

Comment Set E1 – Pacific Gas and Electric Company



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February 10, 2015

Michael Krausie, Associate Planner
c/o Aspen Environmental Group
235 Montgomery Street, Suite 395
San Francisco, CA 94104

Re: Draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Report (SEIR) (CUP No. UP 1023-09-A, State Clearinghouse No. 2010031008, San Benito County) for the Panoche Valley Solar Project

Dear Mr. Krausie:

Pacific Gas and Electric Company (PG&E) appreciates the opportunity to review and comment on the Draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Report (SEIR) for the Panoche Valley Solar Project. As you know, PG&E will be responsible for upgrading its electrical system to connect the new solar project to PG&E's electrical grid. These upgrades will include a new switchyard called the Las Aguilas Switching Station (constructed by Panoche Valley Solar (PVS) and deeded to PG&E), a new 230 kV transmission line looping into and out of the new switchyard (constructed by PG&E), and system protection facilities (communication wires and microwave towers constructed by PG&E). While San Benito County does not have jurisdiction over utility construction performed by PG&E, the County properly included all of PG&E's interconnection upgrades in its previous and current California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) reviews because the upgrades are a direct, physical result of the solar project approval.

The California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC), which has sole discretionary jurisdiction over the siting and design of PG&E's electrical facilities, exempts substation and switchyard projects from formal permitting requirements when CEQA review has been completed for a larger project, and when the lead agency finds no unavoidable significant impacts as a result of the PG&E facilities. In order to proceed with the CPUC's noticing process necessary to interconnect the solar project on schedule, PG&E requests clarification from the County that there are no unavoidable significant impacts resulting from the PG&E upgrades, including the switchyard. While engineering is not yet complete on PG&E's system upgrades, PG&E has constructed similar interconnection facilities for other solar projects (*see, e.g.,* the enclosed exhibit showing a "typical" switching station similar to the one to be constructed for the project) and PG&E believes there is sufficient information available in the record to conclude that PG&E's upgrades, a minor part of the proposed solar project, will have less-than-significant impacts.

It should be noted that, because detailed engineering is not yet complete, the switchyard and transmission line details provided in the SEIR at Section B.6.2, page B-13 are estimates and could change with final engineering.¹ For example, it is possible that tubular steel pole heights associated with

¹ PG&E has reviewed the revised map submitted by PVS, which will replace Figures B-5 and C.b-1b, and believes they more accurately represent current plans for the switchyard and transmission interconnection facilities.

E1-1

E1-2

Comment Set E1 – Pacific Gas and Electric Company (cont.)

the interconnection could be up to approximately 100 feet comply with state and federal requirements. The final plans for the system upgrades, however, should not change markedly from those described in this section, and no additional significant impacts should result from any subsequent minor changes in these utility facilities.

E1-2 cont.

One important point of clarification: Section B.9 at page B-19 seems to suggest that PG&E will remove and “decommission” the switchyard at the time that the solar project is decommissioned. That is not the case. The Las Aguilas Switching Station will be paid for by utility ratepayers and will become a permanent asset of PG&E’s electric transmission system. Accordingly, please clarify this point in the final SEIR, amended Conditional Use Permit and as part of the cancellation of the Williamson Act contracts to ensure that any decommissioning plan excludes any PG&E-owned facilities.

E1-3

Update on Telecommunication Facility Plans

E1-4

Section B.11.1.2 at page B-29 describes how optical ground wire (OPGW) will cross two 500 kV lines in the area. According to the SEIR, the wires will be placed on nine new wood poles installed along an approximately 4,650-foot section of the line. This design has been updated as follows:

PG&E now plans to install All-Dielectric Self-Supporting (ADSS) fiber optic cable on approximately twelve existing wood distribution poles located to the north of the existing 230 kV transmission line that crosses under the 500 kV lines. The existing poles, which are within an existing PG&E right-of-way and on land currently used for agricultural purposes, will need to be replaced to handle the additional load of the ADSS. PG&E would splice in ADSS fiber optic cable from the 230 kV towers to the east and west sides of the 500 kV transmission line corridor, connect the ADSS to the existing distribution line, and then attach the ADSS to approximately twelve replaced wood poles. The ADSS would replace OPGW for this approximately 4,650-foot section. Although 12 poles will be replaced, this plan will avoid having to install any new poles, resulting in fewer permanent impacts and minimal additional temporary impacts. Construction of the replacement poles will be the same as previously described for constructing the new poles; removed poles will be disposed of in accordance with applicable laws.

CPUC Interconnection Permitting Requirements

E1-5

As explained above, PG&E’s interconnection facilities may be exempt from formal permitting requirements at the CPUC. Thus, PG&E suggests the following revisions to the SEIR:

1. Page A4: Language in Section A.5.2 (California Public Utilities Commission) states that “The CPUC must approve...” This language should read “The CPUC has jurisdiction over...” since the project may qualify for a notice procedure that does not require an approval.
2. There is repeating language throughout the SEIR document (for example the last paragraph of page C6-102) stating that “[t]he County recommends that PG&E implement and that the CPUC adopt . . .” PG&E requests that the word “adopt” be replaced with “enforce” to clarify that the CPUC will likely be enforcing measures through the notice process, rather than adopting them as part of a project approval.

