

# Solar energy firm drops plan for project in Mojave Desert

*BrightSource Energy's decision ends a battle with environmentalists over a 5,130-acre site in a proposed national monument.*

**Louis Sahagun, Los Angeles Times, 9-18-09**

Ending a bitter feud in the rush to develop solar farms, BrightSource Energy Inc. on Thursday said it had scrapped a controversial plan to build a renewable energy facility in the eastern Mojave Desert wilderness that Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) wants to transform into a national monument.

The proposal pitted companies queuing up to replace imported oil and facilitate a national clean-energy economy against environmentalists strongly opposed to the idea of creating an industrial zone within 600,000 acres of former railroad lands that had been donated to the Department of Interior for conservation.

The acrimony even triggered a nasty public squabble between Robert Kennedy Jr., a senior advisor at VantagePoint Venture Partners, which raised \$160 million for Oakland-based BrightSource, and David Myers, executive director of the Wildlands Conservancy, which raised \$40 million to buy the old railroad lands to protect them from development.

"I commend BrightSource Energy for this action," Feinstein said in a statement. "It's clear that conservation and renewable energy development are not mutually exclusive goals -- there is room enough in the California desert for both."

Of particular concern was BrightSource's proposal to develop a 5,130-acre solar power plant on a portion of the donated lands known as Broadwell Dry Lake, which lies within Sleeping Beauty Valley.

The scenic, near-pristine region near Ludlow is home to a significant herd of bighorn sheep and framed by the Kelso Dunes Wilderness and Bristol Mountains Wilderness on the east and the Cady Mountains Wilderness Study Area on the west.

Scientists continue to catalog plants and reptiles uniquely adapted to the scorched terrain in what remains a biological frontier.

For example, botanists recently discovered a species of lupine that features showy purple blossoms in the spring.

Biologists are also studying unusually dark lizards that appeared to have genetically adapted to the volcanic terrain.

On Thursday, BrightSource spokesman Keely Wachs said, "We have ceased all activity at the Broadwell site. . . . We will not build inside of a national monument."

The company's announcement came as a welcome surprise to environmentalists.

"This creates an open playing field for the monument to be built," Myers said. "It also could herald a sea change in the solar energy industry in that people will better understand that there are good and bad places to build."

Elden Hughes, former chairman of the Sierra Club's California-Nevada Desert Committee, described the company's announcement as "fantastic news."

"Broadwell is one of the most beautiful vistas in the desert," he said. "I've seen it covered with yellow flowers to the horizon in all directions."

BrightSource's proposal was one of 19 filed with the U.S. Bureau of Land Management.

BrightSource's project would have relied on hundreds of mirrors known as heliostats to focus the sun's rays on the tops of 200-foot towers, where water boilers would produce high-pressure steam and run electric turbines.

Wachs said BrightSource ceased activity at the Broadwell site "a few months ago." Around the same time, the company began seeking alternative sites for that project "in and outside of the state," he said.

"That's the best thing I've heard in months," said Gary Thomas, project coordinator for the Society for the Conservation of Bighorn Sheep.

"Of all the solar projects being proposed, this is the one that would have driven a stake through the heart of a herd of at least 200 bighorn sheep," he said. "We would have died on the mountains out there to stop it."

Separately, BrightSource is pressing ahead with plans to build a massive solar energy facility in the Mojave Desert's Ivanpah Valley, near Primm, Nev., just south of Las Vegas.

State and federal regulatory and land-use authorities say construction of the Ivanpah Valley project could begin as early as March.