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VIA EMAIL: GPLUCKER@COUNTYOFCOLUSA.COM

Greg Plucker
County of Colusa
1213 Market Street
Colusa, CA 95932

Governor's Office of Planning & Research

Nov 16 2021

STATE CLEARINGHOUSE

Dear Mr. Plucker:

DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT REPORT FOR THE JANUS SOLAR PROJECT,
SCH#2020070577

The Department of Conservation's (Department) Division of Land Resource Protection (Division) has reviewed the Draft Environmental Impact Report for the Janus Solar Project (Project). The Division monitors farmland conversion on a statewide basis, provides technical assistance regarding the Williamson Act, and administers various agricultural land conservation programs. We offer the following comments and recommendations with respect to the project's potential impacts on agricultural land and resources.

Project Description

Janus Solar PV, LLC has applied to the Colusa County Community Development Department for a Use Permit to construct, operate, maintain, and decommission a photovoltaic (PV) electricity generating facility, with a battery energy storage system (BESS) and associated facilities and infrastructure, to be known as the Janus Solar Project.

The Project would generate and store up to 80 megawatts alternating current on an approximately 1,024-acre site, owned by a private landowner in unincorporated western Colusa County. To avoid environmental constraints, an estimated 768 acres of the 1,024-acre site would be used for the Project. The proposed battery energy storage system (BESS) would extend the period of time each day that the Project could contribute PV-generated energy to the electrical grid. The Project would connect to the electrical grid at the existing Cortina Substation, which is owned and operated by Pacific Gas and Electric Company (PG&E), approximately 4 miles northeast of the Project site. The entirety of the Project site is included in a Williamson Act contract.

Department Comments

The conversion of agricultural land represents a permanent reduction and significant impact to California's agricultural land resources. CEQA requires that all feasible and reasonable mitigation be reviewed and applied to projects. Under CEQA, a lead agency should not approve a project if there are feasible alternatives or feasible mitigation measures available that would lessen the significant effects of the project.

All mitigation measures that are potentially feasible should be included in the project's environmental review. A measure brought to the attention of the lead agency should not be left out unless it is infeasible based on its elements.

Consistent with CEQA Guidelines, the Department recommends the County consider agricultural conservation easements, among other measures, as potential mitigation. (See Cal. Code Regs., tit. 14, § 15370 [mitigation includes "compensating for the impact by replacing or providing substitute resources or environments, including through permanent protection of such resources in the form of conservation easements."])

Mitigation through agricultural easements can take at least two forms: the outright purchase of easements or the donation of mitigation fees to a local, regional, or statewide organization or agency whose purpose includes the acquisition and stewardship of agricultural easements. The conversion of agricultural land should be deemed an impact of at least regional significance. Hence, the search for replacement lands should not be limited strictly to lands within the project's surrounding area.

A helpful source for regional and statewide agricultural mitigation banks is the California Council of Land Trusts. They provide helpful insight into farmland mitigation policies and implementation strategies, including a guidebook with model policies and a model local ordinance. The guidebook can be found at:

<https://www.calandtrusts.org/resources/conserving-californias-harvest/>

Of course, the use of conservation easements is only one form of mitigation that should be considered. Any other feasible mitigation measures should also be considered. Indeed, the recent judicial opinion in *King and Gardiner Farms, LLC v. County of Kern* (2020) 45 Cal.App.5th 814 ("KG Farms") holds that agricultural conservation easements on a 1 to 1 ratio are not alone sufficient to adequately mitigate a project's conversion of agricultural land. KG Farms does not stand for the proposition that agricultural conservation easements are irrelevant as mitigation. Rather, the holding suggests that to the extent they are considered, they may need to be applied at a greater than 1 to 1 ratio, or combined with other forms of mitigation (such as restoration of some land not currently used as farmland).

Conclusion

The Department recommends further discussion of the following issues:

- The Projects compatibility with, and/or, potential contract resolutions for lands within agricultural preserves and/or enrolled in a Williamson Act contract.
- If applicable, notification of Williamson Act contract non-renewal and/or cancellation.

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to comment on the Draft Environmental Impact Report for the Janus Solar Project. Please provide this Department with notices of any future hearing dates as well as any staff reports pertaining to this project. If you have any questions regarding our comments, please contact Farl Grundy, Associate Environmental Planner via email at Farl.Grundy@conservation.ca.gov.

Sincerely,

Monique Wilber

Monique Wilber
Conservation Program Support Supervisor