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Capay Valley looks at going its own way for electricity

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Published Monday, Sep. 21, 2009

In the rural Capay Valley, Pacific Gas and Electric Co. powers the packing sheds of organic farmers, the slot machines of the Cache Creek Casino Resort and just about every TV and light bulb in the 24 miles between the hamlets of Rumsey and Madison.

Now, some valley residents are ready to flip a switch on the energy giant.

They'd like to generate all of their own electricity through wind, water and solar and sell any excess back to PG&E.

Achieving that goal in the next few years could make the narrow, winding valley in Yolo County – with its almond orchards and casino traffic – among the first places in the nation to meet President Barack Obama's call for energy independence and reliance on renewable resources.

Supporters of the plan say the costs will be substantial, and they expect resistance from PG&E and perhaps some of their neighbors.

But the involvement of influential allies means the movement can't be easily dismissed as a green pipe dream.

The wealthy and powerful Yocha Dehe Wintun Nation, the tribe that owns the Cache Creek casino, is supporting the push to make the valley a net exporter of electricity.

Tribal chairman Marshall McKay, who has been involved in the process from its inception, said it could set a national example. The effort originated in discussions between tribal leaders and the valley's organic farmers, he said.

"It's something the tribe's passionate about," McKay said. "Electricity could be different in 50 years, and we could be part of that discovery."

The tribe is funding a study by scientists at the University of California, Davis, to determine what it will take to transform the remote valley into a leader in local energy production.

Project director Deb Niemeier, an engineering professor at UC Davis, says the project is a potential "game changer" in energy supply and distribution.

It's billed as the Capay Valley Energyshed Initiative.

"They call it unplugging the Capay Valley," said Sue Heitman, the project's community liaison and director of the nonprofit Capay Valley Vision. "I know that's wishful thinking on our part, but according to (researchers at) UC Davis, it's not impossible thinking."

The UC Davis team is conducting a study to see how much electricity the valley uses and whether it could be generated through local, renewable resources.

The goal is to have it done by January and then determine what kind of organizational structure, such as an energy co-operative, might work best, Niemeier said.

Starting in early 2010, there will likely be a push to gain the support of the majority of valley residents, she said.

The project is already being discussed in community meetings, including one at the Western Yolo Grange Hall in the village of Guinda last week, Heitman said. She said she hasn't heard any objections from her neighbors to exploring the idea.

In the United States, at least two rural communities have pursued similar projects.

Greensburg, Kan., flattened by a tornado in 2007, is rebuilding and attempting to generate electricity primarily through wind turbines. In a speech earlier this year, Obama said it was "a global example of how clean energy can power an entire community."

Rock Port, Mo., population 1,400, announced last year that it was the first town in the United States to be 100 percent wind-powered. Giant wind turbines on the edge of town tower over the rolling farmland of northwestern Missouri.

The small size of those communities has been a factor in their ability to provide their own energy.

The Capay Valley is similar, with a population of about 350 residents, Heitman said. If you include the communities of Esparto and Madison, near the valley's entrance, and surrounding areas, the population would increase to 4,500, she said.

Heitman said the goal is to include Madison and Esparto in the energy project.

Today, there already are efforts afoot in the Capay Valley that resemble what the energy independence proponents have in mind.

A brown hillside behind the tribe's fire station is covered in solar panels. They generate a significant amount of energy for the casino-resort's operations, McKay said.

Just down the road from the casino, almond rancher Mike McDonald has panels that put out enough electricity to run his home and shop and keep his agricultural irrigation pump running about a third of the time, he said.

McDonald says he's no liberal conservationist but agrees with the idea of generating power locally.

"I don't care about how much I use," he said. "I care about how much I generate. If I generate more than I use, who cares? The fact is I'm going to be using more and more energy."

A few miles up Highway 16 in Guinda, Paul Muller is among the owners of Full Belly Farm, one of the valley's best-known growers of organic produce.

The farm's bank of solar panels generates electricity for the packing shed, cold storage and a water pump, he said. Excess electricity flows into PG&E's grid, while the farm draws power from the grid on cloudy days.

"At the end of the year, we have a square-up" to determine how much the farm owes the power company, he said.

Muller said other possible energy sources include small hydroelectric projects on Cache Creek, which tumbles into the valley from rugged hills, wind turbines in the canyons, and biomass generated from orchard clippings.

Energy, Muller said, could be a way to help diversify the valley's economy. He likened the push for homegrown power to the movement toward local produce.

"We could begin to see energy as a potential crop," he said.

Proponents acknowledge there are likely to be hurdles as the plan progresses.

Paying for the infrastructure to implement the plan is one of them. Solar panels, wind turbines and hydroelectric generators are expensive, and it could take years before the cost savings pay for the project.

Some are looking to the tribe as investors – with the possibility that the tribal members could recoup their investment through energy profits in coming years.

Others suggested it would be a way for the tribe to generate goodwill while it plans a large-scale, controversial expansion of its casino resort.

McKay didn't rule out funding the infrastructure but said the tribe is taking the project one step at a time for now.

Another question is how PG&E might react to the plan.

Recently, PG&E hasn't been too happy when customers have tried to free themselves from the utility.

A push by most of Yolo County to join the Sacramento Municipal Utility District in 2006 was met with a fierce campaign by PG&E and eventual defeat at the ballot box.

PG&E is now sponsoring a measure on the June 2010 ballot that would make it much more difficult to defect, requiring a two-thirds vote of residents before local governments could start selling electricity.

But PG&E spokesman Brian Swanson said the Capay Valley initiative is different because residents don't intend to leave PG&E but only to generate a portion of their own power.

"We do have programs available to customers who want to sell renewable energy back to PG&E," he said. "There are plenty of options available for customers in the Capay Valley," he said. "It sounds like something we can work with them on."

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