

Will renewable energy ruin an 'irreplaceable' Mojave Desert oasis?

Julie Cart, LA Times, 11-08-14

In one of the hottest, driest places on Earth, velvety sand dunes surround dry lake beds that, with luck, fill with spring rains. Hidden waterways attract a profusion of wildlife and birds; submerged desert rivers periodically erupt in a riot of green.

The federal Bureau of Land Management describes the Silurian Valley as an "undisturbed, irreplaceable, historic scenic landscape."

Now, a Spanish energy firm is proposing a wind and solar project that would cover 24 square miles of the Mojave Desert oasis.

Iberdrola Renewables wants to build a 200-megawatt wind farm that would sprout as many as 133 turbines reaching heights of 480 feet. Next door would be a 200-megawatt solar facility with 400 pairs of photovoltaic panels. The industrial facility would operate around the clock and be visible from nearly every point of the valley.

I believe it would be a mistake to place this in the Silurian Valley. We need renewable energy -- it's just about where it is and how we go about it. - Mark Butler, former Joshua Tree superintendent

If approved, the project would be the first major exception to the BLM's strategy of guided development across more than 22 million acres of California desert.

The BLM's approach aims to encourage development in less-sensitive parts of the Mojave. But the agency allows developers such as Iberdrola to apply for variances — critics call them loopholes — that let energy prospectors plant their flags just about anywhere in the California desert if they successfully clear hurdles designed to discourage building in environmentally fragile areas.

Iberdrola's experience will help developers determine whether the difficult process is worth their time and money. For environmentalists, it will be a test of the government's commitment to protect sensitive areas of the desert.

In this application, Iberdrola said the plans would create 300 construction jobs, and about a dozen full time positions once the facilities are completed. It would require building 45 miles of new roads, a new power substation and 11 miles of transmission lines to connect the site to the power grid. The two plants would generate about 400 megawatts of power.

There has been wide opposition to the project, which sits astride the Old Spanish Trail, a historic trade route managed by the National Park Service.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and California's Department of Fish and Wildlife have criticized its proposed location: a valley that serves as a crossroads for three major wildlife corridors and an important avian flyway. They warned that the long-standing migration corridors would be disrupted and wildlife would be injured or killed in the wind project's turbines or the solar project's superheated panels.

The park service has said the visual impact would be "significant, irreversible and likely unmitigatable."

This lonely place is a tourist mecca too. The valley's volcanic mesas and creosote forests are bisected by Highway 127, a two-lane black ribbon that connects three jewels of Southern California: Joshua Tree National Park, the Mojave National Preserve and Death Valley National Park.

Mark Butler, who retired this year as superintendent at Joshua Tree, said energy developments in the desert must be smartly placed to protect sensitive ecosystems.

Conservation groups, which have opposed variance exceptions, say the Silurian Valley is a poor testing ground for the process.

"They are proposing something that has such grave impacts, that benefits so few and harms so many and is opposed by so many," said David Lamfrom, the associate director of the California Desert program for the National Parks Conservation Assn., a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization.

Iberdrola representatives declined requests for an interview.

Some local officials have sent letters to Congress opposing the project, in part because they fear industrialization could mar the valley and deter tourists.

Le Hayes, who for 23 years was the general manager for the town of Baker, called the proposed energy plants the latest example of "the ongoing pillage of the desert, scraping off thousands of acres to generate electricity so the metropolitan areas can light their streets, big box parking lots, etc."

Proponents of the projects say the plants will become an engine for job creation in San Bernardino County, while others cite the need for more clean energy sources to combat climate change.

It was always anticipated to be a rigorous process. - BLM State Director Jim Kenna

Siting renewable energy on public lands in the West is a priority for the Obama administration, which has pledged to generate 20,000 megawatts of power from federal land by 2020. There have been 375 applications for renewable-energy related projects in California since 2007, BLM State Director Jim Kenna said. The BLM has approved 18 applications.

The proposal comes as both solar and wind facilities are facing criticism over bird fatalities.

Three solar farms were examined in a recent report from the National Fish and Wildlife Forensics Laboratory. The investigation concluded that one of the plants was a "mega-trap" for insects, attracting birds that later died. The report described birds igniting as they chased after their insect meals and flew into the plant's concentrated solar beam. Workers at the site referred to the smoking birds as "streamers," according to investigators.

At the Ivanpah project near the Nevada border, investigators saw "hundreds and hundreds" of dead dragonflies and butterflies that had been attracted to the luminescence generated by 170,000 mirrors focused on a 450-foot glowing tower.

Other birds, the report said, died after striking photovoltaic panels or other structures. The report did not offer a definitive number of annual deaths, because investigators only observed the sites on a few occasions, but they collected more than 200 birds from 71 species.

BrightSource Energy, which developed Ivanpah, reports avian mortality to the California Energy Commission monthly and said investigators' estimates were greatly exaggerated.

When it comes to permitting renewable energy projects such as Iberdrola's, the BLM employs a carrot-and-stick approach.

To encourage companies to develop projects in less sensitive zones, it offers fast-tracked permitting and streamlined environmental review. The shortened process can take less than two years.

The stick comes down on companies seeking to develop outside designated areas, known as Solar Energy Zones. Those projects are relegated to the back of the line, and the companies must pay for costly environmental analysis.

Iberdrola is the first to use the variance process. Its development plan will have to pass muster on a 25-point review that examines potential effects on air and water, cultural resources, wildlife, parks and other conservation lands. Developers also must demonstrate that they have the financial and technical resources to complete the project. The projects' plans are open to public comment.

"It was always anticipated to be a rigorous process," Kenna said.

The variance decision for Iberdrola's Silurian Valley project rests with Kenna, who said he will rule early this month. Should he deny the application, Iberdrola may appeal to the Department of the Interior's Board of Land Appeals.

Iberdrola originally had envisioned completing construction by this December. Three years after beginning the process, not a spade of dirt has been turned.

"Given the often-stated desire of the current administration to responsibly develop more renewable energy on the large amount of federally owned lands, the actual reality of the variance process they've initiated seems to be somewhat at odds with that desire," Iberdrola spokesman Art Sasse said in a statement.

Solar companies argue that the variance process is critical to allow industry to choose its own sites.

Environmental groups are watching to ensure that companies such as Iberdrola meet the strict requirements meant to protect natural treasures like the Silurian Valley.

"There was a high bar put in place and a lot of scrutiny," said Kim Delfino of Defenders of Wildlife. "We ... very much feel this is a test for the BLM."