as many as 400 jobs would be created during the approximate two-year construction phase, and Tribal members would be given hiring preference. Officials said at Thursday’s meeting that they don’t know whether the wages would fall in line with the Davis-Bacon Act, which requires employers to pay prevailing area wages. Once the plant is operational, it will take less than a dozen individuals to staff the facility.

First Solar officials said they are prohibited from discussing the monetary value of the lease. Robert Jacobo, the Tribe’s workforce development director, said it was valued at \$170 million.

Upon expiration of the 35-year agreement, First Solar will be required to restore the land to its current condition, or the Tribe could exercise the option to take ownership of the plant and continue its operation.

Ron Van Fleet, one of several Tribal members who attended the meeting Wednesday and a second one on Thursday in Laughlin, spoke eloquently about the relationship between Native Americans and the land. He said the land is sacred to the Mojave and represents the culture’s heritage.

“This land is not for sale, it is not for lease for this project,” said Van Fleet. “All I’m asking is respect for our land: Leave it alone.”

Many individuals of the Mojave community called out the seven members of the Tribal Council for their failure to communicate with them about the proposed project. Otero said they were “blindsided” by the plan and that they only heard of it a few days prior, through newspaper articles and social media.

No members of the Tribal Council attended either of the scoping meetings. Absent, also, were representatives of Mohave County Board of Supervisors, Bullhead City council, Clark County board of commissioners, and the Laughlin Town Advisory Board.

Non-tribal members questioned the location of the proposed solar array, as well. Some noted that the Colorado River is part of the Pacific Flyway, a migratory bird route that stretches from South American to Alaska.

Others questioned the noise levels that would be produced by the panel’s tilt motors. One woman commented that the sound may not be audible to humans but that it could be detrimental to wildlife and pets. Another mentioned the migration of tarantulas that occurs on the land each year.

“I’ve observed the fact that the panels look like just a big lake of water with the light reflecting off them...,” said Norm Burger, a resident of the adjacent Pebble Lake subdivision. “My vision of kind of a living hell could possibly be that during the day I’m going to be blinded by solar panels and then at night I’m going to hear nothing but buzzing from transformers.”

Ralph Schwab, also a Pebble Lake resident, said he’s not a fan of the farm area either, especially the aerial spraying of pesticides. Despite those concerns, he appreciates the cooling effect the irrigated crops provide in the evening hours and questioned whether removing the farm fields would result in a rise of temperatures in the surrounding area, a phenomenon known as the heat island effect.

“We have studies on this,” said Laura Abram, First Solar’s director of public affairs. “This is not an event we’re seeing on farm land.”

Jacobo countered that research shows the temperatures on the back surface of the solar panels can be up to 30 degrees Celsius warmer than the ambient temperature; above the arrays, it’s a difference of about 2.5 degrees Celsius. Those conditions will render the land useless for generations, he said.

“Anybody that knows how to cook in this room, if you put something in an oven for 40 years, even though you’re only doing it for 18 hours (a day), that’s going to...potentially prevent farming in the future. Anybody that’s looking to farm something after this plant is in place, you’re going to be out of luck on 2,800 to 3,600 acres, and we won’t get it back in any of our lifetimes.”

During the meetings, First Solar officials were unprepared to respond to questions about whether other utility-size solar plants have been built adjacent to residential areas; and if so, the effect those plants have on surrounding property values.

All concerns and comments will be taken into account, assured Chip Lewis, environmental compliance officer with the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the lead agency on the project. He pointed out that the BIA is bound by a government-to-government relationship with the Tribal Council.

The next step in the process is the preparation of a draft Environmental Impact Statement. Lewis explained the document could contain alternatives to the original proposed plan based upon comments provided during the

scoping process. The public will be given an opportunity to comment on the draft EIS before the final decision is rendered.

“This is really early. We’ve been through projects like this where people raise concerns,” said Abrams when asked if First Solar is considering withdrawing its proposal after hearing the negative comments expressed during both scoping meetings. “What we pride ourselves on is being able to sit down and talk and listen to people and see what we can do to address them. And that’s what we’re committed to do: working with the Tribe, the Tribal community and the Tribal Council to do that.”