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Biden Administration Halts Trump's Push to Open up Protected Desert Lands

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Federal officials Wednesday announced that President Joe Biden's administration intends to halt an effort by his predecessor that would have opened up millions of acres in the Southern California desert to mining, energy development and broadband infrastructure, a move activists said would have been catastrophic to desert wildlife populations.

Just days before former President Donald Trump's departure from the White House, the Bureau of Land Management announced a series of proposed amendments to the Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan. The framework, finalized in 2016, designated nearly 11 million acres of federal land for conservation and recreation across the Southern California desert.

Among the plan's proposed amendments was the reduction of California Desert National Conservation Lands — now closed to energy development — by 2.2 million acres. The move also sought to scale back special protections for about 1.8 million acres of desert called "Areas of Critical Environmental Concern."

The BLM on Wednesday announced it intends to reverse course, leaving the original plan as is.

"The Trump administration's proposal in its final days to re-open the plan is unnecessary and at odds with balanced land management," said Laura Daniel Davis, the principal deputy assistant secretary for land and minerals management for the U.S. Department of the Interior.

"The Department will not move forward with the proposed environmental review of potential amendments to the DRECP. 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."

BLM officials announced in February 2018 that the agency would seek to revamp the DRECP, saying it placed too many barriers in the way of energy development, with not enough public land provided for energy projects. The plan covers lands spanning the Mojave and Colorado deserts, and took about eight years to finalize.

Environmental groups, however, were quick to blast the proposed changes as dangerous for the environment, and unnecessary, given that the DRECP already provides more than 388,000 acres for renewable energy development. California state energy officials additionally opposed the proposal.

Ileene Anderson, a senior scientist at the Center for Biological Diversity, called the scrapping of the proposed changes an “enormous relief.”

“We don’t have to choose between preserving important conservation areas and building the renewable energy systems crucial to addressing the climate crisis, and this agreement proves that. In fact, it’s the only way to slow climate change, address the wildlife extinction crisis and preserve life on the planet,” she said.

Members of the public were given until April 15 to submit comments on the proposed changes, although the BLM said it intends to publish a notice in the Federal Register in the coming days that will formally revoke the comment period, officially nixing the proposed changes.

The proposal was one of several last-minute efforts by the Trump administration aimed at ramping up development on public lands, which include a contentious battle in Alaska over the leasing of oil- and gas-drilling permits within the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.