

California's desert deserves permanent protection

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After more than six years of analysis, debate and draft proposals, the U.S. Bureau of Land Management is close to issuing its final plan for nearly 10 million acres that it controls in the California desert, designating sections for recreation, industry, conservation and renewable energy production. If its most recent "preferred option" prevails, this will be a strong blueprint for the future, protecting the desert's most pristine and environmentally significant land while making good use of perhaps its best natural resource — abundant sun for solar energy. But one thing has been missing in the BLM's plan so far: a guarantee that the conserved lands will be protected permanently, as such lands have been everywhere else in the country.

Environmentalists expect the BLM's Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan to set aside about a third of its acreage for conservation — 3.5 million acres of land in seven southern California counties. This portion of the acreage is home to iconic species such as the desert tortoise and bighorn sheep, and is the site of petroglyphs and other important historical and archaeological treasures. Slightly less than a tenth of the total land — close to 1 million acres — would be zoned for energy development, largely solar. A second phase of the desert plan, being developed by county and city governments for the areas over which they have jurisdiction, is expected to provide more land for energy development.

But the BLM has been troublingly vague about its long-term intentions for the land placed in conservation; indeed, there have been hints that it would only be protected for 25 years. It shouldn't be. Under a 2009 federal law, the BLM's National Conservation Lands are set aside for permanent protection.

The law didn't name any specific land within the area covered by the BLM's desert plan because the process of examining that land for preservation was just beginning. But it did include more general wording that says "public land within the California Desert Conservation Area administered by the Bureau of Land Management for conservation purposes" is to be permanently preserved. The law's intention is clear. If that land needs to be removed from protection later on, Congress always has the power to do that.

Further, these protected lands should be shielded from future mining claims. There already are various claims staked in the areas most likely to be named as conservation areas, and those have a right to go forward — although most mining claims don't lead to actual mining. But if this land is worthy of conservation, the BLM certainly shouldn't allow one of the most environmentally intrusive forms of industry on it.