

# World's largest solar project prompts environmental debate

**Paul Rogers, Bay Area News Group, 12-23-09**

Panoche Valley is known mostly for cattle and barbed wire, a treeless landscape in eastern San Benito County that turns green every spring but for much of the year looks like rural Nevada.

A posse of lawmen gunned down the famous Gold Rush bandit Joaquin Murrieta, an inspiration for the fictional character Zorro, near here in 1853. Nothing that exciting has happened since.

But now the remote valley 25 miles south of Hollister is finding itself at the center of a new showdown. A Silicon Valley company is proposing to build here what would be the world's largest solar farm — 1.2 million solar panels spread across an area roughly the size of 3,500 football fields.

"This is renewable energy. It doesn't cause pollution, it doesn't use coal or foreign oil, and it emits no greenhouse gases," said Mike Peterson, CEO of Solargen Energy, the Cupertino company behind the \$1.8 billion project.

But critics — including some environmentalists — say green energy isn't always green. In a refrain being heard increasingly across California, they contend the plan to cover this ranch land with a huge solar project would harm a unique landscape and its wildlife.

From the Bay Area to the Mojave Desert, green energy supporters are frustrated that a state that wants to lead the green revolution is facing roadblocks.

Peterson, a former vice president of Goldman Sachs, looked across the Panoche Valley last week and noted its attributes.

"From our standpoint, this is a perfect place," he said. "If not here, where?"

## **Opposition mounts**

The project would produce 420 megawatts of electricity, roughly the same as a medium-sized natural gas power plant, and enough to power 315,000 homes.

But in recent weeks, the Santa Clara Valley, Monterey Peninsula and Fresno chapters of the Audubon Society have opposed the project.

"One of our biggest worries is the size. There are no other projects like it," said Shani Kleinhaus, an environmental advocate with the Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society. "There is really very little information on how these sorts of projects impact the environment. We really don't know."

Among their primary concerns: Panoche Valley is home to several endangered species, including the San Joaquin kit fox, the blunt-nosed leopard lizard and the giant kangaroo rat. Additionally, an estimated 130 species of birds have been observed in the valley, including the bald eagle, golden eagle and prairie falcon.

Kleinhaus said she supports renewable energy. But not here.

"Put solar panels over parking lots. Put them along the freeways, in airports, landfills," she said. "There's plenty of space. In five years, with new technology, they may not even need this much space."

Several nearby residents also are fighting the project.

Kim Williams leases 300 acres along Panoche Road, where she raises 650 free-range chickens. Williams moved to the area from Concord three years ago, becoming a sustainable farmer after reading Michael Pollan's "The Omnivore's Dilemma."

"It looks desolate right now at first glance. But come back in a month, and you'll see a green valley that looks like Ireland," she said. "There are wildflowers. It's beautiful."

Williams said vast solar arrays would alter the character of the area. She worries that Solargen, founded in 2006, has never built a solar farm, and is pursuing the project primarily for the huge federal subsidies now flowing to renewable energy.

Similar debates are playing out across California.

Two large solar proposals in San Luis Obispo County near the Carrizo Plain — a 250-megawatt project proposed by SunPower of San Jose, and a 550-megawatt proposal from First Solar of Arizona — also are facing environmental opposition.

Meanwhile, U.S. Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., on Monday introduced a bill to establish two new national monuments on federal land in the Mojave Desert. If approved, the measure would all but kill 19 large solar and wind farms proposed for the area.

Feinstein said she wants no large-scale solar or wind energy on former railroad lands that the federal government acquired a decade ago and that are prime habitat for bighorn sheep, desert tortoises and other wildlife.

In a statement, Feinstein said she supports solar energy, and her bill requires the Bureau of Land Management and other agencies to identify other desert areas suitable for solar.

But others argue that prohibiting solar developments in vast portions of California doesn't make sense.

"They say that we want renewable energy, but we don't want you to put it anywhere," said Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger in a speech at Yale University last year. "I mean, if we cannot put solar power plants in the Mojave Desert, I don't know where the hell we can put it."

Demand for solar is hot. Schwarzenegger this year signed an executive order requiring 33 percent of California's electricity to come from renewable sources such as solar and wind. Meanwhile, President Barack Obama's stimulus plan contains billions in grants and tax credits for green power. It would pay for 30 percent of Solargen's project in the Panoche Valley, for example, if ground can be broken by Dec. 1, 2010.

Julia Levin, a member of the California Energy Commission and former Audubon California policy director, said large solar projects are needed because residential rooftop solar, while important, costs more and takes longer to ramp up than big commercial installations.

"There are some very real environmental challenges for renewable energy development," she said. "But

NIMBY challenges are slowing down some renewable projects. Our challenge is separating one from the other." NIMBY is an acronym for "Not In My Back Yard."

The Panoche Valley solar project could come to a final vote before the San Benito County Board of Supervisors by year's end. If work started by next December, it would be finished by 2016.

"There is some opposition down there, and I can understand that," said retired schoolteacher Reb Monaco, the supervisor whose district includes Panoche Valley. "But when you look at areas that make sense for solar, it is probably an area that makes sense."

### **Jobs, tax revenue**

Solargen's Peterson said the solar panels would be on racks, 3 feet off the ground, so sheep could graze underneath, and wildlife could move under them. The 4,717-acre installation would create jobs and tax revenue for the tiny county and give it an international reputation as a solar leader, he added. Currently, the largest solar farm in the world, in Spain, is 60 megawatts, about seven times smaller than Solargen's proposal.

"It was like everyone was in favor of renewable energy," Peterson said, looking out over a field of cow patties. "But the solar industry is finding the politics are complicated. There's a lot of 'we love renewable, but not here, and not in my backyard.' "