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Environmental Groups Blast Trump's Push to Open up Protected Desert Lands

Posted by [Contributing Editor](#) on January 14, 2021 in [Business](#) | [Leave a response](#)

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Environmental organizations are blasting a last-ditch effort by the Trump administration to open up millions of acres in the Southern California desert to mining, energy development and broadband infrastructure, a move activists say would be catastrophic to desert wildlife populations.

The U.S. Department of Interior announced Wednesday a series of proposed amendments to the Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan, which designates more than 10 million acres for conservation and recreation. Among the plan's proposed amendments is the reduction of California Desert National Conservation Lands — now closed to energy development — by 2.2 million acres. The move would also scale back special protections to about 1.8 million acres of desert called Areas of Critical Environmental Concern.

“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,” said Karen Mouritsen, California state director for the Bureau of Land Management, in a statement.

The proposal is 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 National Wildlife Refuge.

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.

Environmental groups, however, are calling the changes dangerous for the environment, and unnecessary, given the DRECP already provides more than 388,000 acres for renewable energy development. Even California state energy officials have come out in opposition of the proposal.

“The drastic reduction in conservation lands, including wildlife corridors, together with the increased development contemplated by this amendment, would reduce and fragment habitat to

catastrophic effect, including the potential loss of species such as desert tortoise, desert bighorn sheep and Joshua trees,” Mojave Desert Land Trust Executive Director Geary Hund said.

Ileene Anderson, a senior scientist at the Center for Biological Diversity, called the proposed changes a “last-minute affront to the state of California and the natural world.”

“Trump is blowing up this carefully crafted plan for no reason, other than to destroy fragile conservation areas and harm desert wildlife,” she said. “Fortunately the Biden administration can right this wrong and keep this plan in place.”

California Energy Commission Commissioner Karen Douglas said in a statement she hopes the incoming Biden administration would “set this proposal aside” once assuming office.

“The DRECP was developed through a close partnership between California and BLM. It remains an important component of our state’s efforts to meet its ambitious climate and renewable energy goals, which will require major new investments in renewable energy projects,” she said. “We look forward to working closely with the incoming Biden administration and hope it will set this proposal aside and instead focus on partnering with us to reinvigorate our longstanding partnership with BLM and other federal agencies to advance our mutual environmental goals.”