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County supervisors approve solar project

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Last Updated Tuesday, Mar 29 2011 04:49 PM

Kern County supervisors blessed a 6,047-acre solar project between Taft and Interstate 5 on Tuesday.

The 700-megawatt project will place photovoltaic solar panels on 4,868 of those 6,047 acres, converting the land from agricultural uses to industrial power generation.

Developer Maricopa Sun LLC President Jeff Roberts of Fresno said the company, which is affiliated with Granville Homes, bought the land eight years ago but couldn't farm it because it lacked a critical component of the agricultural process: "This is land we tried for eight years to find water for," he said.

So the company chose to convert the land, which is broken up into a mish-mash of parcels that stretch in a long line from I-5 west to Taft, into a solar power project.

Roberts said Maricopa Sun, as the property owner, is partnering with several solar power companies to develop the land. Those companies are in the process of developing purchase agreements with power companies to sell the energy the project would produce.

He said Kern County planning staff have estimated that the project, when built out, would produce enough electricity to consistently power 300,000 homes. But Roberts believes that is a conservative number.

The project, which had been questioned in the past by two oil companies and the Sierra Club, was not opposed during Tuesday's meeting.

In fact Gordon Nipp of the Sierra Club spoke in support of the project, saying his organization supports projects that are in the right place and are properly mitigated.

He said Maricopa Sun had been open to making changes to its project to satisfy Sierra Club concerns.

Planning Director Lorelei Oviatt said the lack of water to irrigate the land, strong Sun's willingness to make sure Kern County will see sales and property tax benefits from the project made her staff comfortable with recommending approval of the project.



Supervisor Ray Watson lauded the project and made the motion to approve the development, a motion that was promptly seconded by Supervisor Jon McQuiston and supported by the full board of Supervisors.

Watson said that the water deficit in the area alleviated the natural concern he has about taking farm land out of production.

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