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MY VIEW MICHAEL QUINN

AES Rancho Viejo proposal should be canceledTop of Form

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I write in response to Jim DesJardins’ opinion piece that the county should approve the AES solar project (“County should approve AES solar project,” My View, Nov. 12). I believe in renewable energy and long-term decarbonization, and I could not disagree more. This project is the height of greenwashing and puts the city of Santa Fe at extreme risk of a catastrophic fire.

The AES Rancho Viejo Solar Power Facility is a proposal for a industrial-scale facility in close proximity to several residential neighborhoods, including a battery energy storage system (BESS) of many hundreds of thousands of lithium-ion cells housed in approximately 70 containers. If improperly stored and maintained, these fragile systems are subject to “thermal runaway” — exceptionally hot, self-perpetuating fires that produce toxic gases and are difficult to extinguish.

There is a sizeable and growing list of BESS thermal runaway incidents in the U.S. and overseas, with the subsequent fires sometimes taking several days to safely put out. See: Melba, Idaho; Chaumant, N.Y.; Millvale, Pa., just this year. Dig deeper and read about Taichung City, Taiwan; Saint-Esprit, Martinique; Surprise, Ariz., and many more.

We all know the elevated risk of wildfires in Santa Fe County, the persistent high winds in our area and the potential for any fire to spread rapidly. But do you know what can lead to BESS failures? The National Fire Protection Association has a handy list: “… ambient temperature extremes, seismic activity, floods, ingress of debris or corrosive mists such as dust (deserts) or salt fog (marine locations), or rodent damage to wiring. Some locations subjected to rapid temperature variations … can experience dewing leading to damage within [BESS] located outdoors.” Do any of those conditions sound locally familiar?

These risks are being downplayed and minimized by AES in its rush to have this project approved. According to the company’s documents, they do not plan to have any staff on site during operations, meaning any initial emergency response will be left to the county. In the event of a fire, AES intends to leave all fire suppression to the county’s already thinly stretched resources.

Decarbonization and renewable energy generation are vitally important to the future of our planet. But these must be pursued safely and sensibly over the long term. BESS and battery technology in general is not mature enough to be used in large-scale projects. More research, development and investment is necessary.

The Rancho Viejo proposal comes with other social and environmental risks, including the fact it creates almost no financial and employment benefits for the county, and its impact on local wildlife and local residents — each of these deserves deep investigation. But the fire risks alone should be enough to stop this project.

Simply, the Rancho Viejo solar project is pure greenwashing — a company using buzzwords and marketing techniques to sell supposedly green energy but cutting corners to maximize profit at the expense of the environment, residents and the county.

Far from being approved, any permissions granted to AES by the county for Rancho Viejo should now be canceled, and all agreements regarding this project should be immediately nullified. Such a facility should never be built on this site or any sites close to residential areas — anywhere.

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