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## As solar farms criticized, MID and TID expecting millions for upgrades

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Is too much sunshine being harvested in the Golden State?

People who see huge solar projects as rivals to farming seem to think so, a study suggests.

Unrelated to the report, the Modesto and Turlock irrigation districts expect to get millions of dollars from solar developers to upgrade points in the districts' power trains that could be vulnerable to electric overload from solar plants.

In a few weeks, the MID board could consider agreements outlining the risk, payments and proposed improvements.

Solar advancements have been hailed as a critical element in addressing climate change because clean and green sun-powered energy emits no pollution.

But farmers — known to bristle at the mention of a "solar farm" producing no food or fiber — are escalating the divide with Tuesday's release of "Triple Harvest: Farmland Conservation for Climate Protection, Smart Growth and Food Security in California."

The study, by the grower-friendly California Climate and Agriculture Network, rails on typical farmland threats such as urban sprawl and soil-gobbling ranchettes. It breaks new ground addressing solar projects, high-speed rail, and oil and natural gas extraction as emerging threats.

By January 2012, 45 agencies — mostly cities and counties — had approved 45 photovoltaic projects covering 17,570 acres in the eight-county San Joaquin Valley, including Stanislaus. An additional 59 projects could threaten an additional 23,188 acres, the study says.

That includes 1,678 acres next to the Fink Road landfill that Stanislaus County supervisors earlier this month agreed to lease to Golden Hills Solar. The company wants to use 600 of those acres for solar panels, for a 70-megawatt plant.

California utilities by 2020 must get a third of their electricity from renewable sources such as solar and wind farms. MID is up to 29 percent with various contracts, including buying energy from a solar plant on McHenry Avenue between Modesto and Escalon.

Renewable energy costs more than burning coal or natural gas, however.

Rules in Stanislaus County require that most housing proposals permanently preserve some farmland.

Agencies throughout the state could adopt similar farm-friendly rules directing solar proposals to poor soil, rooftops or parking lots, but don't, "Triple Harvest" says.

"These projects will remove from production some of the most fertile farmland in the world," the study says.

Last week, Greg Salyer, the MID's acting assistant general manager of electric resources, told the board that the state's renewable energy mandate has "bred another California gold rush" in sun-fueled projects.

Solar proposals by Pacific Gas & Electric Co., whose system ties into those owned by the MID and TID in some places, could threaten their lines, Salyer said. Developers hoping to build in the next two years will pay the districts about \$3 million to strengthen a 30-mile line from Westley to Los Banos, he said.

"A beefier transmission system is a win-win for everyone," Salyer said.



(Debbie Noda/dnoda@modbee.com) The Solar project is being installed at McHenry Ave. and Patterson Rd., April 19, 2012. - Modesto Bee - Debbie Noda

Another in the Bakersfield-Fresno region will require a \$3 million MID transformer upgrade on Standiford Avenue in Modesto.

**On the Net: <http://calclimateag.org/triple-harvest>.**

**The MID board will meet at 9 a.m. Tuesday in the district boardroom, 1231 11th St., Modesto.**

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