

San Francisco Chronicle, February 21, 2021

Map out where solar installations will have least impact on farmland

by Robert Selna

California's transition to clean energy will mean that solar projects occupy vast amounts of open space, including agricultural acreage, which is urbanizing at a rapid clip. Meanwhile, Gov. Gavin Newsom recently ordered conserving 30 percent of state land to help protect biodiversity.

As a lifelong Californian, I have great confidence that we can convert to 100% renewable energy and preserve our resource-rich land and native species. It will take smart planning, however, because the environmental priorities of California — and increasingly those of the U.S. — often present competing goals.

In particular, the conflict between large-scale solar development and its impacts on agricultural lands, open space and threatened species is escalating. Adding to the tension are large energy companies, which see the price of solar dropping as the state and federal governments embrace it, presaging a new energy economy that could make them very rich.

If unaddressed, the solar versus natural resources battle, which needlessly pits one set of important environmental goals against another, will mostly be fought at the local level, where land use regulations are enforced.

Fortunately, there is a basic solution to the problem: mapping out where large solar installations — which are fundamentally industrial land uses — will have the least impact on farmland, open space and species. Solar is an important tool for California to meet its clean energy goals, but it does not belong on land abundant in agricultural and other natural resources.

Some locals wisely have started to plan. Santa Clara and Contra Costa counties, and leaders in the San Joaquin Valley, have identified “least conflict areas” where solar development is likely to have fewer adverse impacts on the surrounding environment. Defenders of the Wildlife, a national group dedicated to protecting imperiled species, says such “smart from the start” efforts accommodate key goals: (1) protecting vital natural resources, and (2) speeding up the permitting process for renewable energy projects.

In contrast, Alameda County shows how badly things can go when local governments review large solar projects on an ad-hoc basis. There, San Francisco company Intersect Power — whose recent corporate PR piece boasts of an \$8 billion asset portfolio — proposes to construct a 400-acre, ground-mounted solar facility that would occupy a valley designated in 1966 as one of the county’s few scenic rural routes.

In 2000, county voters went a step further and approved Measure D to “protect the natural qualities, the wildlife habitats, the watersheds and the beautiful open spaces of Alameda County.” Measure D’s goal for unincorporated North Livermore — where the project would be constructed — was to “permit and encourage cultivated agriculture and to preclude urbanization.”

More recently, the U.S. Department of Fish & Wildlife warned the county officials of what local farmers and environmentalist already knew. The valley is home to threatened species, such as California red-legged frogs, Central California tiger salamanders, and San Joaquin kit foxes, to name just a few. The agency concluded that the project would likely injure or kill threatened species and noted that the project had failed to compensate for the expected wildlife loss by replacing habit elsewhere.

It is easy to understand why Intersect would like the location for the solar project it has dubbed Aramis. The area is large, flat, undeveloped pastureland near a substation. From an economic standpoint, it makes perfect sense. And, absent any solar guidelines, county planning staff seems to have focused on the project's climate change benefits at the expense of preservation and the will of county voters.

The Aramis project has made environmental groups uneasy. The Golden Gate Audubon Society and others oppose it. The Sierra Club has given mixed signals. The club's Tri-Valley chapter recommended pausing the project until solar guidelines could be adopted. Later, the national office silenced the Tri-Valley chapter and started advocating for the project.

For its part, Intersect has acted in ways unbecoming of a Bay Area clean energy company. In addition to failing to compensate for wildlife loss, Intersect claims that the large solar project is actually an agricultural use because sheep will be used for weed abatement two months out of the year, and plants for honeybees will be grown on the project's permitter. Further, despite admitting that the project imposes significant adverse effects on the area's scenery, the company takes the dubious stance that it is consistent with the scenic route designation.

An even darker side of Intersect emerged in January when it lost 38 acres of the project site because a property owner terminated lease negotiations. The property owner's lawyer issued Intersect a cease-and-desist letter and reported to the county counsel that Intersect representatives had spent five hours at the elderly owner's home without his lawyer present, offering him \$75,000 to sign a lease that was missing important legal provisions. The attorney described Intersect's behavior as "horrificing."

The Alameda County Board of Supervisors is scheduled to review the Aramis project on March 4. The supervisors should reject the project and craft sensible, least-conflict solar development guidelines. The alternative is to needlessly sacrifice protected land and native species, spurn county voters, and attract more conflict. If interested, contact the Alameda County Board of Supervisors at cbs@acgov.org.