

Sweeping plan to use Mojave for solar, wind development wins OK

Carolyn Lochhead, San Francisco Chronicle, 9-14-16

WASHINGTON — Interior Secretary Sally Jewell gave final approval in Palm Springs on Wednesday for a sweeping renewable energy development plan within nearly 11 million acres of public lands in California's Mojave Desert, one of the largest intact ecosystems in the continental United States.

Jewell described the California desert as the “epicenter” of President Obama's goal to produce 20,000 megawatts of solar and wind power on public lands as a key element of his agenda to fight climate change, which she called “the most pressing issue of our time.”

The Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan, a joint effort between California and the federal government, sets aside more than 600 square miles of land for renewable energy development, with streamlined permitting for giant solar and wind plants, mainly in Riverside and Imperial counties. Another 625 square miles are available for potential development under stricter rules. More than 6,500 square miles are set aside for conservation, meaning industrial development is ruled out.

The plan, which is being administered by the Bureau of Land Management, has generated enormous controversy, pitting national environmental groups concerned about climate change against local conservationists who insist that the state should concentrate instead on rooftop solar, which generates power on developed land rather than in remote wild areas.

The solar and wind industries have criticized the plan as all but unworkable, as did off-road-vehicle recreationists.

The desert plan has taken nearly the entire eight years of Obama's presidency to complete, complicated by the need to reconcile two inherently conflicting goals: putting big solar and wind farms on public land to fight climate change, while at the same time conserving the fragile desert ecosystem, which scientists say is a large natural carbon sink.

Plant biologist James Andre, director of UC Riverside's Granite Mountains Desert Research Center in the Mojave National Preserve, dismissed environmentalists who back the plan that treats public land ecosystems “as commodities for industrial purposes.”

Large environmental groups that support the administration on climate change hailed the plan as a way to save the Mojave from an onslaught of renewable-energy development while still using the desert to meet greenhouse gas targets.

The plan also got a strong endorsement from Sen. Dianne Feinstein, the California Democrat who has built her legacy on desert conservation.

With Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton promising to increase by tenfold the amount of renewable energy on public lands, supporters said that restricting that development to less intact areas of the desert will help preserve the rest.

“We will be entering the next push for projects in a much more organized way than we were before,” said Kim Delfino, California director for Defenders of Wildlife, which supports the plan. “Eight years ago, it was a free-for-all out there. Now developers are being told these are the more degraded places to go.”

Karen Douglas, a commissioner on the California Energy Commission and a key architect of the plan, said this week that meeting California’s ambitious climate goals will require industrial-scale solar of the kind that can be put in the desert.

She said that the state is also looking at other areas for industrial solar such as degraded farmland in the San Joaquin Valley but that the desert remains “a really important part of our portfolio” to meet climate targets.

The planning effort grew out of mistakes made early in Obama’s first term, when billions of dollars in subsidies led to a solar and wind land rush in the Mojave and siting decisions that now are widely viewed as irreversible mistakes. The most prominent of these is at Ivanpah (San Bernardino County). Built on 6 square miles of endangered desert tortoise habitat with more than \$2 billion in federal subsidies, the massive solar complex is still wrestling with thousands of fatalities of birds and bats zapped each year by its concentrated solar beams.

Delfino said the plan will stop the threat of industrialization of miles of pristine desert in places such as the stunning Silurian Valley at the gateway to Death Valley National Park.

But Randy Banis, who represented off-road vehicle users on the plan’s advisory committee, said the initiative drastically reduces “recreational opportunities for the more than 5 million visitors” a year who use desert lands that are all but inaccessible without a vehicle.

Shannon Eddy, executive director of the Large-Scale Solar Association, said the plan is a big disappointment. She called the plan “out of step with climate goals ... a Model T in a Tesla world.”