



CANTUA CREEK, population 500, will be near one of the world’s largest solar and battery storage projects.

Permits were expedited for clean energy. Locals feel sidelined

The fallowed farmland — too dry, salty and barren to grow crops — stretches across a remote, sunbaked expanse crisscrossed by rutted dirt roads.

Soon, roughly 15 square miles of these retired agricultural fields in western Fresno County will hold one of the world’s largest solar and battery energy storage projects — a behemoth capable of powering some 850,000 homes for four hours.

The Darden Clean Energy Project, approved by the California Energy Commission in June, is the first development to be fast-tracked under a 2022 state law that allows large renewable energy projects to be reviewed and permitted without sign-off from county and municipal governments.

The Opt-In Certification Program, as it is called, is

Western Fresno County is a test case for fast-track strategy

By Hailey Branson-Potts
REPORTING FROM CANTUA CREEK, CALIF.



FIREBAUGH is another town in the largely agricultural region, where the project has blindsided many.

meant to sidestep the kind of local pushback that can drag on for years. And the Darden project’s approval was touted by Gov. Gavin Newsom as a major victory in helping the state meet its ambitious climate goal of using 100% clean energy by 2045.

But in rural western Fresno County — where energy firms have planned multiple large-scale battery and solar projects — many residents feel blindsided. They have raised serious questions about who benefits and who gets left behind when major projects are fast-tracked.

Espi Sandoval, a board member for the nonprofit Rural Communities Rising, a western Fresno County advocacy group, said the impoverished, mostly Latino area has long been exploited [See [Energy](#), A12]

AI is reshaping the modeling industry

Workers reckon with digital clones and wholly created faces, bodies

By QUEENIE WONG

Fashion model Hannah James faced a dilemma as she weighed whether to digitally clone herself.

On one hand, the 25-year-old worries digital replicas of models could render her job obsolete. On the other hand, the Los Angeles model wants to get ahead of artificial intelligence and use it to potentially make more mon-

ey before it’s too late.

She partnered this year with Kartel.ai, a Beverly Hills startup that’s building a platform for brands and businesses to license the likenesses of models for a fee. Kartel.ai helps models create digital replicas of themselves that can be hired for advertising campaigns.

“It’s crazy to see what they can create in hours,” said James, who has modeled for a decade. “It’s beautiful, but at the same time, it’s scary.”

Models like James are contending with how to retain control over their careers as the rise of AI-powered tools that can quickly generate images and videos alters the creative process. Advancements in AI have made it easier to generate digital clones of models or virtual people who don’t exist in real life.

Unlike real people, AI

models and digital clones don’t get sick or deal with bad-skin days. AI models can be in many places at the same time, and they don’t need a break as campaigns try different shots, locations and products.

Applying generative AI — the kind of technology used by ChatGPT — to generate and manipulate fashion shoots and other images has been taking off this year. [See [Models](#), A8]

Where is the captain of this fishing boat?

Joel Kawahara’s fishing boat, the Karolee, traveled down the coast from Washington toward California waters, keeping a steady course that offered no hint that something had gone terribly wrong.

But when Coast Guard crews boarded the boat this month in Northern California, officials found no one on board. Its captain was nowhere to be seen. Somewhere along the roughly 400-mile journey, the 70-year-old Kawahara was lost.

“It’s a strange case,” said U.S. Coast Guard Petty Officer Steven Strohmaier. “There were no signs of distress, no signs of debris.”

On the Karolee, the fishing gear was set up on the deck. A half-finished cup of coffee was found sitting at

At some point along his journey, Joel Kawahara went missing

By SALVADOR HERNANDEZ



STEVEN STROHMAIER U.S. Coast Guard Northwest District
THE KAROLEE’S 70-year-old skipper was nowhere to be found when the Coast Guard boarded the vessel.

the helm, and Kawahara’s oatmeal was left unfinished, as if the experienced fisherman suddenly disappeared in the middle of breakfast, said Heather Burns, a longtime friend.

His life jacket, she said, was found hanging in the boat.

Kawahara’s friends suspect “a freak occurrence” may have tossed him overboard somewhere out at sea.

Born in Seattle, Kawahara was a professional fisherman who focused on salmon, albacore tuna and halibut. But friends and colleagues said Kawahara was a passionate advocate for fish and conservancy, fighting to maintain safe and healthy habitats for fish.

