

## Rio Bravo Ranch joins ag's solar power fraternity

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Bakersfield-based Rio Bravo Ranch, owned by a family that traces its California agricultural roots back to the days of mule-drawn plows, has taken the first steps toward the 21st century technology of solar power.

The ranch, a division of Nickel Family LLC, retained Cenergy Power, Carlsbad, Calif., to design and install two solar systems, a 100 kilowatt field array and a 25 kilowatt carport roof mounted array, said James Nickel, a sixth generation member of the farming family. More systems are in the planning stages for some of the family's other farmland.

"From a pure business perspective, it just makes sense," Nickel said.

The larger system at Rio Bravo Ranch, which grows citrus and nut crops on several thousand acres, will power a pump used to provide well water for irrigation, while the carport system will help provide electricity for the family's ranch-based corporate office.

"We had planned to build a carport to provide shade for our employees' cars, and adding the solar system worked out well," Nickel said.

Depending on the financial arrangement for a solar system, costs can be recaptured in as little as five years, Nickel said. The two initial systems at Rio Bravo are on a lease-purchase agreement, but outright purchase is being considered for the systems planned for the company's other valley properties.

"Prices are dropping dramatically; they're becoming very, very competitive," Nickel said. "The federal tax credit, state rebates and accelerated depreciation make installing solar systems work financially."

Cenergy Power believes the installation of solar arrays will continue to be a growing source of energy in the San Joaquin Valley, said Nader Yarpezeskan, the company's director of business development.

"Farmers are always looking to lower their costs because they have so many different variables," he said. "Bringing down the cost of electricity is huge."



By adding solar panels to plans for a carport, Rio Bravo Ranch was able to supply power to the company's corporate offices, says James Nickel, co-owner.