

Weldon solar project comes under scrutiny

Cathy Perfect, Kern Valley Sun, 4-6-10

A project to develop 500 acres into a 60-megawatt solar facility in Weldon is winding its way through the County planning process.

The Weldon Solar Project proposed by the Los Angeles-based Renewable Resources Group, is located east of Fay Ranch Road and on both sides of Hwy 178, and could serve 20,000 homes, proponents said.

At a March 26 “scoping meeting” the Kern County Planning Department brought together all the agencies having jurisdiction and/or interests within the area to comment on the proposed project.

South Fork Union School District trustee Alan Jaffe and Kernville Union School District administrator Sherry Costa spoke about the potential impacts to the South Fork Elementary and Middle Schools, said Debbie Hess, SCE Region Manager Public Affairs, who attended the meeting.

Discussion topics included view shed, transmission, dust, whether the land should be used for solar or remain as agriculture, cultural issues, wetlands, flood zone, traffic from construction, and do three full time jobs justify this type of project in this area.

1st District Supervisor Jon McQuiton’s representative Judy Hyatt cited other items of major concern that included, high groundwater levels and the effect the project may have on existing wells in the area; the bird population and the potential effect the project could have on migratory bird populations and threatened and endangered species; dark skies; aesthetics; cultural and historical sites; loss of prime agricultural land; impact on Weldon United Methodist Church, the church property sits in the boundary of Renewable Resources; increased blowing dust in an already windy area of the South Fork Valley; change in drainage, as the project sits in a flood plain and in the path of the water traveling through the Kelso Creek levy; increased traffic; wetlands; infrastructure concerns; and who will benefit from the power produced?

“All of these issues will be addressed during the CEQA (California Environmental Quality Act) process,” Hyatt said. “I think the major complaint heard from our community was the lack of communication from the proponents, Renewable Resources,” she added.

PG&E, SCE and San Diego Gas and Electric are mandated to have 33 percent of their portfolio, or energy mix, by 2020 from renewable sources, said Hess. “With renewable energy comes the possible need for new transmission lines, substations or upgrade to existing facilities. This project is not an SCE project.”

Edison was recently contacted by the Weldon Solar Project group, Hess said. “We are currently initiating a study to see if there is capacity on our current transmission line to accept this power and what (if any) upgrades would be necessary at the Weldon Substation. The earliest I expect our study will be available is October.”

Those in attendance at the March 26 meeting were assured that public comments could be received right up to the point the draft EIR (DEIR) was completed, Hyatt said. “Once the DEIS is published for review, the public will then have another opportunity to submit comments,” she said. “Renewable Resources will be hosting at least two meetings in the South Fork area to take public comment.”