

## Solar plant recommended for Patton training plot

**If approved, project would use innovative technology**

**K Kaufmann • The Desert Sun • November 13, 2010**

The stretch of Colorado Desert that Gen. George S. Patton used to train soldiers for desert combat during World War II may soon become a solar plant.

The California Energy Commission on Friday released a recommendation for approval of the project — called the Rice Solar Energy Project — which would put a 150-megawatt solar thermal plant on Patton's old base, about 40 miles northwest of Blythe.

The commission could vote on final approval for the project at a meeting scheduled for Dec. 15. The project will also need approval from the Bureau of Land Management.

SolarReserve LLC of Santa Monica is the project developer. The company's innovative solar thermal technology uses thousands of mirrors, called heliostats, that reflect sunlight onto a concentrator at the top of a central tower.

The concentrator heats molten salt, which can be stored for later use to power an electric generator, similar to power plants using fossil fuels but in this case solar-powered.

At the Rice site, about 17,500 mirrors will reflect the desert's sun onto a tower rising 653 feet above the desert floor, said Andi Plocek, spokeswoman for SolarReserve.

"We collect solar during the day and distribute it when needed or on demand," Plocek said. "Other renewable energy suffers the intermittency problem. With our inherent storage, we're able to provide energy 24 hours a day or at peak demand."

SolarReserve has already signed an agreement to sell power from the plant to Pacific Gas & Electric. It will generate about 450,000 megawatt hours of electricity a year, or enough to power 60,000 homes, said Denny Boyles, a PG&E spokesman.

The project could break ground early in 2011 and

may still qualify for federal stimulus funds, Plocek said. It will also generate 450 to 500 jobs at the peak of its two-year construction and another 45 to 50 permanent positions.

Larry McLaughlin, who heads solar and wind technical training programs at College of the Desert, met with officials from SolarReserve this week to talk about the kinds of skills valley workers will need for jobs on the project.

"Our program needs to have some training developed for heliostat construction," said McLaughlin, who hopes to work with the company on developing the required courses.

The project has at least one downside: the potential destruction of the remains of Rice Army Air Field and a portion of Camp Rice, which were part of Patton's Desert Training Center, used to prepare American soldiers for combat in the North African desert from 1942 to 1944.

According to the commission's report, the only remains of the training center are "a few foundations, concrete pads and defunct runways."

The location is not a registered historic site, but Holly Roberts, associate field manager at the BLM's Palm Springs field office, said: "It may be a significant historical feature attributed to the Patton-era activities."

If approved, the Rice project would be the third industrial-scale solar project built in or near the Riverside East solar zone, about 202,000 acres of

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public land between Joshua Tree National Park and Blythe.

In recent weeks, U.S. Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar has announced final approval of two Riverside East projects: Solar Millennium's 1,000-megawatt Blythe plant and NextEra Energy's 250-megawatt Genesis plant.

An approval for Rice could provide the valley with the critical mass needed to get solar companies to move to the region, said Wesley Ahlgren, director of the Coachella Valley Economic Partnership, a public-private initiative to bring new business to the region, including renewable energy firms.

"These solar companies are all going to relocate their offices," he said.

"If you've got a billion-dollar project, you're going to have an operation in the region, so they'll set up here."

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## The road to approval

The Rice Solar Energy Project needs approval from the California Energy Commission and Bureau of Land Management.

The release of the California Energy Commission's proposal for approval of the project on Friday began a 30-day public comment period.

The commission will hold a conference on the project, to take public comments, at 10 a.m. Dec. 3 in Sacramento, with online access through the commission's teleconferencing system. Written comments can also be submitted to the commission by Nov. 30.

The BLM released its draft report on the project in October, beginning a 90-day public comment period.

Both reports are posted on the Energy Commission website at [www.energy.ca.gov](http://www.energy.ca.gov).

Information on how to teleconference into commission meetings or comment on the project are available from the Public Advisor's Office by calling (916) 654-4489 or (800) 822-6228.

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