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In Palm Desert, Obama administration puts finishing touches on conservation, clean energy plan

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Interior Secretary Sally Jewell unveiled a sweeping conservation plan in Palm Desert on Wednesday, promising to protect millions of acres of California desert while encouraging solar and wind farms in limited areas. But even before federal officials finalized the plan in a signing ceremony at the base of the San Jacinto Mountains, renewable energy trade groups were pushing back, saying the new rules and regulations will stifle solar and wind development at a critical moment in the fight against climate change.

Jewell's latest trip to the desert — she was last here in May to celebrate the creation of three national monuments — marks a milestone for the Obama administration, which has been working on the Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan for nearly eight years. The final plan sets aside 6.5 million acres for conservation and 3.6 million acres for recreation, although



(Photo: Jay Calderon/The Desert Sun)

some of those areas overlap, and some of them were already managed for conservation. The plan also designates 388,000 acres for clean energy development, 148,000 of which are in eastern Riverside County.

Conservationists hailed the 11-million-acre plan as a major victory for the California desert, one the largest intact ecosystems in the lower 48 states. The millions of acres of protected federal lands are expected to help safeguard at-risk species such as the desert tortoise, Mojave ground squirrel and golden eagle, which face threats ranging from the fragmentation of the desert to the changing climate.

During Wednesday's event at the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument Visitor Center,

Jewell said the plan represents a “smart from the start” approach to renewable energy in the desert. That means figuring out which areas are appropriate for solar and wind development and which areas should be roped off, rather than allowing project applications anywhere and then determining whether those spots make ecological sense. The new landscape-level planning approach will help keep the California desert intact, Jewell said.

“As I was pouring over the maps over the course of the past couple of days, you can see that these pockets of conservation — like Joshua Tree, like the national monument here, like the new national monuments — still have significant gaps in terms of migration corridors for bighorn sheep and others,” she said. “Those have really been looked at carefully, and the connectivity will be improved.”

Interior Secretary Sally Jewell speaks before the signing of the Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan on Sept. 14, 2016, at the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument Visitor Center in Palm Desert. (Photo: Jay Calderon/The Desert Sun)

Kim Delfino, director of California programs for Defenders of Wildlife, called the desert plan “a win for wildlife,” even though it doesn’t give conservation groups everything they asked for.

“On balance, we’re pleased with where this has ended up,” Delfino said. “Do I think all issues have been addressed, and I can go home and not work on the desert anymore? No.”

The solar and wind industries were far more critical. They’d urged the Obama administration to open up more land to development and modify proposed building requirements

they see as onerous and expensive. But Interior Department officials largely rejected their suggestions, settling on a plan with few major changes from the final draft they released last November.

In a blistering joint statement, several renewable energy trade groups and an electrical workers union said the final document “abandons the initial promise to balance renewable development with preservation of desert land.” They noted that in the eight years since work began on the plan, California and the federal government have dramatically increased their clean energy goals in an effort to limit climate change. Just last week, Gov. Jerry Brown signed a bill committing California to cutting its planet-warming greenhouse gas emissions 50 percent below 1990 levels by 2030.

“What we really need in the (desert plan) is the flexibility to meet climate and regional energy goals — not just the ones from yesterday, but the ones that are happening right now, and the ones we know are coming,” said Shannon Eddy, executive director of the Large-scale Solar Industry, a California trade group. “When we set aside this much land for conservation permanently, it hamstring industry’s ability to meet those goals.”

Conservation groups have dismissed the industry criticisms as overblown, as have the state and federal agencies that crafted the plan.

Karen Douglas, a member of the California Energy Commission, said the new land-use rules would speed up development by directing energy companies to the areas where their projects are most likely to get approved: the 388,000 acres set aside for solar, wind and

geothermal energy. That's why then-Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger called for the desert plan in the first place, in 2008: A wave of solar-farm applications had set off an unexpected conflict between clean energy developers and conservationists, who feared rampant development would run roughshod over the desert.

This area just west of Highway 62, known as the Devil's Playground, is populated by many species of cacti and is part of the Sand to Snow National Monument, which President Barack Obama established in February 2016. (Photo: Jay Calderon/The Desert Sun)

With that conflict in mind, state and federal officials set out to identify the lands best suited for energy projects, ideally areas that had already been disturbed by human activity or weren't too important to wildlife. That's how they identified the final plan's 388,000 acres, which Douglas said are expected to accommodate more than 8,100 megawatts of climate-friendly energy. She acknowledged some of those acres would end up being undevelopable upon closer inspection — another criticism raised by the solar industry — but said the plan's authors had taken that uncertainty into account.

“The agencies working on the plan have built in flexibility in order to provide developers with as much optionality as possible, to choose the best sites within the development focus areas,” she said.

The 8,100-megawatt estimate assumes about 50,000 of the 388,000 acres will actually be developed. With a fuller build-out, the energy zones could support up to 27,000 megawatts, Jewell said.

