



**COUNTY OF SANTA BARBARA
PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT**

MEMORANDUM

TO: Santa Barbara Planning Commission

FROM: John Day, Planner

DATE: May 12, 2006

**RE: Conceptual Review
Lompoc Wind Energy Project (06CUP-00000-00009 & 06ORD-00000-00002)
Third Supervisorial District
Hearing of May 24, 2006**

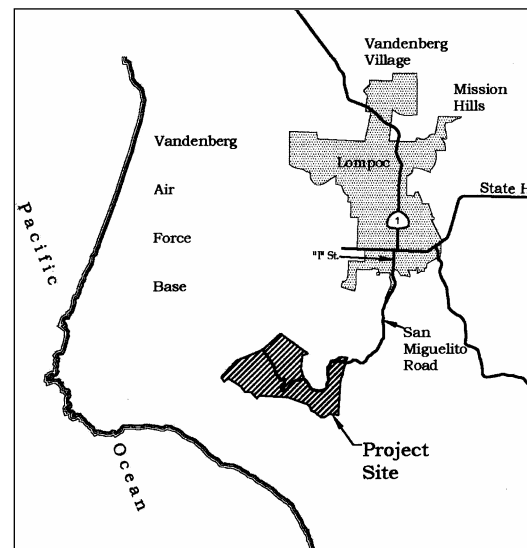
REQUEST

Planning Commission Conceptual Review is requested for the Lompoc Wind Energy Project, a proposed commercial wind farm, to be located approximately 5 miles southwest of Lompoc, adjacent to Vandenberg AFB. The application has not yet been found complete, as of the date of this memo. The application involves 10 agriculturally-zoned parcels. (APNs: 083-080-004, 083-090-001, 083-090-002, 083-090-003, 083-100-004, 083-100-008, 083-250-011, 083-250-019, 083-090-004, 083-100-007).

PROJECT SUMMARY

The proposed project includes the following components (numbers approximate):

- 60 wind turbines, 350-440 feet high;
- 5.2 miles of new gravel roads; widening and improvements to 8.3 miles of existing dirt roads;
- Operations and maintenance facility (5,000 sq. ft.);
- Electrical substation;
- Overhead and underground 34.5-kV electric lines within project area;
- New 9 mile-long, 115-kV power line from project substation to PG&E Cabrillo Substation in Lompoc.



The project is located on grazing land on the ridges between Jalama and Point Arguello, at the end of San Miguelito Road (a public road). The project area is bounded on the south and west by Vandenberg AFB. The project is entirely within the inland area of the County; the southern project perimeter abuts the coastal zone boundary. The combined area of the 10 project parcels is approximately 3,000 acres. All the parcels are zoned AG-II-100, and all are under Agricultural Preserve Contracts. The applicant has signed 30-year agreements with the property owners to construct and operate the wind farm, which would not interfere with the ongoing use of the land for cattle grazing. The project is expected to generate 80-120 megawatts of electricity, enough to supply 20,000-30,000 homes. The power would be sold to PG&E under a long-term purchase contract. The project description section of the application is attached.



APPLICATION OVERVIEW

Pacific Renewable Energy Generation LLC (applicant) and Mr. John V. Stahl (agent) have submitted the following applications:

- Major Conditional Use Permit for the basic project.
- Ordinance Amendment to Article III general regulations, to allow the Planning Commission to grant exceptions to the 50-foot height restriction for wind energy projects on agriculturally-zoned land. The existing 50-foot limit renders any commercial wind energy project infeasible, as modern turbines are over 300 feet high.
- Variances from setback requirements along the Vandenberg AFB property line and along property lines within the project perimeter (i.e., between properties that are participating in the project). Reduced setbacks are needed to access the best winds and optimize turbine locations, and also to avoid locating turbines on steeper slopes off the ridge crest.

