



Tortoise takes center stage at Energy Commission Workshop

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Staff from the California Energy Commission held a public workshop in Ridgecrest on May 3 to discuss how the Ridgecrest Solar Power Project was going to deal with the population of desert tortoise in the proposed project area.

The workshop followed from the commission staff's December 2009 listing of biological resources as a major issue of concern for the CEC. At that time, staff members stated that they considered the potential of "noncompliance with applicable laws, ordinances, regulations or standards" in formulating their report.

First up on the agenda after Eric Sorlorio, project manager for the CEC, made a round of introductions, Richard Anderson, a commission biologist, presented vu-graphs with data showing a tortoise population density of 8.1 to 9.8 animals per square kilometer.

Dr. Alice Karl, a biologist under contract by the RSP Company, commented that the population reported by Anderson is considered not very high and added that the Ridgecrest Solar Project is "not a critical area for [tortoise] recovery."

That elicited a spate of opposing comments. First up was Brian Croft, representing the US Fish and Wildlife Service, who disagreed, saying that the project area's "value is above all other

desert tortoise conservation areas."

Ileene Anderson, staff biologist for the Center for Biological Diversity, described the proposed plant site as an "inappropriate site for development." The Kerncrest Audubon Society, the Ridgecrest branch of the nonprofit National Audubon Society, was represented at the workshop by Brenda Burnett who said, "This may be the end of the desert tortoise in the Indian Wells Valley."

Dr. Larry LaPre, a biologist from the Bureau of Land Management district office in Moreno Valley, said that of all the BLM solar project sites our valley has the highest desert tortoise population density.

He described the Ridgecrest Solar Project site as a "hot spot."

Richard Anderson added that density surveys have been conducted in several critical habitat sites and that the Ridgecrest area has a higher density than any of the others.

Following a break for lunch, the workshop reconvened and delved into the topic of moving the tortoise out of the affected area.

The Bureau of Land Management sent a draft of its Environmental Impact Statement to the California Energy Commission. Part of the document included a plan drafted by AECOM, a global engineering firm under contract to Ridgecrest Solar Project, for clearing

the desert tortoises from the area proposed for the solar plant construction.

The AECOM tortoise mitigation plan calls clearing the tortoises from the proposed plant site and either relocating or translocating them. Translocation is described by the plan as moving a tortoise more than five kilometers, about three miles — typically out of its home range. Relocation, on the other hand, requires a movement of less than five kilometers and is the preferred method.

In a press release dated Aug. 5, 2009, the Center for Biological Diversity stated that a translocation effort at nearby Fort Irwin resulted in the death of more than 40 percent of the animals involved. According to Ileene Anderson, "Fort Irwin's original translocation program was a disaster for tortoises." As a result, according to the release, BLM put additional plans to move tortoises on hold.

Brian Croft of the Fish and Wildlife Service said the translocation must occur during the spring or fall. He added that if the translocation site were more than five kilometers from the project site, Fish and Wildlife would require health testing of all tortoises to be moved.

He said an additional requirement would be five years of monitoring for the tortoises that were moved. That, he said, would require putting transmitter locators on all animals that were moved and an additional number of

resident tortoises on the new site.

After a lot of dialog between the RSP applicant and various members of the workshop, it was apparent that full or total mitigation regarding the translocation site is not feasible.

In other words, an exact duplicate of

the IWW site will not be found, nor can it be constructed.

The RSP managers did agree that they would work with the various government agencies to identify potential sites, and in return the commission staff agreed to work closely with RSP and the other agencies to achieve the

best possible results.

Anderson capped off the workshop by saying, "It seems to me that what's being proposed is generally the same old, same old, which is we'll move tortoises, some of them will die, there'll be less habitat and that'll be OK. That's just not acceptable."