

<https://www.desertsun.com/story/news/environment/2021/01/15/trump-administration-announces-rewrite-desert-conservation-plan/4145109001/>

Trump administration announces 11th-hour rewrite of desert conservation plan

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Palm Springs Desert Sun

The Trump administration on Wednesday unveiled a substantial rewrite of the Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan, a landscape management strategy that balances conservation, renewable energy development and cultural resources across 10.8 million acres of the Southern California desert.

Dropped a week before President Donald Trump leaves office, the move was quickly lambasted by politicians and conservationists, while the renewable industry approached it cautiously, arguing that the plan does need a second look.

Agreed to in 2016, the original plan took eight years to construct and was shaped by more than 16,000 public comments as well as input from dozens of stakeholders including the military, conservation groups, solar companies and state agencies.

While most, if not all, parties walked away with some gripes at the time, no lawsuits were filed to halt its implementation.

[The draft environmental impact statement](#), published Wednesday by the Bureau of Land Management, proposes two alternatives to the current iteration of the plan. The first would, among other things, reduce protected lands called "areas of critical environmental concern" by 1.8 million acres and would "modify or eliminate" 68 conservation management actions, which set rules for development in the desert. The second alternative would reduce that protected land designation by 1.5 million acres, while changing or eliminating the same number of rules.

"This is (Secretary of the Interior) David Bernhardt's final middle finger to the state of California on renewable energy issues," said Ileene Anderson, a senior scientist at the Center for Biological Diversity who worked on drafting the plan. She said the move came off as "irrationally punitive."

Helen O'Shea is the Natural Resources Defense Council's director of the renewable energy, lands division and nature program, and she also helped build the original plan. [She agreed with Anderson](#), labeling the eleventh-hour move "a final attack on the things California prioritizes and holds dear."

Environmentalists argued that the draft, which neither they nor the renewable industry knew was coming, was a gift for mining interests. The Department of the Interior, however, said it represents a much-needed update that would bolster renewable energy.

“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,” Casey Hammond, the Interior Department's principal deputy assistant secretary for land and minerals, said in a statement.

Mining appears to be a winner

California politicians and conservationists were skeptical of the Bureau of Land Management's motivations for releasing this draft plan — one that's likely to evaporate once President-elect Joe Biden takes office — in the dying days of President Donald Trump's tenure.

"It's very friendly to mining," said Chris Clarke, California desert associate director at the National Parks Conservation Association. “A lot of the changes in the DRECP that this plan suggests are there to facilitate mining.”

He pointed out various examples of protected areas on the chopping blocks, areas that happened to be near proposed or active gold and lithium mines.

These were among [numerous areas of critical environmental concern, or ACECs, that stand to lose significant acreage:](#)

- Chemehuevi ACEC south of Mojave National Preserve could lose 285,600 acres
- Chuckwalla ACEC southeast of Joshua Tree National Park could lose 192,900 acres
- Panamint Lake ACEC near Death Valley National Park would be eliminated
- Whitewater Canyon ACEC near Palm Springs would lose 12,100 acres, 81% of its total area

"It would open up more land for industrial development and industrial uses, and that seemed to be a hallmark of the Trump administration,” said Geary Hund, executive director of the Mojave Desert Land Trust. “It's a situation where there's money to be made and profit to be had by developing yet another area.”

A spokesperson for the National Mining Association, the country's main mining trade group, told The Desert Sun that the organization was not involved in writing this draft document, and other mining companies were not listed as official stakeholders.

In response to questions from The Desert Sun, a spokesperson from the Bureau of Land Management sent a statement that said, "In some instances, the areas proposed for removal may indirectly provide a benefit to other uses, such as for mining, though no particular use was favored."

This now opens a 90-day public comment period.

According to agency staff, the draft included eight public meetings to gather input, although the release still caught stakeholders by surprise. While the DRECP deals with federal lands within California, the state's absence from the process of writing this update still drew regulators' ire.

Commissioner Karen Douglas of the California Energy Commission released a statement in response, saying, "We are disappointed that the BLM has unilaterally proposed amendments to the DRECP in the last days of the Trump administration."

She pledged that the commission would work "closely with the incoming Biden administration" to "set this proposal aside."

Southern California Democrats echoed the sentiment. Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., who has advocated for the DRECP for years took aim at the Trump administration's move.

"I will work with the new administration to immediately block this rule change when President Biden takes office next week," she said in a statement. "The desert plan carefully balances recreational use, energy production and preservation. There is no reason to amend it now."

Rep. Raul Ruiz, D-Calif., agreed. "This eleventh-hour attempt by the Trump Administration to open California lands to private mining companies is a threat to our environmental and human health and would harm our desert ecosystem," he said in a statement.

Using the desert for energy

For the renewable energy industry, the DRECP needs changes, one way or another.

Nancy Rader is the executive director of the California Wind Energy Association, and she said the incoming Biden administration should take another look at the DRECP to identify more areas where renewable energy development could be allowed with minimal impacts. The first iteration, she said, "took too much wind energy off the table."

While most of the high-quality wind resource areas around California had already been developed by the time the DRECP came around, Rader said the final few options in the desert were blocked by the plan. "We had kind of given up, thrown in the towel, until this (draft) came up," she said.

Shannon Eddy, executive director of the Large-scale Solar Association, agreed that the DRECP needs to allow renewable development on more land if California's emissions reductions goals are to be met.

The original plan identifies 388,000 acres of "development focus areas" where renewable construction is prioritized. But, Eddy argued, caveats within the DRECP make development difficult even in those zones. Plus, she said, back-of-the-envelope math suggests the state could require new utility-scale solar covering somewhere between 600,000 and 1 million acres to meet its goals on climate change.

According to the Bureau of Land Management, the proposed changes to the DRECP would put more than 800,000 acres of desert back on the table for renewables.

"We would never expect that the DRECP or the California desert would have to shoulder all of the projects needed to meet our climate targets," Eddy said, "but it needs to provide more than it currently does."

She said that conservation groups won in the original DRECP planning process, leaving many solar projects dead on arrival. Still, Eddy was optimistic about large-scale landscape management's place in the California desert and was hopeful that her industry and environmental groups could continue dialogue to tinker with the balance the plan strikes.

But because the Trump administration has so aggressively rolled back environmental rules and regulations in favor of extractive industries, a last-minute rewrite of the plan was inherently going to be met with intense opposition. For Anderson from the Center for Biological Diversity, not enough time has passed to properly judge whether the plan is stymieing renewable development.

"From my perspective," she said, "(the DRECP) does seem like it is working the way it was envisioned. I'm hoping that the Biden administration will just terminate this process and let it play out a bit."