

# Can green goals coexist in desert?

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Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and lawmakers set an ambitious goal for California to produce 33 percent of its electricity from renewable energy sources by 2020.

With more than 20 million acres of desert, California has tremendous potential for solar and wind energy. To meet the "33 by 2020 goal," the California Energy Commission estimates that 100,000 to 160,000 acres of desert will be needed to build utility-scale projects.

The challenge will be to find places that don't undermine this great natural resource - with sand dunes, volcanic craters, mountain ranges and extraordinary wildlife (including desert tortoises, bighorn sheep and fringe-toed lizards) and plant diversity (including Joshua tree forests and cactus gardens).

Is it possible to develop renewable energy and preserve natural values in the California desert? Yes, but the details have divided environmentalists and others with stakes in the debate.

Recently, Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., jumped into the fray. The bulk of California desert - 80 percent - is under federal control, managed primarily by the Bureau of Land Management. Cooperation between the federal government and the state is critical in identifying conservation areas and development areas.

In a March 3 letter, Feinstein wrote that while she strongly supports renewable energy, "many of the sites now being considered for leases are completely inappropriate and will lead to the wholesale destruction of some of the most pristine areas in the desert."

That was a game changer. She drafted a bill that would create two national monuments in the triangle between the existing Mojave National Preserve and Joshua Tree National Park. In its original form, it would have halted 19 solar projects.

After meeting with various stakeholders, however, she changed the boundaries.

Feinstein believes that creation of a 941,000-acre Mojave Trails National Monument and a 134,000-acre Sand to Snow National Monument would halt development of only five solar projects. Under her bill, solar developers who lost proposals would get "right of first refusal" to viable BLM sites. Fifty solar-development proposals currently in the pipeline would be unaffected.

Her bill also requires the evaluation of 3 million acres of military land in the California desert for potential solar development. That's a move in the right direction.

The reality is that solar plants are land-intensive. A 550 megawatt solar plant, generating power for 400,000 homes, would require bulldozing 6,000 acres. Siting is important.

Feinstein's bill still can be fine-tuned. It has had the good effect of speeding up a federal state process to map areas for renewable project development and areas for long-term natural resource conservation - which should be a "win-win" for energy and conservation. Ironically, by taking a million acres of land off the table, Feinstein has stepped up action to find viable sites. To meet the "33 by 2020" goal, speed is of the essence.