The application has identified “turbine corridors” within which the turbines would be located, rather than mapping their exact point-locations, to provide some flexibility in the turbine locations up until the construction stage. The locations of the turbines are interdependent, as the layout must take into account adequate spacing of the turbines as well as the wind pattern. Moving one turbine may necessitate reconfiguration of an entire cluster of turbines. In addition, information discovered during EIR preparation or geotechnical surveys may require repositioning of turbines. The environmental review will encompass the entire area of the turbine

corridors, so that a supplemental environmental document would not be required if turbines must later be relocated within the corridors.

MAJOR ISSUES IDENTIFIED

Biological Impacts

The proposed project is configured to avoid oak-wooded areas present on the properties. The applicant's preliminary Biological Resources Report indicates the project would result in impacts to special status species, particularly Gaviota Tarplant. Approximately 35 acres of habitat will be permanently lost due to construction of roads and turbine foundations. One of the turbine corridors is partially within federally designated critical habitat for the California red-legged frog. In addition, there will be impacts to bats and birds that fly into rotating turbine blades during wind farm operation. Avian impacts have been found significant for wind projects elsewhere in California. The report suggests some possible mitigation measures for biological impacts.

Visual Impacts

The turbines would be situated near ridgelines in order to best capture the wind. Although the project location is fairly remote, the turbines may be visible from the Lompoc Valley and other areas, though the visual impact from potential viewing locations may be minor. The electrical transmission line, as proposed, would run across private property, down San Miguelito Road, and in view from Highway 1 near Lompoc. The potential for significant visual impacts has not yet been assessed. Photo-simulations will be prepared as part of the EIR.

Cultural Resources

The project location includes at least 15 archeological sites, some of which have potentially high significance. The sites are associated with prehistoric quarrying of Monterey Chert outcrops, plant processing, and other uses, as documented in a Phase I Archeological Survey conducted for the applicant. The survey indicates that extended Phase I and Phase II studies are needed to assess the resources and develop options to avoid disturbance of archeological sites and mitigate potential impacts.

Grading and Erosion Control

The project involves significant grading for roads and turbine foundations, which in some cases may be on fairly steep slopes. Roads and road widening would also require creek crossings at Hondo Creek and minor drainages. Some access roads would need to be temporarily widened during construction to a width of 40 feet, to accommodate large cranes. Following construction, roads would be restored to widths of 16-24 feet. Cut and fill volumes are estimated at 245,000 cubic yards. The applicant proposes to use excess excavated soil to fill eroded gullies and ravines on the project parcels, thereby reclaiming currently unusable land for grazing use.

Vandenberg AFB

The project is adjacent to VAFB along most of the southern project boundary. The applicant has been working closely with Base staff to ensure that the turbines do not conflict with VAFB operations including air traffic, microwave paths, and telemetry tracks. Another potential issue is the need for reduced setbacks along the Vandenberg property line.

Potential Public Benefits

- Establish a major source of clean, renewable energy in the County.
- Preserve the rural character and agricultural use of grazing land, by providing a “second crop” for ranchers.
- Provide a significant source of local property tax revenue.

PROJECT OPTIONS

The proposed project site is one of a few locations in the County where consistent winds favor wind energy development. Potential alternative areas with good wind resources include the Santa Ynez mountains along Gaviota coast, areas on Vandenberg AFB, and sites near Casmalia and Point Sal. Several important factors, in addition to wind power potential, favor the proposed site, including excess capacity on the PG&E transmission lines, remoteness of the site, compatible existing land use for grazing, and cooperation of landowners. Adjacent property within the coastal zone may also be well-suited to the project. However, the County’s Local Coastal Plan currently lacks a wind-energy ordinance to enable such a project. Hence, it is unlikely that the project could realistically be sited elsewhere. Staff anticipates that options for improving and optimizing the project will develop during environmental review. One possible area for improvement is the transmission line route, which may not be optimal when all impacts are taken into account.

POLICY & ORDINANCE CONSISTENCY

A preliminary consistency analysis will be done after the application is found complete. Some important considerations are as follows:

Visual Resources

Construction of any major wind energy project may result in visual impacts, because to effectively capture the wind energy requires very large turbines, which must be located where the wind is, typically near ridgelines. There is some flexibility in the County’s visual resources policies and regulations.

