

Gov. Jerry Brown sees future in massive solar plant near Blythe



Written by

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California Gov. Jerry Brown, just a day after vetoing the Democrat-backed state budget, on Friday used the backdrop of the future site of one of the world's largest solar plants to issue a call for fiscal responsibility and investment in a green economy for the state's future.

"We're going to be the world leader in solar energy," Brown said, in feisty form as he spoke at the groundbreaking of Solar Trust of America's 1,000-megawatt solar plant 8 miles west of Blythe and roughly 90 miles east of Indio.

"Yes, I vetoed the budget. Yes, we will have fiscal discipline," he said. "We can have more wealth if we have the discipline, if we have the imagination and are willing to do the hard work."

Future hope and present controversy were the two themes of the day. An Indian American group claiming the project will

destroy historic geoglyphs unfurled banners and protested both at the groundbreaking ceremony at the project site and a community reception at nearby Palo Verde Community College that followed.

"They've destroyed geoglyphs of the sun," said Patricia Figueroa of La Cuna Aztlan, an American Indian group that has filed a lawsuit against several of the solar projects on public land east of the valley. "We're desperate. All geoglyphs are tied to the creation story."

Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar responded to questions about the protest by maintaining that the Obama administration considered "First American" concerns a top priority. But, he said, that didn't mean problems wouldn't arise.

"We have to make decisions to move forward in a way (that is) respectful of native concerns," he said. "This at the end of the day is about jobs. We will power the energy security, the economic security of

America into the future.”

Like Salazar, most speakers at the event focused on the economic benefits, for Blythe and Riverside County, as well as the country at large.

“The Blythe solar power project is the first solar power facility to compete on scale with coal and nuclear power plants,” said Uwe T. Schmidt, CEO of Solar Trust.

Brown was more succinct. “Energy is not Texas oil; it's California sun,” he said.

The Solar Trust plant is among four fast-track solar projects planned for the 202,000 acres of public land between Joshua Tree National Park and Blythe. A second, NextEra's 250-megawatt Genesis project east of Desert Center, also has started construction.

Electricity from the 7,000- acre Solar Trust project, enough to power 300,000 homes, is being sold to Southern California Edison, officials said.

Solar Millennium, the project developer and a subsidiary of Solar Trust, has estimated that the Blythe plant will create about 1,000 local jobs during construction and 200 long- term jobs. Thousands of jobs also will be created across the country from the mammoth project's supply chain, Schmidt said.

Wendy Frederick, eastern regional manager for Riverside County Workforce Development, thinks the majority of jobs

on the project will be able to be filled locally. She pointed to the 140 students trained in solar technology in programs at College of the Desert and Palo Verde Community College.

“The project labor agreement says they have to hire from Riverside County,” she said.

“We already have three laborers (employed on the project),” said Michael S. Dea, business agent for the Laborers' International Union of North America, Local 1184, which has a hiring office in Thousand Palms.

“We're hoping to get 150-200 laborers. We'll have people from the local (Blythe) area and the Coachella Valley” he said.

But the economic trickle- down of the Blythe project and other solar plants remains uncertain.

Riverside County officials are proposing a franchise fee of 2percent of all gross

revenues per year from the large-scale solar plants to accommodate the projects' long-term environmental and social impacts.

Blythe Mayor Joseph DeConinck said Kiewit, the project contractor, has opened an office in town and is buying fuel and building materials locally.

But, he said, "Blythe only gets 1 percent of sales tax."

Still, many in the community saw Friday's groundbreaking as a turning point.

Alec Todd, 29, is one of the graduates of the solar training program at Palo Verde. The Army vet has been accepted into a union apprenticeship program with the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, he said.

"I'm waiting for the phone call," he said.

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