

IWVWD PRESS RELEASE
Tom Mulvihill, May GM Column

SOLAR THERMAL POWER AND WATER

In 2002, California Governor Gray Davis signed SB 1078 into law, establishing the state's Renewable Energy Portfolio Standards (RPS). The measure mandated that, by the year 2017, twenty percent of our electricity must come from natural and sustainable energy sources like the sun, wind, and geothermal activity.

In 2005, Gov. Schwarzenegger enthusiastically supported revision of the RPS to include new and more stringent requirements: 1) a call for twenty percent renewable energy sources by 2010 and 2) thirty-three percent by 2020.

Considering the abundance of windy and sunny days in Eastern Kern County, this situation seems like a heaven-sent economic boon to this Valley. And so it could be. However, the Indian Wells Valley Water District Board does not believe that development of one natural resource - solar power - should harm prudent stewardship of another - our most vital resource, water.

On April 24, a company named Solar Millennium made two presentations about their proposed solar power plants to be located in the Indian Wells Valley. These presentations took place at the Bureau of Land Management offices, one for public agencies in the morning and another for the general public in the evening.

During the agency meeting, IWVWD representatives expressed concern with the very substantial amount of water consumed by some solar power methodology, such as wet cooling technology. According to Solar Millennium representatives, the projects proposed for the IWV would use about 2,500 acre feet (AF) of water per year. (One acre foot is slightly less than 326,000 gallons.) Other water consumption estimates for wet cooling cause us to question if Solar Millennium's actual water consumption would be even more than this.

So-called dry cooling technologies, however, consume up to 95 percent less water. The success and economic feasibility of dry cooling technologies is demonstrated by several current and proposed projects.

At the May 2nd IWVWD Administration/Executive Committee meeting, committee members proposed only supporting solar power technology that would result in a "zero net effect" on Valley water resources, including potable water, brackish water, and wastewater treatment effluent. They also felt strongly that this position should be discussed at greater length at the May 12 Board meeting and the item was subsequently added to the agenda.

During the May 12 Board meeting, the IWWWD Directors unanimously supported the position of “zero net affect” on Valley water resources regarding all future solar power opportunities. They also requested that support for this position be secured from the Kern County Supervisors, Sen. Roy Ashburn, U.S. Rep. Kevin McCarthy, and Assemblyperson Jean Fuller, among other state legislators.

Water in all its forms is this Valley’s - and the planet’s - most precious asset. Without adequate amounts at a reasonable cost, life as we are able to enjoy it now could not exist. Although the Water District pumps less than one third of the water used in this basin per year, the IWWWD Directors and staff feel responsible for addressing the water needs of everyone in this Valley.

Since this issue will impact all Valley residents, we encourage you to learn more.