



## Interior set to unveil ‘much needed’ development plan for S. Calif. desert

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The Interior Department is expected today to release a draft plan to manage large-scale renewable energy projects across the California desert, a move that academicians, industry representatives and conservation groups say should finally provide the regulatory structure to balance development with natural resource protection.

Interior Secretary Sally Jewell is scheduled this afternoon to unveil the draft Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan (DRECP) during a visit to the AES Wind Energy Generation Facility in North Palm Springs, Calif.

The DRECP, which will cover 22.5 million acres of federal, state and private lands in the Mojave and Colorado deserts in Southern California, is intended to identify areas suitable for development where the permitting process will be streamlined to expedite solar, wind, geothermal and transmission projects while minimizing impacts to threatened and endangered species such as the desert tortoise, Mohave ground squirrel, arroyo toad and burrowing owl.

The plan is also expected to establish permit conditions and other environmental safe-

guards for these “covered species” within the massive planning area.

The Bureau of Land Management, California Energy Commission, Fish and Wildlife Service, and California Fish and Wildlife Department have been working collaboratively for nearly five years to develop the draft conservation plan.

In advance of today’s expected announcement from Jewell, a group of scientists, renewable energy leaders and conservation groups told reporters during a conference call yesterday that the draft desert conservation plan is a major opportunity for the Obama administration to set a permanent course for the responsible development of commercial-scale projects in the California desert, and perhaps serve as a nationwide model for renewables development in the coming decades.

They also said the plan is long overdue, noting that since 2009, BLM has approved 22 large-scale solar, wind and geothermal power projects in California that have disturbed or when built will disturb thousands of acres of desert land.

“The scope and extent of renewable energy development in the desert just calls out for a coordinated, multijurisdictional plan,” said

Frank Davis, director of the National Center for Ecological Analysis and Synthesis in Santa Barbara, Calif.

Glenn Stewart, a professor emeritus of zoology and environmental science at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, and a member of the Desert Tortoise Council board of directors, echoed Davis' statement.

"The Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan is very much needed with the Obama administration's current emphasis on placing massive projects on public lands over the last five years," Stewart said. "There's been little effort to minimize the impacts of these projects on desert biological resources, including threatened species like the desert tortoise." Combating climate change

Kim Delfino, California program director for Defenders of Wildlife in Sacramento, said the expected release of the DRECP also represents an opportunity for the public to get involved with federal and state regulators to help shape the future of the California desert.

"We are looking forward to the fact that at least now we can see what they've been planning over the last couple of years, and hopefully work out the issues so that we have a successful plan by the end of the Obama administration," Delfino said during the conference call.

Mark Tholke, vice president of EDF Renewable Energy's Western region, said the company will be looking for a conservation plan "that accelerates development of properly sited projects" across the desert. Developing clean, green energy resources is critical to slowing the impacts of a warming climate, he said.

"Our company recognizes the importance of smart planning for the siting of renewable energy project development," Tholke said during the call. "Given the potential impacts of climate change, I think many of us feel a real urgency to get as many of these projects up and running as possible, as soon as possible."

Other groups issued statements yesterday supporting the overall effort to develop the DRECP.

"There's no doubt that we need to immediately transition to renewable energy, but it has to be done right," Ileene Anderson, a senior scientist and public lands desert director with the Center for Biological Diversity in Los Angeles, said in a statement.

The Center for Biological Diversity last month notified the Interior Department that it plans to sue over what it calls the department's failure to protect an endangered bird from threats posed by commercial-scale solar power projects in the California and Arizona deserts (Greenwire, Aug. 22).

Anderson said the group is hopeful that federal and state regulators focus the DRECP toward steering development in the California desert to already-disturbed lands.

"We can ramp up renewable energy and preserve California's wildlife and pristine ecosystems by steering any new large-scale development to already degraded and disturbed lands and near existing transmission lines," Anderson said. "We hope this new desert planning process will help get us there."