

Kern County considers developing big solar, wind energy projects

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Ilsa Setziol/Special to KPCC.org

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There's growing interest in California in developing large solar and wind energy projects. Utilities have to meet a state mandate to increase their use of renewable sources over the next several years. Some counties see alternative energy as a potential economic boon. One of them is Kern County.

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Planted amidst the Joshuas: more than 3,000 wind turbines, resembling large white pinwheels. The older models are about six-stories-high. The newest are taller than the statue of liberty. Standing next to the turbines, Kern County planner Lorelei Oviatt says, "You're actually in the middle of a 223,000 acre wind area that Kern County has set aside, where we hope we can site enough wind for over 3 million households."

This vast wind farm is a conglomeration of a dozen private projects that sell energy to Southern California Edison and two other utilities. Oviatt's planning office makes it easier to build alternative energy projects by shepherding developers through the permitting process.

Kern County has ambitions to power more of the state. Oviatt projects that, by 2020, the county will produce enough wind and solar energy to supply seven million homes. Industry analysts say that's entirely likely, in part because Kern

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has some of the best wind and sun resources in the state, and much of the infrastructure needed to export the power.

"I think what makes Kern County the leader among counties in the state is the combination of things they look at," says John White, director of the Center for Energy Efficiency and Renewable Technologies. "They're looking at the environment, they're looking at economic opportunity, and they're also looking at their tax base." Oviatt says the county prides itself on understanding and addressing environmental concerns. That can mean helping energy developers find more suitable locations. "We make sure our wind projects take into account that we'd like to leave the desert as untouched as possible," she says.

The pay off is a windfall of tax revenue—perhaps as much as \$30 million a year two decades from now—and new jobs at a time when unemployment in Kern is running around 16 percent.

And, says Oviatt, unlike housing developments, energy projects—especially wind farms—don't cost the county much.

"They don't need the same kinds of infrastructure, they don't need sewer, don't need water. And they certainly don't call at midnight about loud parties."

Oviatt says the county prefers energy projects be developed on private instead of public land. That way the county gets the tax revenue, and wildlife is protected on land managed by the federal government.

Large tracts of private land are hard to come by. Still, many property owners in this conservative county have already signed on. Ranchers have found that turbines don't disturb their cattle, and they bring in extra income.

At the southeastern tip of the wind farm, CalPortland Cement is leasing 9-thousand acres surrounding its limestone mine to a wind turbine company.

Plant manager Bruce Schafer says the project takes advantage of land that wasn't being used. He calls the project "good stewardship of our property. Wind turbines in general take a very small footprint."

Linda Parker of the Kern County Wind Association says many desert landowners hadn't found a way to profit from their holdings—until now. "A lot of these landowners are getting royalties and a retirement that they otherwise never imagined they were going to get.," she says. "I equate this to a gold rush."

Kern County is positioning itself to scoop up the money, and hoping that with careful planning, its foray into alternative power will result in a full-blown energy boom.



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What's being done (if anything) to estimate/mitigate for impacts to birds who use the same air currents that these turbines do? At a minimum, there should be third-party monitoring for this, with some mechanism for withdrawal of permits if the impacts are significant.

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