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# Feds unveil new renewable energy zone along Salton Sea shore

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## Fewer development issues expected in Imperial County

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THE DESERT SUN

The federal government has created a new renewable energy zone along the southeast shore of the Salton Sea that could eventually host thousands of megawatts of solar and geothermal energy on previously disturbed lands.

The West Chocolate Mountains Renewable Energy Evaluation Area, recently announced by new Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell, covers a 64,058-acre patchwork of public and private land between the sea and the Chocolate Mountain Aerial Gunnery Range, a military training area.

The new zone, located entirely in Imperial County, is crisscrossed by Highway 111, the Coachella Canal and railroad lines. About 60 percent of the land is private and, in addition to being used for farming, the area is popular for off-roading, environmental representatives said.

Matt Spangler, a spokesman for the Bureau of Land Management, said the decision to keep the zone in Imperial County was made specifically to avoid a 14,000-acre wildlife preserve in southern Riverside County, the Dos Palmas Area of Critical Environmental Concern.



New 'green' zone unveiled along Salton Sea shore: The federal government has created a new renewable energy zone along the southeast shore of the Salton Sea

"We don't have too much heartburn with this zone," said Ilene Anderson, wildlands deserts director for the Center for Biological Diversity, a group that has been critical of large-scale solar development on public lands in the open desert east of the Coachella Valley.

"For better or for worse, it's fairly close to the Imperial Sand Dunes (off-roading area). There's a lot of spillover off-roading activity; it's already pretty hammered," she said.

"In the north end of the county, we have disturbed land of mixed quality," added Gary Wyatt, director of intergovernmental relations for Imperial County. "A good bit of it is not prime farmland; it is land many of the land owners have desired to find another use for."

Other sweeteners to reduce controversy include a ban on wind energy projects in the zone and a 200-foot height limitation on solar projects, precluding large-scale solar tower projects such as BrightSource Energy's proposed Palen solar thermal plant near Desert Center.

If approved, the 500-megawatt project's two 750-foot-tall solar towers, each surrounded by 85,000 reflecting mirrors, would be visible from certain stretches of Interstate 10 as well as Joshua Tree National Park.

Solar development on 7,000 acres of public land east of the Coachella Canal, and particularly close to the military training area, will be limited to about 700 acres. Buffer zones will also keep renewable development away from drainage areas and wetlands habitat around the Salton Sea.

With the sea a major stop for migratory birds, individual solar projects may also need to develop plans to minimize bird deaths similar to the recent deaths of sea birds and water fowl at the Desert Sunlight and Genesis solar projects east of the Coachella Valley.

In the past few months, about 20 water birds have been found dead at the two projects, including an endangered Yuma clapper rail, two great blue herons and four brown pelicans.

Even with such restrictions, federal officials estimate solar projects in the new zone could generate about 3,300 megawatts of power, with new geothermal plants adding another 150 megawatts.

One megawatt produces enough electricity to power 750-1,000 California homes, according to the state's Energy Commission.

The BLM has approved three geothermal leases on public land in the zone to date but no projects have been proposed on those parcels. No solar projects are in the pipeline in the area either on public or private land, federal and Imperial County officials said.

## **Future remains unclear**

The lack of any prospective development in the zone leaves uncertain what role it might play in California's rush to generate 33 percent of its power from renewable sources by 2020, while also replacing the loss of San Onofre nuclear power plant.

Renewable energy development around the Salton Sea is also seen as a possible source of the funds needed to restore the shrinking inland sea and forestall the air quality impacts if dust from lake bed is exposed.

Offline since January 2012 and now permanently closed, San Onofre, near San Clemente, produced 2,200 megawatts of electricity, about 17 percent of Southern California Edison's total power supply.

One sign that state officials are looking at renewable development in Imperial County as at least part of the solution can be seen in plans to expand transmission lines able to pump power out of the region.

"We have been working for several years in coming up with transmission plans for this project," said Juan Carlos Sandoval, the Imperial Irrigation District's assistant manager for transmission expansion.

The district will more than double its transmission capacity with its Path 42 upgrade, a 500-kilovolt line scheduled to begin construction in October, he said.

Within the next five years, the district could also build an additional transmission line from Imperial to Southern California Edison's Devers substation near Palm Springs, he said.

But the short-term replacements for San Onofre are more likely to be located near the plant and will need to include baseline, round-the-clock power sources, not just renewables, said Steven Greenlee, a spokesman for the California Independent System Operator (ISO), which manages the grid.

"We have to look at the the system needs and the local needs, including the latest data on natural load growth," he said. "Those are the things we're going to have to start looking at as we're weaving this new grid area to replace San Onofre."