

THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

MARCH 30, 2010

Alternative site for Primm-area solar plant to be studied

By DAVID DANIELSKI

An alternative site for a large-scale solar project planned in the Mojave Desert near the Nevada border will be evaluated in an environmental study, an official with the federal Bureau of Land Management said this week.

The Sierra Club has suggested building the solar project closer to Interstate 15 to avoid as much tortoise habitat as possible.

The study also will examine a plan by the developer, Oakland-based BrightSource Energy Co., to downsize the public land it would lease for the project by about 11 percent, to approximately 5.7 square miles, said BLM project manager Tom Hurshman.

BrightSource wants to install on the desert floor thousands of mirrors that will focus heat on water-filled steel boilers mounted on towers. The steam would drive turbines to generate clean electricity for about 140,000 homes.

Company spokesman Keely Wachs said the California Energy Commission staff has recommended approval of the project at its current location and found that it won't have a significant affect on wildlife.

The Sierra Club proposal would move the development away from

foothills of the Clark Mountains to a nearby site along west side of Interstate 15, where fewer desert tortoises live, said Sidney Sillman, of the Sierra Club's San Gorgonio chapter and desert committee, in a letter last year to the BLM.

The commission staff also reviewed the Sierra Club's alternative and said it would not reduce the project's environmental impacts, according to a state document.

Wachs said in an e-mail the company is optimistic that the Bureau of Land Management's findings in the new study will be "equally positive."

Ileene Anderson, a biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity, disagreed with the commission staff's conclusions.

Moving the project closer to the interstate would mean using land less valuable as habitat for desert tortoises, a species listed as threatened with extinction

Tortoises are scarce near freeways because they get hit by cars and trucks and face more predation from ravens drawn by road kill, she said. Ravens eat baby and juvenile tortoises.

Putting the project next to the freeway also would avoid isolating habitat between the freeway and solar plant, Anderson said.

The supplemental study will be in addition to a 1,249-page environmental report completed jointly by the BLM and California Energy Commission late last year. The new study, expected to be more 300 pages, should be released before May, Hurshman said.

The timing should keep BrightSource on schedule to win approval this year so it can qualify for federal stimulus dollars, he said.

