

# Solar sensitivity

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The desire for clean energy does not justify the needless sacrifice of fragile habitat. California's desert is ideal for alternative energy projects, but the desert is also a delicate ecosystem. So state and federal officials who oversee green energy development should direct new energy projects to already-disturbed desert land, instead of pristine public acreage.

A draft scientific report says large new power plants should strive to use desert land already touched by human activity. Many green power projects now seek sites in areas unspoiled by development. The report, released last month, is from a panel of scientists advising state and federal agencies on crafting a conservation plan for renewable energy in the California desert.

The panel said that siting big energy projects on former farmland, or property along roads, canals and power lines, would limit environmental harm to desert habitat and species. State and federal agencies should exercise great care in desert development, the report said, because desert ecology is extremely hard to restore once it has been disrupted.

That advice offers a sensible guide for the state's pursuit of alternative energy. Green energy has obvious advantages, providing an endless supply of power while curbing the air pollution that fossil fuel plants emit. Even so, such projects can create environmental conflicts -- particularly in areas with fragile ecology, such as the desert.

Green energy projects can require large swaths of land. Eight large solar developments seeking state approval by the end of this year would cover 59 square miles of untouched public land in the desert. Inland residents should care about how and where alternative energy expands: Seven of the projects are in San Bernardino and Riverside counties.

The scientists' recommendations will not affect those projects, which are already far along the permit process. But future proposals should avoid covering thousands of acres of pristine desert with power plants. Using property with little value as habitat can avoid environmental challenges, which leads to faster state and federal approval for projects.

Renewable energy companies contend that such a strategy is not practical -- yet Abengoa Solar Inc. neatly demonstrates otherwise. The California Energy Commission this month approved that company's plans for a solar plant in the San Bernardino County desert -- using 1,765 acres of privately owned, abandoned farmland.

Much of the previously disturbed desert land is in private hands, and companies find it easier and cheaper to covet public land. But that approach puts short-term convenience ahead of the public's long-term interest in preserving undamaged desert for future generations.

California cannot replace unspoiled desert once development occurs. Clean energy should not destroy priceless natural resources when better alternatives exist.