NEWS OF THE DESERT FROM SIERRA CLUB CALIFORNIA & NEVADA DESERT COMMITTEE JANUARY 2026

DESERT REPORT

BY CAMILA BAUTISTA

A New Beginning at the Salton Sea

We need to keep up the momentum

It was the end of August, the time of year when fall migration is in full motion and shorebirds begin passing through the Salton Sea. The sky feels different during this season. Long strings of cormorants move steadily overhead, stilts and avocets call across newly exposed mudflats, and phalaropes spin on the water like tiny wind-up toys. My team and I were preparing for our semi-annual Intermountain West Shorebird Survey, which Audubon coordinates alongside several agencies, nonprofit partners, and more than a dozen volunteers.

August weather in the Coachella and Imperial Valleys can be unrelenting, and this year was no exception. We kept pushing the survey back because of repeated excessive heat warnings. The night before the survey, when everything was ready and volunteers were set to meet us at sunrise, a new excessive heat warning arrived. For safety, we had to cancel. But some of our partners were already on their way, including colleagues flying in from Sacramento who had never visited the Salton Sea before, so we decided to make the most of the day, even though temperatures were well above 110 degrees. As someone who grew up in the Coachella Valley, I wanted their first impression of the Salton Sea to be meaningful. I wanted them to see what I see: a place that is complicated but beautiful, challenged but alive, and full of possibility.

Their timing turned out to be unexpectedly perfect.

We headed toward the Brawley area. Off an unassuming stretch of Highway 86 is Poe Road, the access point to one of the most significant restoration efforts currently underway at the Salton Sea. This is the site of California State's Species Conservation Habitat Project, known as SCH.

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WATER IN CALIFORNIA

Water in California is complicated. Whether viewed through the lens of water rights, the Public Trust Doctrine, the Human Right to Water law, Tribal Beneficial Uses, human health, the environment, conservation, privatization or riparian rights. In this issue we have 3 articles about varying aspects of water in the California desert, namely: water rights, water privatization and the environment/habitat/health. We hope you will find them very interesting and in so doing value the many flavors of water, so critical to sensitive desert resources.
Charming Evelyn, Co-Chair Sierra Club California Water Committee

Red-necked Phalaropes at the Salton Sea.
Alecia Smith/Audubon

BY JORA FOGG

Cadiz Water Updates

The multi-decade movement to protect the California Desert's ancient groundwater continues

The water company, Cadiz Inc. is moving full steam ahead and taking full advantage of this Administration's prioritization of extractive development projects on public lands. Their latest iteration of influencing public opinion involves creating a false narrative of conveying water to underserved communities in California. While Cadiz attempts to rebrand itself as a water justice company the project in fact would deplete an aquifer by pumping 25 more times the recharge rate on an annual basis. Community rate payers would end up with water shortages and left to pick up the bill for whatever environmental mitigation is required. These environmental and legal risks are the very reasons the Metropolitan Water District rejected Cadiz's proposal in 2002. Will water districts in southern California have the foresight to do the same?

The next step in Cadiz's plan is already underway as they work with the Bureau of Land Management on a new Right of Way permit to use their previously purchased oil and gas pipeline (gross right?!) to transport water westward, out of the desert aquifer. The ROW application should be subject to a full environmental review but this remains to be seen. Under Trump's various emergency orders things could move quickly and without much due process. Californians will have to act swiftly to respond to Cadiz's ROW. It seems the best tool to stop Cadiz's dirty bidding is for the California State Lands Commission (SLC) and the State Legislature to reaffirm their commitment to blocking this dangerous and destructive project. Cadiz needs authorization from the SLC under Water Code 1815 and additionally, needs the SLC to grant a land lease to it for use of state lands. Cadiz has not yet applied for any of these permits.

Simultaneously, other strategies up Cadiz's sleeves include seeking federal funding and State Proposition 4 (The Climate Bond) funding. To hedge their bets further, they also are exploring selling water to Arizona in partnership with EPCOR, a private water company that conducts business in Arizona. Cadiz suffered a major defeat in November when the Water Infrastructure Finance Authority of Arizona rejected EPCOR's application that sought financing for the project.

