

Solar plans pit green vs. green

Keith Matheny, USA Today, 6-2-11

Plans to create huge solar energy plants in the deserts of California, Arizona, Nevada and elsewhere in the West are pitting one green point of view vs. another.

Janine Blaeloch, executive director of the Western Lands Project, a non-profit group that examines the impacts of government land privatization, supports developing America's renewable energy sources but says fields of mirrors along miles of open desert isn't the way to do it. "These plants will introduce a huge amount of damage to our public land and habitat," she said.

On the other side are people such as Johanna Wald, director of the Natural Resources Defense Council's land program, who supports the idea and its potential to curb climate change. "There's no free lunch when it comes to meeting our energy needs," she said. "To get energy, we need to do things that will have impacts."

In April, U.S. Energy Secretary Steven Chu announced \$2.1 billion in federal loan guarantees for a 1,000-megawatt solar farm proposal near Blythe, Calif. Another solar plant in development, Ivanpah in California's San Bernardino County, received \$1.37 billion in federal loan guarantees in February. "California is the national leader in clean energy, and our great state is poised to become the world leader in renewable energy generation," Democratic Gov. Jerry Brown said.

Already-disturbed lands such as brownfield sites or former agricultural fields — and residential and commercial rooftops — would make better locations for solar panels, critics say.

"The irony is, in the name of saving the planet, we're casting aside 30 or 40 years of environmental law. It's really a type of frenzy," said Christine Hersey, a solar analyst at Wedbush Securities, a major U.S. securities firm and investment bank

State and federal regulators have approved 11 major solar projects in Southern California and Nevada since last year, California Energy Commission and federal Bureau of Land Management records show. All but three of the plans utilize largely undeveloped public land overseen by the federal Bureau of Land Management.

The projects are supposed to generate about 4,200 megawatts of power, enough electricity to power nearly 2.8 million homes, and nearly 7,000 jobs, according to federal estimates.

More than a dozen other utility-scale solar projects are in the permitting pipeline in California, Nevada and Arizona, according to California Energy Commission and federal Bureau of Land Management records. Federal agencies are considering plans that could open up 21.5 million more public acres to solar development in six Western states.

The open deserts are prime habitat for threatened plants and animals, including the endangered desert tortoise, whose population has declined 90% since the 1980s in parts of its Mojave Desert range, which includes areas planned for solar development, said Kristin Berry, a leading desert tortoise researcher for the U.S. Geological Survey in California.

On April 15, the U.S. Department of the Interior suspended many construction activities at the Ivanpah solar facility after workers encountered far more desert tortoises than anticipated.

The desert solar projects also threaten thousands of sites important to Native Americans. On Dec. 27, La Cuna de Aztlan Sacred Sites Protection Circle, a non-profit group, sued federal agencies and four solar projects, alleging they didn't follow environmental laws and failed to adequately consult tribes.

La Cuna is dedicated to protecting the Blythe Giant Intaglios — ground drawings of humans, animals and shapes also known as geoglyphs left by native people in some cases centuries ago.

Though the desert may not mean much to the majority of people, "to us, it means everything," said Alfredo Figueroa, 73, founder of La Cuna.

Bureau of Land Management archaeologist Rolla Queen said no geoglyphs identified by Figueroa will be affected by the solar projects, but tribal members cite the sacred importance of the entire region.

"Let's say I want to build a McDonald's in Vatican Square, and I'll mitigate and provide land to make up for the space I use," said Charles Wood, chairman of the Chemehuevi tribe in San Bernardino County. "What part of the Vatican is sacred to you? Is it just the cathedral or is it the entire grounds? Now you start to understand the ... concerns we have."

There's much greater value in helping the whole society, counters Kenneth Zweibel, director of the George Washington University Solar Institute in Washington. "Something you are trying to protect is being changed, but it's helping so much in terms of climate change, energy self-sufficiency and clean energy; it's a sacrifice that's appropriate to take."