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Avenal power plant idea appears dead

Environmental leader calls proposed facility 'a terrible idea';

Avenal mayor says demise 'a shame'

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AVENAL -- A proposed 600-megawatt natural gas power plant near Avenal in limbo for more than half a decade appears to have imploded.

An attorney representing Avenal Power Center LLC wrote in a letter last week that the center "will let the license for the project expire on Sept. 16, 2015."

The company had previously listed Sept. 16 as the deadline for starting construction.

A spokesman at New York-based Macquarie Group, which provided financial backing for the proposal, declined to comment.

Environmental organizations opposed to the project celebrated Macquarie's cancellation of the plan, which originally got a green light from the California Energy Commission in December 2009.

"We need to see industry and government get together to put solar on rooftops," said Bradley Angel, executive director of Greenaction for Health & Environmental Justice. "[The Avenal Power Center] was a terrible idea."

Avenal Mayor Harlin Casida said he's sorry to see the project bite the dust. "They had too many hurdles and roadblocks," Casida said. "I think it's a shame." Casida said the project would have generated "a lot more power" than solar installations and would have taken up less agricultural land.

The project was originally grandfathered in under more relaxed air emissions standards that were later tightened by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Environmental groups sued, arguing that the proposal should have been subject to the tougher requirements.

In August last year, a federal appeals court agreed, invalidating the project's permit and throwing the whole idea into disarray.

Angel said he hoped the new, more stringent emissions standards will discourage other energy companies from pursuing additional fossil fuel power plants in the pollution-choked San Joaquin Valley.

"It wasn't necessarily the smartest project from the get-go," he said. "We do hope this gives a boost to the truly renewable energy industry."