

# Energy and conservation compete in California's desert plan

David Danelski, Orange County Register, 9-14-16

Interior Secretary Sally Jewell on Wednesday approved the first phase of a sweeping renewable energy and conservation plan for California's deserts that is expected to shape large-scale wind and solar development for decades to come.

"Climate change is the pressing issue of the day ... and this region is part of the solution," she said at a signing ceremony at the Santa Rosa & San Jacinto Mountains National Monument Visitor Center in the hills above Palm Desert.

But while environmentalists hailed the plan, a coalition of solar and wind-energy developers said it doesn't leave enough public lands available for carbon-free energy projects needed to meet clean-energy goals for California and the nation.

In the works for eight years, this first phase of the Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan covers 10.8 million acres of public land in the deserts of seven California counties, including Riverside, San Bernardino and Los Angeles.

It is expected to be part of a plan encompassing about 22.5 million acres, including private land.

Jewell said this phase strives to speed up approvals for solar, wind and geothermal projects by focusing such energy development on 388,000 acres where such projects will do the least amount of harm to wildlife habitat and other natural and cultural resources.

"It makes development happen in the right way and in the right places," Jewell said.

The plan, developed in collaboration with state planners, also adds conservation protection to 4.2 million acres. Five million acres already are protected through wilderness, wilderness study and national monument designations.

These new conservation areas ensure that bighorn sheep and other wildlife will be able to travel among Joshua Tree National Park, the Mojave National Preserve and Death Valley National Park through newly protected land, Jewell said.

David Myers, executive director of The Wildlands Conservancy based in Oak Glen, praised the plan as a milestone in desert conservation.

"It is a great day for a grand vision of the greater Mojave Desert landscape," Myers said.

Five industry associations representing large-scale solar and wind developers issued a harsh statement Wednesday, saying the plan hamstring state and federal clean-energy goals.

The plan removed about 3 million acres of public land that was previously available for alternative energy development, the statement said.

Nancy Rader, executive director of the California Wind Energy Association, said most of the land set aside for development isn't good for wind development because of conflicts with military operations or concerns about bird deaths.

"There are no assurances," she said by telephone from Berkeley.

The plan also designated 3.5 million acres for recreational uses.

But Ilene Anderson, a biologist with the Tucson, Ariz.-based Center for Biological Diversity, said most of that land overlaps with conservation areas.

She faults the plan for not analyzing how recreational uses, such as off-roading, may impact wildlife habitat.

"This was a missed opportunity," Anderson said.