

Ag Panel Says Don't Rush Solar Policy

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Alameda County Supervisors are going too fast in trying to put a policy in place for location of solar arrays in rural areas. The haste could cause big problems for more than one-half of the prime agricultural land in the county.

That was the message from the County Agricultural Advisory Committee, which met May 24 in Dublin. Much more study is needed concerning solar arrays' impact on farming, ranching, and endangered species habitat, the panel members stated.

The county planning staff is under direction from Supervisor Scott Haggerty to return 90 days after the supervisors' April 12 meeting with a policy draft. County assistant planning director Liz McElligott told the ag panel at its meeting, "We are on a short time-line. We are not having as many (input) meetings as we'd like."

In addition to the ag panel meeting last week, there is a session slated for the county building at 224 W. Winton Avenue, Hayward, at 6 pm. June 16. Another opportunity to provide input is scheduled for 6 p.m. June 23 at 4825 Gleason Drive, Dublin, where the ag committee regularly meets.

Haggerty and Supervisor Nate Miley made it clear where their sentiments stood concerning locating solar installations on agricultural land.

Miley said, "Unless we turn out the lights here, we need solar and wind farms, and to put them where they work best. I do think that East County Mountain House is the best place."

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

When environmentalist Dick Schneider asked that the study include urban locations for solar arrays, Haggerty told planners to prepare a separate report on that aspect so that it won't slow down the look at rural locations.

Haggerty said that putting a policy in place quickly is important because a solar power firm, Cool Earth, has submitted an application. The firm wanted quick approval in order to help secure financing.

Cool Earth director of business development Tony Chen said that the site in the Mountain House area is a good location because it is near a power substation that feeds to a nearby power grid.

Cool Earth would use a parcel of approximately 140 acres. However, an application is in the works that would dwarf that size. However, it has not been filed yet.

Michael Clevenger, who heads Pegasus Energy Partners, has been lining up parcel owners who control approximately 2000 farmland acres adjacent to the Cool Earth project.

The would-be Pegasus project and the Cool Earth application are in an area designated as prime agricultural land, which means the soil is good and there is enough moisture, through available irrigation.

The county contains 3957 acres of prime land, so the Pegasus plan, if it became reality, would be on more than one-half of the county's prime agricultural land, said committee member Kent Reeves, who is executive officer of the Alameda County Resources Conservation District.

The area is near Byron-Bethany Road, west of the Mountain House new town, which is in San Joaquin County.

No one at the meeting came out against locating the solar arrays in the Altamont. Members' focus was on making sure that the county researches all the facts in drawing up the policy.

The study also should include impacts on neighboring landowners, including economics, and how use of such things as weed killers to keep grasses away from the solar arrays would affect neighbors' land.

Larry Gosselin, who represents the equine industry on the panel, said that taking land out of production affects nearby agriculture. A farmer who uses part of the land for solar might not have enough land left to use his or her equipment fully, and then will move away, he said.

Rich Cimino, conservation director for Ohlone Audubon society, told the panel that the removal of tall grass near solar arrays will destroy habitat for both endangered species and for the rodents on which Altamont predator birds feed.

The county is finishing years of efforts to reduce the number of bird-kills in the Altamont. If the birds were pushed over to the turbine areas, because of the migration of tall-grass animals to the turbine areas, there could be more birds killed. The county could miss its goal on bird-kill reduction, said Cimino.

Being careful now about solar power installation policy could prevent the lawsuits and environmental destruction that occurred with the wind turbine issue, said Cimino.

IS SPEED OF STUDY

A PRE-APPROVAL?

When the committee's discussion came around to the fast-track imposed on the research, McElligott said, "We don't want to hold up the projects." Cimino asked, "Is it pre-approved?"

Laura Baker of the California Native Plant Society said, "It's totally inappropriate," if the draft policy is being speeded so applications could be approved.

Baker said that besides the farming impacts, the county should also look at the impact on native plants. Even in the non-prime lands, with high alkaline soils, there are native plants. The Altamont is one of 15 "protected areas that have been identified in Alameda and Contra Costa counties," said Baker.

Sheila Barry, a committee member who represents UC Agriculture Extension, was also concerned about the "fast track" for the policy, and for any subsequent environmental studies.

"When environmental review is pushed so far and so hard, there is no opportunity to see what the impacts are. It's not about just one impact, but the transformation of landscapes," said Barry.

"I would be sorry to see the transfer from ag lands to energy production. There is a profound change in the way of life, impacts that are not looked at unless at the landscape level," said Barry.

"If this is rushed so far because the applicants want to know what their status is, then that kind of deliberation won't take place. I urge the county to look at land use first. If it's appropriate for solar to come in, then so be it," said Barry.

Bob Baltzer, president of Friends of Livermore, said that when the county policy is drawn up, mitigation of any agricultural acres displaced should be done at more than a 1:1 ratio.

Dolores Bengtson, who represents parks and recreation on the committee, said one question that should be asked in the policy formation process is how Measure D affects siting of solar panels.

Measure D co-author Dick Schneider told the East County Board of Zoning Adjustments at its meeting Jan. 19 that an application by GreenVolts for the first, and so far only, solar installation in the Altamont is not an exception in Measure D, although wind turbines are. GreenVolts is located slightly west of the Cool Earth application.

Measure D deleted from the county plan "industrial uses appropriate for remote areas and determined to be compatible with agriculture," said Schneider. As a private, commercial solar electricity plant, the application clearly was in an industrial use, said Schneider.

Ag committee member Gosselin, who is also on the East County Board of Zoning Adjustment, said at that Jan. 19 zoning board meeting that he agreed with Schneider that solar arrays are an industrial use. He voted against the GreenVolts application, which was approved 2-1.