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Bureau of Land Management attempts to open more California desert land to renewable energy development

By [Kelsey Misbrener](#) | January 14, 2021

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The Bureau of Land Management has released a draft environmental impact statement and plan amendment for the three plans that underlie the Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan (DRECP). The public comment period will end on April 15, 2021.

The BLM is proposing targeted amendments to the California Desert Conservation Area Plan, the Bakersfield Resource Management Plan and the Bishop Resource Management Plan. These amendments are intended to promote economic growth, support broadband infrastructure development, increase public access and allow for greater management flexibility in order to meet our nation's energy needs.

“It does not make sense that every renewable energy project on public lands in California would likely require a resource plan amendment to simply move forward,” said Deputy Secretary Kate MacGregor. “The previous plan made only 4% of 10.8 million acres managed by the BLM available as renewable energy development focus areas. This proposal will add over 800,000 acres for renewable energy development and create a more measured approach to foster responsible off-highway vehicle recreation, rural broadband and other important multiple-use projects — including those needed to meet California's renewable energy mandates.”

“As trusted forms of energy production are eliminated in California, large expanses of desert landscape will be needed to bring alternatives online to avoid blackouts and new constraints on the grid,” said Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Land and Minerals Casey Hammond. “This plan will make more federal land available for renewable energy projects in hopes of balancing uses as well as keeping the lights on and the air conditioning blowing.”

“The BLM is committed to the responsible management of public lands in California for variety of uses, from energy development to conservation and recreation,” said BLM California State Director Karen Mouritsen. “The proposed amendment will provide better opportunities to foster economic growth by supporting the development of renewable energy sources and the expansion of broadband access in California's vast deserts, while maintaining our shared conservation stewardship for important species and habitats.”

The targeted amendments provide flexibility and streamlining for siting renewable energy development within designated Development Focus Areas in an effort to continue to assist the state in their mandate of 60% energy from wind or solar by 2030. In addition, the amendments increase opportunities for multiple use within the planning area, including for broadband infrastructure, mining and minerals development, rights-of-way, rangeland and livestock grazing, recreation and public access. In order to achieve these goals, while at the same time continuing to ensure the conservation of resources and public uses in the southern California desert, the BLM carefully evaluated the existing Conservation and Management Actions (CMA) and conservation allocations in the planning area. As a result of this evaluation the BLM is proposing to modify the CMAs that overly restrict access to public lands, do not conform with current policy, or have been identified as inappropriate at a plan level.

The Center for Biological Diversity opposes the plan amendment. Ilene Anderson, a senior scientist at the Center, issued the following statement:

“The Trump administration’s despicable attempt to gut this important agreement is a last-minute affront to the state of California and the natural world,” said Ilene Anderson, a senior scientist at the Center for Biological Diversity. “Trump is blowing up this carefully crafted plan for no reason, other than to destroy fragile conservation areas and harm desert wildlife. Fortunately the Biden administration can right this wrong and keep this plan in place.”

In addition to the CMA changes, the BLM is also proposing modifications to the conservation allocations within the planning area, specifically Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) and California Desert National Conservation Lands. ACEC modifications are intended to simplify management through the reduction of overlapping designations where appropriate (e.g. wilderness), and ensure the ACEC designation is necessary for the management of a resource. Careful consideration in the ACEC evaluation was provided for federally and state-listed species as well as areas of cultural importance.

The BLM is proposing modifications to the California Desert National Conservation Lands (CDNCL). Specifically, the BLM has reevaluated the existing CDNCL to ensure (1) they contain nationally significant landscapes with ecological, cultural, and scientific values, and (2) that the BLM can manage for them. The proposed amendment would better align the CDNCL with other nationally significant landscapes, as identified in the March 30, 2009, the Omnibus Public Lands Management Act of 2009, through the creation of stand-alone units that meet criteria rather than an eco-regional approach. This approach would provide for a more readily identifiable conservation area that is intended to better facilitate public engagement and unit management.

In February 2018, the BLM initiated public scoping and requested comments that would help set the parameters, or scope, of the review of the three plans. In particular, the BLM requested comments on how land designations identified in the plan might affect development of solar, wind or other renewable energy resources. The BLM received more than 850 unique written submissions during public scoping; approximately 450 were substantive.

The draft EIS and draft plan amendment can be viewed and comments submitted on the BLM website: <https://go.usa.gov/x7hdj>. Comments may also be submitted by mail: BLM-CA Desert Plan Amendment, 2800 Cottage Way, Rm W-1623, Sacramento, CA 95825.

The BLM will hold public meetings during the public comment period. Announcements about these meetings will be made by news releases to the media and posting on the project website listed above.