“To say that there's not enough (land) is not an accurate statement,” she said after Wednesday's signing ceremony in Palm Desert. “We want to expedite development in the areas that make the most sense, and that's exactly what this plan does.”

It's hard to say how much clean energy California will need to meet its climate goals, or how much the United States will need to help keep global warming to two degrees Celsius, the target set by 195 nations in Paris last year. That will depend on many factors, including trends in energy demand and efficiency, and the spread of technologies such as energy storage and electric cars.

The plan's authors did make some concessions to industry critics, such as clarifying that 419,000 acres of “unallocated” lands — which weren't designed specifically for development, conservation or recreation — will be open to energy project proposals. Still, the permitting barriers in those areas will be formidable, making it unlikely solar and wind companies will spend money trying to build there.

Interior Secretary Sally Jewell, right, and then-First Solar chief operating officer Georges Antoun tour the 550-megawatt Desert Sunlight solar farm near Desert Center on Feb. 9, 2015. (Photo: Jay Calderon/The Desert Sun)

The federal Bureau of Land Management also modified the language of several “conservation management actions” derided by the solar industry. One of those rules, for instance, had language suggesting that “collector lines” from solar farms to electrical substations would need to be buried underground, so as to prevent birds from flying

into them. The Bureau of Land Management changed that language, clarifying that in some cases, it wouldn't make sense to bury lines underground, perhaps because doing so would damage Native American artifacts.

"You'll see that through all the (requirements) that we added a little more flexibility as to how they were worded," said Tom Pogacnik, deputy director of the Bureau of Land Management's California office. In general, he added, "We're trying to allow for more flexibility, so if technology changes, or our level of knowledge changes, we could look at different alternatives to meet that objective."

It's unclear whether any of those changes will assuage the solar industry, which has argued that burying collector lines would almost always be prohibitively expensive. And the tweaks won't do anything to mollify the wind industry, which has said the plan closes most of California's best remaining wind hotspots to development, essentially shutting down the industry here.

Nancy Rader, executive director of the California Wind Energy Industry Association, said about a dozen wind farms were proposed within the Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan area when government agencies got to work eight years ago. Now, all but one of those proposals have been scrapped — and the last one standing is "on life support," Rader said.

"All of the developers have left California. There's almost no wind development going on in California today, even outside of the desert," she said.

Conservationists have some concerns, too. Delfino, from Defenders of Wildlife, de-

scribed a development zone north of Kramer Junction in the West Mojave as problematic, since scientists are hopeful that region will provide a "climate refuge" for species like the Mojave ground squirrel as temperatures rise. But she praised federal officials for making the last-minute decision to put a five-year moratorium on development in that area, giving San Bernardino and Kern counties time to finish their own conservation plans.

The Center for Biological Diversity, meanwhile, criticized the plan's authors for designating millions of acres for both conservation and recreation. Ileene Anderson, a biologist for the conservation group, said those overlapping designations would lead to more off-road vehicles trampling the open desert in areas where they shouldn't be.

The Bureau of Land Management "can't seem to control the (off-roading) issues that they have now. Now there's going to be an expansion of that," Anderson said.

Randy Banis, who represents the California Off-Road Vehicle Association, pushed back against that criticism. While he hadn't yet read the final plan that was signed Wednesday, he said the draft released last year wouldn't create new routes for off-road vehicles. Except for areas that already allow off-roading, the newly designated recreation zones will be closed to off-road vehicles unless specific routes are designated through separate regulatory processes, he said.

Banis believes the desert plan will actually limit off-roading. Where conservation and recreation designations overlap, he expects conservation to win out, leading to the closure of some existing off-road vehicle routes.

“Although the (Bureau of Land Management) is technically correct when they say that the (plan) does not open or close roads, it sets the stage for what I’m afraid may become one of the biggest rounds of road closure that we’ve seen in the desert,” Banis said.

Despite those criticisms and others, state and federal officials chose not to make many changes before finalizing the plan Wednesday. The Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan took effect just before 1 p.m., when Jerry Perez, director of the Bureau of Land Management’s California office, signed the “record of decision,” with Jewell and Douglas at his side.

But the desert planning process is far from over.

Up next: “Phase Two,” which involves conservation and renewable energy planning for nearly 12 million acres of private land overseen by seven county governments (Imperial, Inyo, Kern, Los Angeles, Riverside, San Bernardino and San Diego). State and federal officials originally wanted to include those lands in the initial Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan. But after criticism from county governments, they split the planning process in half last year, moving forward with the federal lands component and giving the counties time to make their own decisions for private lands.

Some of those counties have already finished their land-use plans; others are still working. It’s unclear how much coordination there will be between the county governments and the state and federal officials who wrote the federal lands plan.

It’s also unclear whether Phase Two will come together as a comprehensive planning document like Phase One and, if it does, how long that will take.