

Large solar project approved by Fresno County planning commissioners

By Marc Benjamin

Fresno County planning commissioners on Thursday threw their support behind a massive solar project south of Tranquillity that has the backing of agriculture, environmental groups and unions.

The [Tranquillity Solar project](#), which bisects Highway 33 north of West Nebraska and south of West Manning avenues, could eventually cover 3,732 acres and produce 400 megawatts of electricity. One megawatt can power 1,000 homes.

Unless the project is appealed, the commission's decision is final and will not need review by the Board of Supervisors.

The project applicant, [Recurrent Energy](#) of San Francisco, has contracts with Southern California Edison to buy power and Pacific Gas & Electric to build a switching station.

Construction could get under way within a year, said Marisa Mitchell with Recurrent Energy. The first phase will consist of about 1,900 acres. Seven other smaller parcels could be part of the project. The development would be the largest in the company's portfolio, she said. Recurrent has built plants producing a total of 700 megawatts of electricity, and the company operates plants producing 500 megawatts, she said.

The energy firm also is building a project known as Adams East, a 19-megawatt solar project near the proposed Tranquillity Solar site.

The Tranquillity project, if built out, would be the largest in the Fresno area. It will create more than 250 construction jobs, plus 10 permanent and 40 temporary jobs, once the project is operating. The company plans to decommission the project in 35 to 40 years.

Mitchell told commissioners that Tranquillity Solar "represents the pinnacle of achievement in environmental siting and design" because the project is on retired agricultural land, has no surface water allocation and is subject to a nonirrigation covenant. The soils also are poor because of exposure to salt and selenium buildup from poor drainage. The site is in close proximity to high-voltage transmission lines and there are no sensitive cultural or animal species on the site, she said.

The project is within Westlands Water District, one of the land owners. Russ Freeman, Westlands' resources supervisor, said the district is selling the land to Recurrent Energy.

Leasing land for farming, Freeman said, has become increasingly difficult for the district, which has to ensure that the land is not a weed or pest nuisance for its neighbors.

"Managing the land is a significant burden," he said.

Crops grown in the area have no water allocation under a federal agreement and are "dry farmed." This year, about 10,000 acres normally in production will not be, he said, meaning that the district will face higher costs to maintain the land.

"I believe this (solar) project is the best use possible at this time," Freeman said.

No opponents to the project spoke during the meeting; supporters include the National Resources Defense Council,

which sent a letter to the Planning Commission earlier this week.

NRDC was “an early supporter of using sites such as the one under consideration for Tranquillity because the lack of environmental and cultural resource conflicts, proximity to population load centers and availability of transmission for the project meet our criteria for developing renewable energy in an intelligent and expeditious way, a process we refer to as ‘Smart from the Start,’ ” said Carl Zichella, director of western transmission for NRDC. “Transmission and substation additions contemplated to serve this and potentially other Central Valley projects have the added benefit of reducing transmission congestion in the Central Valley and improving system reliability.”

Local union representatives also support the project because it will create jobs.

Solar projects in the region have put large numbers of people to work who would otherwise be unemployed, said Kevin Cole, business manager for the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers in Fresno.

“If it hadn’t been for these projects, I can’t tell you how many people would have lost their homes or cars,” he said. “It’s been a godsend.”

He said many workers at the Adams East project will go to work on the Tranquillity project, which will create even more jobs for western Fresno County residents.

“It has impacted our whole community,” said Kathy Sanchez, a solar project construction employee from Mendota. “They don’t just pay minimum wage, they pay us a little more than that. They treat us good ... it has benefited many, many people.”

Bay Area lawyer Laura Horton said Recurrent Energy was helpful in adding measures in the environmental impact report for the Tranquillity project to guard against Valley fever.

“We raised the issue of health impacts of Valley fever ... because there have been a number of cases in the area, and disturbing soils could greatly increase the risk of exposure,” said Horton, who represents California Unions for Reliable Energy.

She supports the project because Recurrent Energy and Fresno County included Valley fever measures as a condition for the environmental report’s approval.

Planning commissioners said the land’s best use today is in solar electricity production, although in 40 years it could go back into agriculture.

“I have been totally opposed to converting agricultural land that has water and is in production, and you also know I have been proposing that most of these solar projects go into the retired land of Westlands because it is a perfect use on an interim basis to bring jobs, produce power and have some value to the property,” said Commissioner A.J. Yates

Commissioner Barbara Ferguson doubted the land would revert to an agricultural use.

“It’s not in agricultural production now, and I don’t know what you can do to make it agriculturally productive,” she said “I’m not the least bit concerned about what will happen 40 years from now when they pull out their solar panels.”

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