

Name _____

Date _____

Case Scenario: A Sunny Conflict in California

Read the passage below. Underline or note any drawbacks and/or benefits of the project.

Strange battle lines have been drawn in remote Panoche Valley in San Benito County, California. In 2010, the solar company Solargen proposed to build one of the country's largest solar farms in the valley. The project was opposed by unlikely groups, including wildlife conservationists, organic farmers, and ranchers.

Panoche Valley is located about three hours south of San Francisco and two hours east of Monterey Bay. The area is not heavily populated. There are only about 20 ranchers and organic farmers scattered throughout the valley. The valley is also home to three endangered species: the San Joaquin kit fox, the giant kangaroo rat, and the blunt-nosed leopard lizard. The Audubon Society has designated the area an Important Bird Area (IBA), because it provides needed habitat for vulnerable bird species.

The solar farm would bring over one million solar panels to the valley. The panels would cover an area of about 3,200 acres. The solar farm is expected to produce almost 400 megawatts of power. That is enough power to supply the electrical needs of over 300,000 homes. The project would also bring about 50 jobs to the area, which often has an unemployment rate well above the national average. Supporters of the project point to studies of the area from the National Renewable Energy Laboratory. These studies show that the area is a microclimate with prime conditions for solar energy. They also point to plans for working around the local wildlife. For example, the solar panels will be raised so animals can graze beneath them.

Groups opposed to the project include the ranchers and organic farmers who would be neighbors to the solar farm. The Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society, the Sierra Club, and other wildlife conservationists are also opposed to the project. Opponents argue that Panoche Valley is too unique a landscape for such a project. They say officials are not taking enough time to study the impact. Conservationists say that the proposed project would hurt the endangered species and other wildlife in the valley. Farmers and ranchers are also worried about the effect the large project would have on their livestock and their way of life.

The project has not met much resistance from state and local governments. California is actively pursuing green power in the state. Opponents focus on the drawbacks of the project and do not believe the benefits are great enough to justify the environmental costs. On the other hand, officials focus on the benefits such projects can bring to California's economic and energy challenges. With the emphasis on alternatives to fossil fuels increasing, Panoche Valley likely will not be the last place to face such complicated choices.