



Obama admin set to approve Calif. project in desert habitat

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The Obama administration is nearing final approval of a solar power plant project on an environmentally sensitive patch of Southern California desert scrubland that is being carefully sited to avoid impacts to the increasingly rare flat-tailed horned lizard.

The Bureau of Land Management is set tomorrow to publish a final environmental impact statement (EIS) for San Diego Gas & Electric's Ocotillo Sol Solar Project, according to an advance notice published today in the Federal Register.

The proposed photovoltaic solar power plant in Imperial County about 80 miles east of San Diego would have a peak capacity to produce up to 20 megawatts of electricity, or enough to power about 7,000 homes and businesses. The solar plant will connect to an existing substation nearby.

Though it is a relatively small power plant covering no more than 102 acres of Colorado Desert land managed by BLM, Ocotillo Sol is one of 14 solar proposals identified by the Interior Department as "priority projects" in Arizona, California and Nevada that are targeted for final permitting either by the end of this year or 2014 and capable of producing up to 3,600 MW.

Once published, the final EIS will be open for a 30-day formal protest period ending Aug. 26. BLM expects to issue a record of decision (ROD) authorizing the Ocotillo Sol project by late September, said Noel Ludwig, BLM's project manager for Ocotillo Sol in Moreno Valley, Calif.

San Diego Gas & Electric wants to finish construction and bring the plant online in early 2015, said Jennifer Ramp, a company spokeswoman. "We're pleased that the BLM has finalized its environmental assessment of this project, which when completed in spring 2015 will provide up to 20 MW of clean, solar energy," she added.

If approved, Ocotillo Sol is on schedule to become the 26th commercial-scale solar power project approved by the Obama administration.

Since 2009, BLM has approved 46 solar, wind and geothermal power projects covering nearly 300,000 acres of federal land, with a total capacity, if built, to produce more than 13,000 MW of electricity -- enough to power nearly 4.5 million homes.

BLM has already approved three commercial-scale solar projects this year, including the 750 MW McCoy Solar Energy project in Southern California, which if built would become the world's largest (E&ENews PM, March 13).

The administration's renewable energy development efforts have been so successful to date that the Interior Department last year announced it had already met a goal established in the Energy Policy Act of 2005 to approve roughly 10,000 MW of non-hydropower renewable energy projects on federal land by 2015.

President Obama last month announced a far-ranging plan to combat climate change in which he challenged Interior to approve an additional 10,000 MW of renewable energy projects on public lands by 2020 (E&E Daily, June 26).

Avoiding environmental conflicts
But there are environmental concerns that BLM and the Ocotillo Sol project proponents are working to address.

The proposed project location sits within BLM's Yuha Basin Area of Critical Environmental Concern and the Yuha Desert Management Area for the flat-tailed horned lizard, a species found in the United States only in Southern California and Arizona.

But Ludwig said the agency is taking a number of substantive steps to minimize or avoid impacts to the lizard, which environmental groups have lobbied the Fish and Wildlife Service to list as threatened or endangered.

For one, BLM has reduced a temporary 15-acre site for construction-related activities to 2 acres, Ludwig said. In addition, he said, a biologist will be on site during the construction phase to ensure that no lizards are harmed or killed.

San Diego Gas & Electric has also committed to install specially designed fencing around the project site to keep the lizards out, Ludwig said.

"All the biologists involved agreed this was the best design," he said.

Ileene Anderson, a staff biologist for the Center for Biological Diversity in Los Angeles, acknowledges that the Ocotillo Sol project is modest in size compared with several other larger solar energy projects already approved on federal land in Imperial County.

"But that said, there are concerns about impacts to the Yuha Area of Critical Environmental Concern," Anderson said. "There's probably not much we can do about this project right now, but certainly we have concerns about the flat-tailed horned lizard throughout its range because of this and other developments.

"We're really concerned because we don't want it to be death by a thousand cuts; we want to have the strong management remain in place," she added.

The Obama administration has made a concerted effort to avoid siting renewable energy projects on environmentally sensitive lands.

The Interior Department last year finalized a programmatic environmental impact statement (EIS) that, among other things, identified 17 solar energy zones (SEZs) in six Western states where commercial-scale project would be most suitable and resource conflicts would be minimal.

But the Ocotillo Sol project is not within one of the 17 SEZs, having been proposed and evaluated well before the programmatic EIS was finalized last fall, Ludwig said.

Thus, in addition to the flat-tailed horned lizards, there are other potential siting problems. Ludwig said the project has been designed to avoid a small area where a site survey uncovered a few ancient American Indian potsherds.

And the proposed plant would sit 5 miles northeast of the Juan Bautista de Anza National Historic Trail, and less than 12 miles east of the 31,000-acre Jacumba Mountains Wilderness area managed by BLM, though the visual concerns are considered to be minimal.

“This is a small project in this area, but it has been surprisingly involved given the issues that have arisen,” Ludwig said. “We wanted to make sure we got this one right.”