

Calif. farm enjoys rare backing of enviros, farmers

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A solar farm proposed for 47 square miles of cracked, salty farmland in a remote region of California's Kings and Fresno counties is a rare solar energy project in the state that enjoys backing from farmers, environmental groups and the government.

While the Westlands Solar Park, to be built in an arid expanse of the San Joaquin Valley, is only one of dozens of unfinished solar projects in California, it is notable for what it is not: Unlike many farms slated for the wilderness of the Mojave, where development faces environmental restrictions and wildlife protections, the Westlands park would be built on land already degraded by decades of use.

"This particular idea of using retired agricultural land for large-scale renewable energy development ... has a lot of interest," said Carl Zichella, Sierra Club's director of Western renewable programs.

Solar developments in the San Joaquin Valley could see more interest in the future, as the Mojave projects linger in uncertainty. But it remains difficult for farmers to let go of their land, even if it is impoverished, and give it over to solar power, said Daniel Kim, a partner at Westside Holdings, the investment group that has a lease contract with Westlands and neighboring farmers.

"The whole idea of farmers letting go of these farms is not easy," Kim said. "When you're a third-generation farmer, it's not a decision taken lightly."