

Here's how Interior Secretary Sally Jewell made desert environmentalists happy and upset energy developers

BY DAVID DANIELSKI
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Interior Secretary Sally Jewell approved the first phase of a sweeping renewable energy and conservation plan for California's deserts Wednesday, Sept. 14, that's expected to shape large-scale wind and solar development for decades to come.

"Climate change is the pressing issue of the day ... and this region is part of the solution," she said at a signing ceremony at the Santa Rosa & San Jacinto Mountains National Monument's Visitor Center in the hills above Palm Desert.

Jewell said climate change means less rain for a waterfall at the national monument, where she went hiking earlier in the day.

But while environmentalists hailed the plan, a coalition of solar and wind-energy developers said it doesn't leave enough public lands available for



Interior Secretary Sally Jewell discusses the Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan, a major land use plan for desert's Californian that strives to foster solar, wind and other clean energy development while also preserving the most important natural areas, at the Santa Rosa & San Jacinto Mountains National Monument Visitor Center in Palm Desert on Wednesday, Sept. 14, 2016.

carbon-free energy projects needed to meet clean-energy goals for California and the nation.

In the works for eight years, this first phase of the Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan covers 10.8 million acres of public land in the deserts of seven California counties, including Riverside, San Bernardino and Los Angeles.

It is expected to be part of a future, larger plan encompassing about 22.5 million acres, including private land.

Jewell said this phase strives to speed up approvals for solar, wind and geothermal projects by focusing such energy development on 388,000 acres where such projects will do the least amount of harm to wildlife habitat and other natural and cultural resources.

These development areas include 170,700 acres in San Bernardino County and 148,000 acres in eastern Riverside County.

“It makes development happen in the right way and in the right places,” Jewell said.

The plan, developed in collaboration with state planners, also adds conservation protection to 4.2 million acres. Five million acres already are protected through wilderness, wilderness study and national monument designations.

These new conservation areas ensure that bighorn sheep and other wildlife will be able travel between Joshua Tree National Park, the Mojave National Preserve, and Death Valley National Park through newly protected land between these park holdings, Jewell said.

David Myers, executive director of The Wildlands Conservancy based in Oak Glen, praised the plan as a milestone in desert conservation.

“It is a great day for a grand vision of the greater Mojave Desert landscape,” Myers said.

He said it fulfills the vision of Elden Hughes, the late Sierra Club regional chairman whose

activism helped spur Congress to approve the Desert Protection Act of 1994. The act created the Mojave National Preserve and several protected wilderness areas in the Mojave Desert.

Wednesday’s new conservation areas include the Silurian Valley in San Bernardino County; Amargosa River Basin and Panamint Valley on each side of Death Valley National Park; and the Chuckwalla Bench, south of Interstate 10 in Riverside County.

Five industry associations representing large-scale solar and wind developers issued a harsh statement Wednesday, saying the plan hampers state and federal clean-energy goals. The plan removed about 3 million acres of public land that was previously available for alternative energy development, the statement said.

Nancy Rader, executive director of the California Wind Energy Association, said most of the land set aside for development isn’t good for wind development because of conflicts with military operations or concerns about bird deaths.

“There are no assurances,” she said when contacted in Berkeley by telephone.

Shannon Eddy, executive director of the Large-Scale Solar Association, said in a statement that the plan is a “Model T in a Tesla world” at a time even more ambitious clean energy will be needed to curb climate change.

In response, Jewell said that plan makes it easier to develop public lands by allowing streamlined approvals. She said it helps the industry avoid places that would be more time consuming and costly to develop because of environmental conflicts.

Karen Douglas, a member of the California Energy Commission who signed the plan Wednesday, said 60 percent of the alternative energy development is expected to occur on private lands, and that 388,000 acres of public land is more than enough for the other 40 percent.

The plan also designated 3.5 million acres for recreational uses. But Ileene Anderson, a biologist with the Tucson-based Center for Biological Diversity, said that most of that land overlaps with conservation areas.

She faults the plan for not analyzing how recreational uses, such as off-roading, may impact wildlife habitat.

“This was a missed opportunity,” she said.

Jewell, however, said that the Obama administration took a comprehensive rather than piecemeal approach to alternative energy development and conservation. The plan now allows for the creation of as much as 27,000 megawatts of clean energy (enough electricity for about 5 million homes) while preserving some of California’s most pristine wild lands for future generations.

“This is the wave of the future,” she said.