

Biden's Interior Department halts Trump's attempt to change desert conservation plan

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In his term's 11th hour, then-President Donald Trump took aim at the [Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan](#) and [began a rollback of key conservation protections](#) in the framework that aims to balance clean energy and conservation on federal land in the Southern California desert. On Wednesday, President Joe Biden's administration announced it will halt that action, leaving the original plan intact.

The Trump administration's proposed changes would have resulted in at least a 1.5-million-acre reduction in lands designated as "areas of critical environmental concern." They also would have modified or eliminated 68 "conservation and management actions," which set rules for development in the desert.

The Bureau of Land Management had said the changes proposed by the Trump administration would put more than 800,000 acres of desert back on the table for renewables. The California Wind Energy Association was working with the BLM to determine if any high-quality wind resource areas were included in that acreage, but that analysis was not completed, according to the trade group.

The plan, known as DCREP, covers 10.8 million acres in the Mojave and Colorado deserts — extending from the border north through Death Valley — and was completed in 2016 after eight years of negotiations and more than 16,000 public comments. It faced no lawsuits when it was completed, a rarity in the environmental planning world.

"The Trump administration's proposal in its final days to re-open the plan is unnecessary and at odds with balanced land management," Laura Daniel Davis, the U.S. Department of the Interior's principal deputy assistant secretary for land and minerals management, said in a statement Wednesday. "The Department will not move forward with the proposed environmental review of potential amendments to the DRECP."

The Trump administration's earlier decision brought condemnation from environmental groups that saw the move as pro-mining.

Ileene Anderson, a senior scientist at the Center for Biological Diversity who worked on drafting the DRECP, called that last-minute move "irrationally punitive" and a "final middle finger to the state of California on renewable energy issues."

When Trump moved to redo the plan, California Democrats, including Rep. Raul Ruiz and Sen. Dianne Feinstein, quickly came out in opposition alongside conservation groups.

Chris Clarke, associate director for the California desert program at the National Parks Conservation Association, applauded the Biden administration's move.

"Scrapping these rollbacks from the final days of the previous administration will help protect the California desert's stunning landscapes, native wildlife, sacred tribal lands and national parks from reckless energy developments," Clarke said.

Still, not all stakeholders are satisfied with the DCREP.

The renewable energy industry, for example, contends the plan took too much area off the table for wind and solar projects, development that will be vital in the shift away from climate-warming fossil fuels.



On Feb. 8, Nancy Rader, executive director of the California Wind Energy Association, wrote to Davis, urging the Interior Department to take advantage of the opportunity to tweak the DRECP. Rader argued that revisions allowing construction of more renewable energy would help tackle climate change and reach clean energy goals.

"CalWEA strongly urges the Biden Administration to carefully consider whether the proposed amendments are warranted to enable wind energy development or should be adjusted to achieve Biden Administration and California goals to eliminate our country's dependence on carbon-based fuels and avoid the most catastrophic impacts of climate change," Rader wrote.

In an email on Wednesday, Rader said CalWEA did not get a response to its letter and that she's "very disappointed that the Biden Administration did not pause to consider" the option of modifying the DRECP.

In her statement, Davis said, "We look forward to renewing our partnership with the state to build a clean energy economy that creates jobs, addresses climate change, and conserves public lands for current and future generations."

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