Visual Resources Policy #2 of the Comprehensive Plan Land Use Element states: “*[in rural areas] the height, scale, and design of structures shall be compatible with the character of the surrounding environment, except where technical requirements dictate otherwise.*” The development standards for wind energy systems state that “*To the greatest extent feasible,*” turbines shall not project above ridgelines, shall be screened from public viewing areas, shall not cause a significantly adverse impact to a scenic vista or from a scenic corridor, and shall utilize visual screening (Article III, Sec. 35-300.4.11).

The Ridgeline and Hillside Development Guidelines would apply if any of the turbines are located on or near slopes exceeding the 16% threshold, which is anticipated. Strict conformance with the guidelines would limit turbine height to 16 feet, which would preclude the project. It is not clear whether this project might qualify for an exemption to the Ridgeline and Hillside

Development Guidelines (Sec. Sec. 35-292b.3). Staff is examining whether an amendment to the exemptions might be required to allow for wind energy projects in certain cases, if technical requirements demand ridgeline/hillside siting and visual impacts are acceptable.

Height Limit

The current General Regulations limit the height of a structure to 50 feet (Article III, Sec. 35-276). This limit is inherently inconsistent with the enabling ordinance for large wind energy systems (Sec. 35-300), because all commercial-scale wind turbines far exceed the 50-foot height limit. The zoning ordinance does not allow for any exceptions to the height limit. The limit applies to oil and gas projects, including oil and gas processing facilities and oil drilling rigs, but has not historically been enforced for such projects. Amending the General Regulations with an exception to the height restriction, as proposed by the applicant, is critical to permitting the project.

In parallel effort, independent of this project, staff is moving forward with recommended revisions to the height limits for uses, including wind turbines, that must exceed the 50-foot limit in order to function at all.

Agriculture

The proposed project appears compatible with the ongoing agricultural use, and will not appreciably reduce the area available for grazing. Staff believes the project is consistent with the goals and policies of the Comprehensive Plan Agricultural element, which seek to assure, encourage, protect, and enhance agriculture in the County. The long-term duration of the project, and the supplemental income received by the landowners from the wind energy leases, will help ensure the land remains undeveloped. All 10 project parcels are under agricultural preserve contracts. The project is potentially a compatible use under the Agricultural Preserves Uniform Rules, and will be reviewed by the Agricultural Preserve Advisory Committee on June 2, 2006 (date tentative).

Energy

Goal 5 of the Comprehensive Plan Energy Element is to “*Encourage the use of alternative energy for environmental and economic benefits, and encourage opportunities for businesses that develop or market alternative energy technologies.*” Policy 5.2 encourages development of incentives for alternative energy projects, including the following Regulatory Incentive 5.2.1:

“Where appropriate and feasible, the County shall remove impediments... to the utilization of alternative energy technologies that are cost-effective and contribute to improved environmental conditions.”

PERMIT PROCESSING

On May 9-12, staff received new maps, revised project description, and other supplementary application materials. As of May 12, we are reviewing the application for completeness, and the application may or may not be found complete by the conceptual review hearing on May 24. The following major processing steps will follow determination of completeness.

- ▶ Review by the Agricultural Preserve Advisory Committee
- ▶ Initial Study
- ▶ EIR Scoping Hearing
- ▶ EIR Preparation and 45-day public review period
- ▶ Public Comment Hearing and/or workshop(s)
- ▶ Planning Commission review and recommendation to Board of Supervisors
- ▶ Board of Supervisors action

Note that the Board is the appropriate decision-making body in this case because the ordinance amendment is a Board-level decision. We plan to hold future public hearings in the northern part of the County, so far as feasible, for the convenience of affected parties and interested public.

ATTACHMENTS

- A. Lompoc Wind Energy Project Description
- B. Air photo of project site