

Solar project would disturb thousands of tortoises

David Danelski, Riverside Press-Enterprise, 4-26-11

More than 3,000 desert tortoises would be disturbed by a solar project in northeast San Bernardino County and as many as 700 young ones would be killed during three years of building, says a federal assessment issued Tuesday.

The document, made public by the U.S. Bureau of Land of Management, was released about a week after federal officials ordered developer BrightSource Energy Co. to halt construction activity on two-thirds of the project area near Primm, Nev. Biologists hired by the company had a permit from federal wildlife officials to disturb -- handle, move and/or test for disease -- no more than 38 adult tortoises. That limit had been reached.

The original estimates of tortoises that would be displaced by the project were based on surveys that found 16 adults. The new estimates were based on the tortoises actually found by biologists who have been removing the protected reptiles from the construction site. The animals are threatened with extinction.

According to the new assessment, as many as 162 adult tortoises that live in the project area will have to be captured and moved.

As many as 700 juvenile tortoises would be killed over three years because they are no bigger than a silver dollar and blend into the landscape, the report says. Despite efforts to find them, about 90 percent of the youngsters in the construction area are expected to die.

The project also will affect tortoises in nearby relocation and monitoring areas. The total number "harassed, injured or killed," as defined by the Endangered Species Act, was estimated at 1,025 adults and 2,349 juveniles, the report says. Harassment includes moving animals, fitting them with radio transmitters or taking blood samples for disease testing. The original estimate was less than 200 adults would be disturbed.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will use the new estimates to determine whether finishing the 5.6-square-mile project puts the species in jeopardy. If not, the agency is expected to set new limits on how the animals may be killed, injured or harassed.

A determination is expected by the end of May.

Work is continuing in a 2-square-mile area that was cleared of desert tortoises last fall. The \$2.1 billion project off Interstate 15 has been hailed by the Obama administration for helping the nation develop clean energy that slows global warming and reduces that nation's reliance on fossil fuels.

BrightSource spokesman Keely Wachs questioned the accuracy of the BLM estimates

"The projections in the biological assessment are not consistent with the actual numbers of tortoises found on the project site," Wachs said in an email. "It appears that the largest concentrations of tortoise are outside the project and in areas that we designed the project to avoid."

David Lamfrom, California desert program manager for the National Parks Conservation Association, said the new estimates are "heart-wrenching for all of us who care about this remarkable creature. ... We are seeing a tortoise stronghold disappear before our eyes."