

# Calif. solar project resumes after reassessment of tortoise impacts

**Scott Streater, Environment & Energy Publishing, 6-16-11**

Construction activity can resume on one of the largest federally sited solar-power projects after a recent review determined the project would not jeopardize hundreds of threatened Mojave Desert tortoises.

The Bureau of Land Management in April temporarily suspended construction activities on parts of two units of the Ivanpah Solar Energy Generating System in San Bernardino County, Calif., because more federally protected desert tortoises were found at the site than originally estimated.

BLM had found that the solar-thermal plant's construction would lead to the loss of 3,520 acres of tortoise habitat, the capture of as many as 274 tortoises and the deaths of as many as 608 tortoises -- far more than an earlier forecast had indicated.

The work stoppage was ordered while the Fish and Wildlife Service completed a revised biological opinion based on the new tortoise data. The agency concluded last week that the project's developer, BrightSource Energy Inc., had an adequate plan in place for relocating and protecting the iconic desert species.

BLM subsequently issued a formal notice to proceed allowing the Oakland, Calif.-based firm to resume construction activities in the affected areas.

"This new biological opinion allows the project to move forward without jeopardizing the tortoise, taking into account the higher number of animals found," said Peter Ditton, acting director of BLM's California State Office. "We worked closely with the Fish and Wildlife Service throughout the development of this new [biological opinion] and will continue to work together to monitor construction" at the Ivanpah plant site.

BrightSource Energy officials said they were satisfied with the FWS opinion, and expect to complete construction on the plant by 2013.

"We're pleased to move forward with the next phase of construction at Ivanpah," John Woolard, BrightSource Energy's president and CEO, said in a statement. "We're setting the bar at a very high level when it comes to desert tortoise protection and care. Every worker on site knows that their two highest priorities are human safety and desert tortoise protection."

## Ongoing concerns

But environmentalists who have criticized the plant's impacts to tortoises and other desert natural resources remain skeptical.

Michael Connor, California director of the Western Watersheds Project in Reseda, Calif., said the latest biological opinion does little to alleviate his group's concerns.

"We're certainly not satisfied that no harm will come," said Connor, whose group is a plaintiff in a lawsuit challenging the project's original environmental impact statement. "The [Fish and Wildlife] Service is failing to appreciate the magnitude of the impact. I don't understand how they could possibly not issue a jeopardy opinion on a project that will impact so many desert tortoises."

The Mojave Desert tortoise has been a nagging issue for developers of the 392-megawatt solar power plant for some time.

In February 2010, BrightSource Energy scaled back its original project proposal from 440 megawatts to 392 megawatts, including cutting the project's footprint by 12 percent, mostly to reduce the number of tortoises that would need to be relocated.

Fourteen months later, construction was halted on parts of the plant's Units 2 and 3 after the latest tortoise information suggested the plant could harm significantly more of the animals. Construction on Unit 1 continued during the stoppage on Units 2 and 3.

With last week's order, BrightSource may resume construction of the power blocks on Units 2 and 3, but it will not be allowed to resume construction on heliostat mirrors for the two units until the remaining tortoises are relocated this fall, according to BLM.

BrightSource must also modify its development plan within 90 days to acknowledge and incorporate any measures, terms or conditions included in the latest biological opinion, according to BLM.