

Project Highlight



Butte County's PowerButte Guide to Utility-Scale Solar

Butte County lies at the northeastern end of the Sacramento Valley, extending eastward into the northern Sierra Nevada foothills. The County is largely rural in character. Urban land uses comprise less than 5% of the total land area. Residential and commercial development is dispersed throughout the unincorporated county, resulting in transportation activity typical for a rural, unincorporated county. Most of the building stock was constructed before adoption of California's energy-efficient Title 24 building code in 1978.

Agriculture is a significant sector of the Butte County economy, and a key component of future economic growth strategies. Butte County's agricultural businesses have taken steps to reduce costs and improve yields by reducing water and fertilizer use, thereby also providing greenhouse gas emissions reduction benefits.

The Project

Butte County had originally intended to streamline permitting for utility-scale solar development through the adoption of a renewable energy overlay and amendment to the zoning ordinance. However, after significant consultation with stakeholders, particularly the Farm Bureau and Cattlemen's and Cattlewomen's

Associations, this approach was revised. Stakeholders were specifically concerned about the potential impacts of utility-scale solar facility development on grazing lands in Butte County. During the initial analysis of suitability, grazing lands had been identified as some of the most suitable for solar development.

Solar Overlay Policy Background



PowerButte Components:

- » Utility-Scale Solar Guide
- » Community Choice Energy (CCE)
- » Property Assessed Clean Energy (PACE) Program
- » Rooftop Solar
- » CAP monitoring and implementation

Source: Butte County

The County decided not to make any changes to the Zoning Ordinance or change any permitting processes. The existing permit process, as set forth under the Zoning Ordinance, will remain unchanged: a Conditional Use Permit would still be required to develop utility scale solar facilities in Butte County. Instead, the County is creating a *PowerButte Guide*. The Guide will provide valuable information to staff, decision-makers, and the public on the subject of utility-scale solar energy development in Butte County, but will not authorize or enable utility-scale solar energy facility development.

PowerButte: Guide to Utility Scale Solar in Butte County



Locally-Driven Solutions

- Listening to the significant concerns of stakeholders who felt strongly that the designation of agricultural lands for energy generation was not a viable solution for the County's economy.
- Incentivizing utility-scale solar by providing tools for evaluating land suitability.
- Strengthening collaboration between County departments and other County-wide agencies.
- Reducing GHG emissions through interventions that can be implemented in rural Butte County, rather than focusing on transportation-based reduction measures that are used in more urban environments.

The *PowerButte Guide to Utility-Scale Solar Facilities* will include the constraints and opportunities modeling that has already been completed. This work will continue to be refined based upon the Planning Commission's direction and public comment. The resulting map tool will provide users and members of the public with detailed assessments for all parcels located in the County.

The Guide is anticipated to include an articulation of the vision and guiding principles for solar energy development in Butte County, an opportunities and constraints analysis, recommended standards and design criteria, best practices for low impact development and a mapping tool to help planners, landowners and developers assess site suitability. These resources will help interested stakeholders gauge the economic viability of solar projects, which could generate individual projects willing to go through the extra step of requesting a Conditional Use Permit—or at a minimum, give residents the tools to quantitatively evaluate trade-offs.

While still underway, efforts to develop the *Butte County Guide to Utility-Scale Solar* have increased awareness of renewable energy issues, how the County responds to them, and what the trade-offs are with their development. This is the first dialogue with the public in Butte County on this issue of renewable energy development, and it has helped to set the stage for further discussions of this important issue in the County's future.

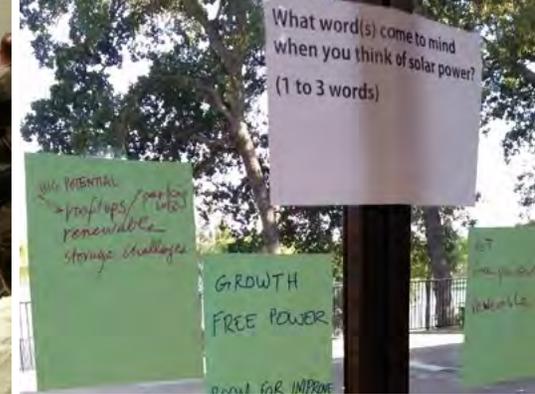
Local/Regional Connection

This project is an implementation measure from the County's *2014 Climate Action Plan* to reduce Greenhouse Gas Emissions. Implementation of this measure is intended to help Butte County meet its state recommended 202 GHG reduction target, which it has identified at 15% below baseline 2006 levels. This supports regional and statewide sustainability efforts.

Agency Collaboration for Action

Butte County collaborated with a broad cross section of County Departments and Agencies through the project's stakeholder meetings. The Agricultural Commissioner, Butte County Cooperative Extension, Butte County Resource Conservation District and the Butte County Air Quality Management District were all engaged in the discussions around this planning project. The exchange of information around

Stakeholder meetings helped the County better understand how residents perceived solar power. Source: Dan Breedon, Butte County



this project helped to strengthen ties between these organizations and bring more attention to the County's *Climate Action Plan* and renewable energy development.

Effective Community Engagement

Butte County engaged stakeholders prior to convening formal stakeholder meetings. This provided an opportunity to be less formal and yet provide a detailed overview of the project and recruit stakeholders for involvement. A strong initial list of stakeholders emerged from this effort. Ultimately, County staff found that stakeholders would come and go based on availability and interest. While there were nearly 50 stakeholders on the list, a core group of 15 or so were dedicated to attending meetings. Others stayed involved via email and website postings, as well as direct communications.

Following direct outreach to stakeholders, the County conducted public workshops in geographically diverse parts of the County. Workshops helped to provide broad context and communicate information to the public. More focused community meetings were held in specific communities that would be most impacted by the Renewable Energy Overlay. Staff found it difficult to bring the public to the table to discuss issues that were not directly and immediately influencing them economically or from a land use regulation standpoint. Because of a smaller turnout

at one meeting, the County modified its outreach approach to a less formal approach of tabling in high-traffic areas. For example, one unanticipated success occurred at a sustainability expo held at a local brewery. This helped provide exposure for the project both with attendees, as well as in the local media.

Following the initial phases of community engagement, County staff reflected on the need to identify stakeholder needs and concerns early on in the project, recognizing that greenhouse gases reduction and fulfilling General Plan goals are not objectives with mass appeal. Future outreach to stakeholders may focus more on community benefits and the goals of free, plentiful, and clean power for Butte County.

Sustainable Benefits for California

Implementation of the *PowerButte Guide to Utility-Scale Solar* will help to advance many of California's sustainability objectives, particularly in the areas of:

- Economic Prosperity
- Energy efficiency and conservation
- Natural resources and agricultural lands protection and preservation
- Reduced greenhouse gas emissions

For More Information

Name: Dan Breedon, Principal Planner
Agency: Butte County
Telephone: 530-538-7629
Email: dbreedon@buttecounty.net
Website: power.buttecounty.net/