

Agriculture, solar energy competition heats up

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

BONANZA — Nobody is against solar energy — at least, not in theory.

Solar power is often cast in a positive light until a specific site is chosen for a facility.

At that point, the proposed development can seem like a dark force to neighbors who fear the unsightly transformation of their familiar landscape.

“What’s it going to do to my property values when I’m right next to it?” asked Greg Thomas, whose farm abuts a proposed 2,733-acre solar project near Bonanza.

“All our property values are going to go in the toilet. Nobody wants to live next to a power plant,” answered Tonya Pinckney, another neighbor opposed to the facility planned by developer Hecate Energy.

Local hostility to solar facilities isn’t just a knee-jerk not in my backyard sentiment in Oregon, a state known for its rigorous protections against converting farmland to other uses.

Opponents of solar facilities are often strongly motivated by concern for the agricultural economy, which can permanently suffer if irrigated acres such as those within the Bonanza project are developed.

“Why do we have zoning laws?” Pinckney asked. “If it’s zoned for ag, how can they just take it out?”

About 600 acres of the project are irrigated and half the associated water rights can’t be transferred elsewhere due to a lack of available farmland, meaning that capacity could be lost forever, said Dave Noble, a local farmer.

“That is some top-notch farm ground for this area,” he said.

Competing goals

Aside from preserving agriculture, Oregon strives to be a leader in promoting renewable energy to reduce carbon emissions and fight climate change.

Those two objectives are bound to clash as solar energy production takes off in the state, propelled by economic forces as the technology becomes less expensive to manufacture and install.

While it’s long been boosted by tax credits, renewable portfolio mandates and other government incentives, the solar power industry has now found its financial footing and is expanding due to demand from utility companies, experts say.

“The market is driving the boom,” said Mark Zwieg, Hecate Energy’s development manager in charge of the Bonanza project and other proposals. “Our cost of materials is going down every year.”

A lower cost of construction is also spur-



Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press

Dave Noble, left, and Greg Thomas look out onto a neighboring field where a 2,700-acre solar facility is proposed near Bonanza. Neighbors oppose the project because it will take irrigated farmland out of production.

ring the growth, he said. “There’s more firms constructing, so there’s more competition, and competition drives costs down,” he said.

A megawatt of solar power capacity requires about 5 to 10 acres and costs about \$780,000 to \$910,000 to install at the utility scale, depending on the technology.

The Bonanza project alone is projected to increase Oregon’s solar capacity by 150-300 megawatts, depending on the configuration of the final design.

Though installation has grown cheaper, siting remains a challenging aspect of the solar development process. Projects require suitable land that’s close enough to transmission lines and substations to make economic sense.

“You may start seeing clusters of solar facilities in one area because of those attributes,” Zwieg said.

Resistance from surrounding landowners is a less tangible but very real impediment to developing a solar facility.

Hecate Energy is still conducting its due diligence on the Bonanza site, which was chosen partly because a natural gas facility was approved there by Oregon’s Energy Facility Siting Council nearly 20 years ago.

The many objections to the project — including the loss of irrigated land, wildlife habitat and cultural heritage — will be worked through as the company discusses the details with stakeholders, Zwieg said.

“We want to be good neighbors. We want to minimize our impacts,” he said. “You don’t want to look at all the projects the same. Your approach to opposition needs to evolve with

each project.”

‘Really big problem’

Even so, the controversies repeatedly encountered by solar projects in Oregon have taken a toll on the industry, experts say.

“Anecdotally, we’re hearing from developers that it’s a really big problem,” said Max Greene, regulatory and policy director for the Renewable Northwest nonprofit, which advocates for solar, wind and geothermal projects.

Unless Oregon comes up with a way to make the public more comfortable with solar projects, it will be difficult or even impossible to build new facilities in the state, he said.

“I don’t think we’re there yet. We’re at this flashpoint,” he said. “It’s a sign we need to do something to get people together and figure this out.”

Battles over large-scale facilities occur before the Energy Facility Siting Council, whose decisions can be appealed directly to the state’s Supreme Court.

Smaller projects approved by county governments are challenged before the state’s Land Use Board of Appeals, whose decisions are reviewed by the Oregon Court of Appeals.

Bills governing solar siting are also regularly debated in the Legislature, which recently gave county governments increased jurisdiction over such projects.

Farmland preservation groups prefer the council’s siting process because they’re afraid county governments aren’t equipped to thoroughly analyze solar facilities.

However, the council’s process also

has critics, such as Donnie Boyd, a Klamath County commissioner opposed to the Bonanza project.

“If the project is a certain size, they can go around the county and do whatever they want,” he said. “The EFSC process takes out the local input. I don’t think the state government should be able to dictate to local citizens how they want their area.”

One of the more significant changes affecting solar development has occurred on the regulatory front: A 2019 rule from the state’s Department of Land Conservation and Development effectively prohibited solar facilities on the two highest classes of soil.

The impact has particularly been felt in western Oregon, where solar development has largely ground to a halt since the rule was enacted, said Angela Crowley-Koch, executive director of the Oregon Solar and Storage Industries Association.

“Most people feel like the Willamette Valley is off the table right now,” she said.

While the area is notoriously soggy and cloudy, it still receives enough ultraviolet light to allow for productive solar facilities, Crowley-Koch said. Critically, the west side is also where most of the state’s power demand is.

“The decision was really using an ax when you should have used a scalpel,” she said. “The DLCD ruling didn’t allow for any nuance.”

Advocates of farmland preservation see the rule change as a victory. The regulation came after the Oregon Farm Bureau, 1,000 Friends of Oregon and local nonprofits raised an alarm about the proliferation of solar proposals on farmland.

In the experience of the farmland preservation nonprofit Friends of Yamhill County, most farmers in the area have received solicitations from solar developers, said Kathryn Jernstedt, the organization’s president. “We’re constantly fighting the misconception that agricultural land is vacant land. It’s not.”

Friends of Yamhill County isn’t opposed to renewable energy but doesn’t consider solar panels to be the best use of high-value farmland, since they don’t depend on high-quality soil or provide the same “economic multipliers” as agriculture, she said.

Though solar developments can provide income for farmers, that doesn’t justify building them on valuable soils, she said. “Running a hotel on farmland would diversify their income but it’s not an appropriate use of high-value farmland.”

Landowners are paid from \$300 to \$2,000 per acre annually — depending on the project’s size, location and other variables — for solar facilities installed on their properties. Contracts are usually for about 20 years and cover the productive lifespan of the project.

**FIVE
STAR
DADS**

**FIND DAD A GIFT
HE'LL LOVE**

STIHL



TRIMMERS
STARTING AT
\$139⁹⁹



BLOWERS
STARTING AT
\$139⁹⁹



CHAIN SAWS
STARTING AT
\$189⁹⁹



ASK ABOUT STIHL
**PRESSURE
WASHERS**

*A majority of STIHL gasoline-powered units sold in the United States are built in the United States from domestic and foreign parts and components.

Astoria
Clatsop Power Equipment
34912 Hwy 101 Bus
503-325-0792
clatsoppower.com

Long Beach
Dennis Company **ACE**
201 Pacific Ave
360-642-3166
denniscompanyace-longbeach.com

Seaside
Seaside **ACE** Hardware
39 South Holladay Drive
503-738-3053
seasideacehardware.com

STIHLDEALERS.COM