

Green Battle Rages in Desert

Mojave Protection Bill Would Put Prime Solar-Power Sites Off Limits

Rebecca Smith, The Wall Street Journal, 12-22-09

David Myers, executive director of Wildlands Conservancy, walks in the Mojave Desert. His group donated 600,000 desert acres for federal protection.

BARSTOW, Calif. -- A California senator's move Monday to put more than one million acres of the Mojave Desert off limits to development is spotlighting a clash between two prime goals of environmentalists.

Before Democratic Sen. Dianne Feinstein introduced legislation to create the Mojave Trails National Monument and other protected wilderness areas, solar-power developers had submitted nearly two dozen proposals since 2006 for projects that would make the Southern California desert the biggest solar farm on Earth.

California has set an ambitious target of garnering one-third of its electricity from renewable sources by 2020. That has sparked a renewable-development boom as utilities sign contracts for everything from solar farms to geothermal plants. It also has made it easier for developers to secure financing.

But some of the land solar developers consider prime real estate also is prized by conservationists who want to preserve unspoiled stretches of unique desert, such as the Sleeping Beauty Valley and Marble Mountains in the Mojave.

The conflicting visions for the Mojave are part of a broader struggle playing out as the nation embarks on a renewable-energy push. In Kansas, some of the last tall-grass prairie habitat could be threatened by wind farms in the Flint Hills area. More than 96% of tall-grass prairie has been destroyed. Critics say wind turbines not only have a visual impact on the landscape, but also require extensive road construction.

Mrs. Feinstein's Mojave bill would protect 1.7 million acres of desert, while still allowing current recreational uses. The biggest piece would form the Mojave Trails National Monument, at 941,000 acres, east of Los Angeles along a 105-mile stretch of historic Route 66. It also would create the Sand to Snow National Monument on 134,000 acres of federal land near Palm Springs, and would put additional acreage under wilderness protection, including important animal-migration corridors.

Mrs. Feinstein is a longtime supporter of desert preservation who sponsored the 1994 California Desert Protection Act that turned the nearby Death Valley and Joshua Tree wilderness areas into national parks. Once word spread that she was trying to protect another stretch of desert in the Mojave, some developers began to rethink their plans.

Tessera Solar, a Houston developer, dropped plans to develop a 5,000-acre site in the Mojave, "knowing Sen. Feinstein was moving forward with her bill," a company spokeswoman said.

BrightSource Energy signed power-purchase agreements with Southern California Edison, a unit of Edison International, and Pacific Gas & Electric Co., a unit of PG&E Corp., for 2,600 megawatts of power it intends to furnish from numerous desert sites beginning in 2013.

John Woolard, chief executive of BrightSource, said Mrs. Feinstein "got quite upset" when she learned development was proposed on some pristine tracts under federal control. His company decided to forgo plans to build a solar project in the Broadwell Dry Lake area that would be within the proposed monument boundaries. However, he warned that putting parts of the Mojave off limits "would push solar farms out of state."

Others have also complained that California's aggressive renewable-energy target, combined with tough land-protection laws, could end up sparking a renewable-energy boom in neighboring Nevada or Arizona.

Mrs. Feinstein's bill attempts to find common ground between developers and those who support renewable energy. Although it prohibits energy development within the monument area, the bill includes provisions that would allow faster and cheaper development of private lands. Instead of taking seven to nine years to do endangered-species act reviews on private land, renewable-energy developers would qualify for reviews taking 18 months to three years.

California's own analysis shows it needs 128,000 acres of desert terrain to fulfill the state mandate for a big boost in utility-scale solar projects. But there currently are projects proposed that would utilize nearly a million acres.

David Myers, the executive director of Wildlands Conservancy, the chief critic of Mojave development, said the legislation is "fantastic" because it redirects activity from sensitive areas to land that already has been degraded by prior use, such as cattle grazing or alfalfa cultivation. His organization donated 600,000 acres in the Mojave to the federal government in stages from 1999 to 2003, with the understanding that it would be permanently protected. Mr. Myers was furious when applications began pouring into the Bureau of Land Management seeking permission to develop it into renewable-energy parks -- as though there were no prior understanding.

The Mojave is particularly attractive because it not only offers nearly uninterrupted days of bright sunshine in a sparsely populated area, but lies near a major electric-transmission corridor from California to Nevada.

"We don't have to sacrifice our national treasures for renewable energy," Mr. Myers said. "We need both."