Burns said Kawahara [See [Karolee](#), A7]

UC draws red lines in talks with Trump

Unlike Newsom, university leaders emphasize a possible settlement, not a suit.

By JAWEED KALEEM

Top UC leaders will attempt to negotiate a settlement with the federal government and have identified guardrails to protect the nation’s premier public university system after the Trump administration cut more than half a billion dollars in UCLA research grants and demanded a \$1-billion fine to atone for antisemitism, according to high-placed UC officials.

The talks with the Justice Department are just beginning and so far involve 10 of the 24 UC regents, including board Chair Janet Reilly and UC President James B. Milliken. The group held its

first publicly announced meeting last week after an emergency convening of all regents Aug. 11.

The negotiations come amid a volatile political backdrop as Gov. Gavin Newsom takes on President Trump in a high-stakes redistricting fight over congressional control and unleashes an audacious social media strategy of Trump-directed insults. In response to actions against UCLA, Newsom publicly announced, “We’ll sue” — and called the demands “extortion” and “ransom,” saying California will not “bend the knee” to Trump.

But the decision to go to court and the negotiation strategy rest with UC leaders and regents, who operate independently under the state Constitution. Newsom, however, is an ex-officio board member with voting power and influence. [See [UC](#), A8]

Voices GUSTAVO ARELLANO COLUMNIST

Latino electorate holds the key in redistricting duel

Latinos unleashed a political earthquake after voting for Donald Trump, who has long painted the country’s largest minority as an existential threat, in unexpectedly large numbers in the fall.

This swing to MAGA helped Trump win, kicked Democrats into the political wilderness, launched a thousand thought pieces and showed politicians that they ignore Latinos at their own risk.

Now, Latinos once again hold the power to make or break American politics, thanks to redistricting fights shaping up in Texas and California. And once again, both Democratic and

Republican leaders think they know what Latinos want.

In the Lone Star State, the GOP-dominated Legislature last week approved the redrawing of congressional districts at the behest of Trump, upending the traditional process, to help Republicans gain up to five seats in the 2026 midterms. Their California counterparts landed on the opposite side of the gerrymandering coin — their maps, which will go before voters in November, target Republican congressional members.

Texas Republicans and California Democrats are both banking on Latinos to [See [Arellano](#), A5]



MYUNG J. CHUN Los Angeles Times
ROBERTO DELGADO, who lives near Edison towers, says prayers were crucial to surviving two fires.

Edison hid role in 2019 Sylmar fire, lawsuit says

Investigator calls the utility ‘deceptive’ for not telling LAFD about gear failure.

By MELODY PETERSEN

Roberto Delgado and his wife were praying the rosary on the night of Jan. 7 when they heard two loud booms that shook their Sylmar home. Then came a flash of light so bright that in the dead of night they could briefly see out their window the rocks and gullies of the San Gabriel foothills behind their house.

Seconds later, Delgado said in an interview, the couple saw flames under two electric transmission towers owned by Southern Califor-

nia Edison — even more shocking because they had seen a fire ignite under one of those towers just six years before.

“We were traumatized,” he said. “It was almost the exact same thing.” In both fires, the family was forced to race to its car and flee with few belongings as the flames rushed through the brush toward its home, which survived both blazes.

Edison’s maintenance of its power lines is now under scrutiny in the wake of January’s devastating Eaton fire, which destroyed a wide swath of Altadena and killed 19 people. Video captured by eyewitnesses shows the Eaton fire igniting under Edison transmission towers.

A lawsuit making its way through Los Angeles County [See [Edison](#), A6]

Fired over display of LGBTQ+ flag
A Yosemite National Park ex-staffer may be criminally charged for posting a banner over El Capitan. **CALIFORNIA, B1**

Synonymous with high school sports
Times columnist Eric Sondheimer reflects on 49 years of covering people who simply make a difference. **SPORTS, D1**

The music will go on at the Bowl
Gustavo Dudamel is a hard act to follow, but there’s talent aplenty at Hollywood Bowl shows. **ENTERTAINMENT, E1**

Weather
Mostly sunny; warm. L.A. Basin: 89/68. **B6**

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