E1-6

Comment Set E1 – Pacific Gas and Electric Company (cont.)

Revisions to PG&E Avoidance and Minimization Measures (AMMs) for PG&E's Transmission Line and Telecommunications Construction Activities:

E1-7

1. Biological Resources: Please note that all Biology AMMs are subject to further refinement through conditions developed in subsequent permitting with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW). For this reason, we suggest one additional AMM:

- AMM BR-PG&E-19. *The above measures may be refined and revised to match the requirements established by the resource agencies (CDFW and USFWS) in subsequently-issued resource agency permits.*

In addition, PG&E requests the following revisions:

E1-8

- AMM BR-PGE-3. Please delete “by permit or ordinance” and add “due to line clearances or for worker safety,” so that it reads:

Work will occur only during daylight hours, unless required to occur at night due to line clearances or for worker safety.

- AMM-BR-PGE-16. Please revise as follows:

E1-9

Conduct preconstruction surveys for active Swainson's hawk nests and implement avoidance measures if necessary. If construction activities are anticipated to occur during the nesting season for Swainson's hawks (generally March through July), PG&E will retain a qualified wildlife biologist to conduct preconstruction surveys within 0.50 miles of construction activities that occur within or near suitable breeding habitat for nesting Swainson's hawks. The biologist will also consult with CDFW and species experts to determine if there are any known active Swainson's hawk nests or traditional territories within 0.50 miles of the work areas. ~~If no active Swainson's hawk nests are detected, a report documenting survey methods and findings will be submitted to CDFW, and no further mitigation is required.~~

If an active Swainson's hawk nest occurs within 0.50 miles of a planned work area, a 0.50-mile restricted activity buffer will be established around the nest. Biologists will monitor the nest and coordinate with local CDFW representatives to designate nest-specific areas of avoidance and restricted activities based upon the location of the nest relative to project activities and the type and duration of construction activities planned during the nesting season. This measure may be revised through the permitting process with CDFW for this project.

- AMM-BR-PGE-17. (see Page B-33) Please revise the first and second paragraphs as follows:

E1-10

Conduct preconstruction surveys and avoidance of active western burrowing owl burrows. CDFW (2012) recommends that preconstruction surveys be conducted at all work areas (except paved areas) in project study areas and in a 250-foot-wide buffer zone around the work areas to locate active burrowing owl burrows. PG&E will retain a qualified biologist to conduct preconstruction surveys for active burrows no more than 30 days prior to the start of construction according to the CDFW guidelines. ~~If no~~

Comment Set E1 – Pacific Gas and Electric Company (cont.)

~~burrowing owls are detected, a letter report documenting survey methods and findings will be submitted to CDFW, and no further mitigation is required.~~

E1-10 cont.

If western burrowing owls are present at the site, a qualified biologist will work with O&M staff to determine whether an exclusion zone of 160 feet during the non-nesting season and 250 feet during the nesting season can be established. If it cannot, an experienced burrowing owl biologist will develop a site-specific plan (i.e., a plan that considers the type and extent of the proposed activity, the duration and timing of the activity, the sensitivity and habituation of the owls, and the dissimilarity of the proposed activity with background activities) to minimize the potential to affect the reproductive success of the owls. If a biologist experienced with burrowing owl determines the relocation of owls is necessary, a passive relocation effort may be conducted as described below, in coordination with CDFW as appropriate. During the nonbreeding season (generally 1 September–31 January), a qualified biologist may passively relocate burrowing owls found within construction areas. Prior to passively relocating burrowing owls, a Burrowing Owl Exclusion Plan shall be prepared by a qualified biologist in accordance with Appendix E of the Staff Report on Burrowing Owl Mitigation (CDFW, 2012). The Burrowing Owl Exclusion Plan shall be submitted to the CDFW for review ~~and to the County for approval~~ prior to implementation, or as otherwise required by CDFW during the permitting process for this project.

2. Cultural Resources

- AMM CR-3. Please revised the first sentence to read: “A qualified archaeological field technician working with and reporting to an ~~professional~~ archaeologist meeting the Secretary of the Interior’s Professional Qualifications Standards will monitor all project-related excavation” since it is not necessary for the selected monitor to meet the Secretary of the Interior’s Professional Qualifications Standards, but for their supervisor to meet those standards.

E1-11

We appreciate your consideration of the above comments. If you have any questions, please contact Michael Calvillo, Senior Land Planner, at the address provided on this letterhead, by telephone at (559) 263-5780 or by e-mail at M6CL@PGE.COM.

Sincerely,

Michael Calvillo

Michael Calvillo

Cc: Wendy Nettles
Jo Lynn Lambert, Esq.

Comment Set E1 – Pacific Gas and Electric Company (cont.)

**Exhibit A
Panoche Valley Solar Project
CUP No. UP 1023-09-A, State Clearinghouse No. 2010031008**



PG&E "Typical" 230 kV Switching Station – View A



PG&E "Typical" 230 kV Switching Station – View B