

Solar power is the threatened species

Steve Williams, Victorville Daily Press, 8-5-11

The Mojave Desert contains roughly 25,000 square miles of land. A company called BrightSource is in the midst of constructing a solar thermal electricity generating system in California near Primm, Nev., just south of the Nevada-California border. The project will cover, when completed, some 5.6 miles of land, and will generate some 392 megawatts of electricity — when the sun's up.

Contrast that with VVI, the natural gas-driven power plant built on less than 10 acres of land on former George Air Force Base land. It generates some 800 megawatts of electricity, rain or shine, night or day.

Monday a federal district judge for the Central District of California, Dolly Gee — a Barack Obama appointee — took under advisement a request for a preliminary injunction to stop construction of the \$2 billion Ivanpah project. The request comes from an environmental group — surprise! — called the Western Watersheds Project. Western Watersheds claims the project, OK'd last year by Secretary of Interior Ken Salazar, was approved without adequate analysis of how it affects desert tortoises.

According to a story in the Riverside Press-Enterprise on Tuesday, an attorney for BrightSource, Al Ferio, said stopping construction now — more that eight months after groundbreaking — could kill the project and waste the money already invested. Stephan Volker, a Western Watersheds attorney, said the construction is causing much more damage to tortoises than predicted in what he described as “flimsy environmental reviews.”

Volker told Judge Gee that the environmental impact study estimated no more the 50 tortoises lived in the project area, but after construction began, tortoise population estimates rose. Federal biologists now say more than 1,000 tortoises could be killed or displaced.

The desert tortoise is said to be threatened with extinction because of the loss of habitat through human encroachment. Environmentalists bewail their shrinking population. But consider: If 5.6 square miles of the Mojave Desert contains 1,000 tortoises, and the Mojave Desert contains approximately 25,000 square miles, how many desert tortoises are there? If each 5.6 square miles of desert contains 1,000 tortoises, there could be as many as 4.4 million of them in the desert? Does that sound like they're threatened? Not to us.

According to the Press-Enterprise, Judge Gee gave no indication of when she will rule. But knowing she was appointed by President Obama, would you hazard a guess as to the final outcome? We would. And our guess would be that the \$2 billion solar power project is the real threatened species here. Not the tortoise.