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Some idle solar energy projects may soon connect to grid

Two federal agencies and Southern California Edison say they're close to ending a long impasse that has made renewable energy projects sit unused. Negotiations with a third agency are tougher.

By Julie Cart, Los Angeles Times

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Southern California Edison and two federal agencies said Friday they are only weeks away from resolving a years-long disagreement over connecting renewable energy projects to the grid.

The parties reached a preliminary agreement one week after Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.) sent a letter to Edison urging the utility to end an impasse that had frustrated the government because solar projects were sitting idle long after they had been built. Utilities elsewhere in California have signed similar interconnection agreements with few problems or delays.

Despite the progress this week, Edison and a third federal agency, the National Park Service, remain at odds over millions of dollars' worth of solar projects on the agency's lands.

Under the tentative deal with the U.S. Forest Service and the Department of Veterans Affairs, Edison will use a General Services Administration utilities contract to end the dispute. The contract will apparently resolve the main sticking point, which is the government's liability for future damages.

"We think we have a solid path," said Steve Pickett, Edison's executive vice president of external relations. "Our plan is to continue to negotiate with all the agencies and hope to come to a resolution in the next couple of weeks."

The Forest Service said Friday that it expected to have its two projects — including a solar facility at the Mono Lake visitors center — connected to the grid soon.

The disagreement has gone on for nearly three years and has hindered the agencies' ability to meet renewable energy goals at a time when they are rushing to comply with orders to reduce their carbon footprints. Equally

troubling is the financial fallout, officials say. The agencies could have saved tens of thousands of dollars in utility bills during the years spent in conflict with Edison, they said.

Negotiations with the Park Service have been stickier.

Pickett said the agency balked at a point involving dispute resolution. Under state law, he said, disagreements about power pricing are to be resolved by the state Public Utilities Commission. The Park Service believes such disputes with federal agencies should be taken up in federal court, Edison said.

Of the two dozen projects currently idle, most are in national parks in Southern California.

Park Service officials were not available for comment Friday.

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