

County Looks at Solar Arrays vs. Agriculture Preservation

Solar energy is viewed as a good green energy source. Whether it will harm another form of green — agriculture — is a question facing Alameda County supervisors and planners.

The county's prime agricultural land, most of it in the Mountain House area, has shrunk from 6926 acres in 2000 to 3957 acres in 2008, a re-

duction of nearly 3000 acres in eight years.

Prime agricultural land has the "best features to sustain long-term agricultural production," says the report. Much of the land in the Mountain House area consists of irrigated row crops.

The agricultural land is even more precious for agriculture in the context of the new town of

Mountain House, which developed over the past 10 years across the county line in San Joaquin County, says a report from the Alameda County planning staff.

Development of solar installations in the Mountain House area could result in the loss of a substantial portion of the county's remaining farmland, according to the report.

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SOLAR

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County supervisors gave the nod to the staff at their planning meeting April 12 to proceed with creation of a policy that will deal with the conflicts. They want it back in 90 days, said the meeting's chair, Scott Haggerty, whose district includes Livermore and Mountain House.

Noting that there have been three applications, either filed or pending, Haggerty said, "We have to be fair to people who made investments in this type of technology."

Haggerty wants reports at the end of 30 and 60 days to see how the policy development is proceeding.

Supervisor Nate Miley, whose district includes Dublin, said, "Unless we turn out the lights here, we need solar and wind farms. We need to put them in the context where they work best. I do think that East County Mountain House is the best place."

Haggerty added, "I'm on the same page with Miley."

Dick Schneider, a Sierra Club representative, said that the county planning staff should conduct an inventory of urban areas such as parking lots and building tops where urban solar could be used. The staff report mentions urban as a potential area for some solar.

Haggerty said he didn't want any study of urban solar to slow down the rural policy formation. He suggested that a separate report be prepared on urban solar.

Schneider also told the board that the staff report refers to "solar farms." He said it is a misnomer. Solar arrays are really an industrial use, producing electricity, he said.

The applicants for the new solar installations told the board they are eager to develop. They support the county's plan to produce a policy in 90 days.

The applicants are Michael Chen of Cool Earth Solar, and Michael Clevenger of Pegasus Development. Clevenger said that he is two or three weeks away from entering an application for a solar installation on 1977 acres near Mountain House.

CONFLICTS BETWEEN SOLAR, AG CITED

A planning staff member told the board that there are a variety of issues besides shrinking agricultural lands involved in forming a policy.

One is the possibility that if solar energy stations were considered industrial uses, they might disqualify an agricultural parcel from the tax protection of the Williamson Act.

The act, passed in the late 1950s, provides an assessment break to ranchers to help them remain in ranching. More research is needed on the question, said a planner.

Fencing for solar installations could disrupt habitat corridors for small animals, continues the staff report.

Locating solar arrays near parklands and scenic corridors could have an impact on the viewshed. Vegetation under solar panels could also present a fire hazard.

Such conflicts will have to be reconciled, if the county supervisors want to support the solar arrays. On the other hand, if the desire for agriculture and open space preservation were paramount, the solar arrays would be "impractical and should not be engaged on our rural lands," says the staff report.

An advantage of allowing them, though, would be to fit in with statewide efforts to promote renewable energy, the report adds.