Environmental justice, water and conservation NGOs are working to ensure that Cadiz does not secure permits or public funding for its unsustainable groundwater mining project. We will need a collaborative, well-coordinated effort to defeat Cadiz in this next fight. Please contact your state legislators, as well as your water districts, county board of supervisors, and city council members (especially if you live in the desert) telling them that they should not be swayed by a project that is unsustainable and would end up costing them money in the long-term.

Jora Fogg (she/her) is the California Program Associate Director for the Conservation Lands Foundation and serves on the Sierra Club California Desert Committee. She lives and works in Mono County but visits the Mojave Desert as often as she can.

BY CARY MEISTER

Let Me Tell You A Story Of A River

But the ending has not yet been written

Today was the day Diana Decolombi would be taking her class of nine fifth-graders on the annual field trip to the East Wetlands along the Colorado River near Yuma. It was a typical glorious October day in the Sonoran Desert with a cloudless sky and a temperature in the low nineties. After the students wrote down their observations of the flora and fauna, as budding young naturalists do, they agreed that some ice cream would be refreshing.

As the group returned to the parking lot to board the school bus, they faintly heard the familiar tunes played by an ice cream truck. As they reached the bus, the ice cream truck had already pulled alongside it. When the driver opened the small side window of the truck, Ms. Decolombi ordered nine ice cream bars. The ice cream man handed her seven. She waited for two more but they never came. The ice cream man advised Ms. Decolombi that there was a shortage of ice cream which led the price to rise, so Ms. Decolombi could only get seven ice cream bars.

The nine students started clamoring for their ice cream bars now that they were sweating and sweltering in the treeless parking lot. They started arguing over who should get the ice cream and began to form groups to more forcefully make their claims as the ice cream bars started to melt.

Cody, Sandy, Aurora, and Dulce yelled that they should each get a whole ice cream bar. Because they were lactose-intolerant and sometimes forgot to bring their Lactaid, they had not received their fair share on past trips. The others could divide the remaining five ice cream bars however they wanted.

Whitney, Parker, and Laverne, who were whizzes at math, countered that everyone should share in times of shortage. Each student should get 7/9ths of an ice cream bar.

The remaining two students, Luís and Gertrudis, said they could go along with whatever the others decided among themselves, but the two of them had an agreement with the teacher that they will get no less proportionally than the other seven and they can't be given cheaper ice cream bars to make up the difference.

As for Ms. Decolombi, her concern grew as the children continued to argue because she feared the dispute would go the school principal, Ms. Ross, who not only took forever to make a decision but also because Ms. Decolombi knew the students would not be happy with the principal's decision.

And this is exactly where we are now with deciding how Colorado River water will be allocated after 2026!

To forestall any confusion, the group of four students represents the Upper Basin states of Colorado, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming. They assert that they should not face cutbacks in water use because, compared to the Lower Basin, they are not diverting all the water granted to them by the 1922 Colorado River Compact but they nevertheless already have to reduce water use in some years.

The group of three students represents the Lower Basin states of Arizona, California, and Nevada. They maintain that when cutbacks in water use are needed, all nine states should take proportional cuts based on how much water is available.

The group of two represents the Mexican states of Sonora and Baja California.

Ms. Decolombi represents the Bureau of Reclamation and the U.S. Department of the Interior who supervise the allocations.

The role of the U.S. Supreme Court is taken by Ms. Ross, the principal.

The ice cream bars represent the amount of water in the Colorado River. Just as the supply of ice cream is insufficient, so is the amount of water in the Colorado River. What isn't in the story is that these flows are projected to decrease until at least the twenty-second century.

The melting ice cream falling to the ground symbolizes the greater percolation of snowmelt into unprecedent-

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A New Beginning at the Salton Sea

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American White Pelicans at the Species Conservation Habitat Project. Salton Sea State Management Program

The State of California is responsible for restoring roughly 30,000 acres of exposed playa around the Sea. Half of that acreage is designated for habitat restoration, and the other half for dust suppression. SCH alone accounts for about 66 percent of the total habitat acreage that must be created, which makes it one of the most important and ambitious projects in the region.

What makes SCH particularly special is its proximity to a relatively consistent water source. The New River flows directly into the project area and is routed into a constructed mixing basin, where it is blended with pumped Salton Sea water. This mixture creates a salinity level that can support fish while also preventing the growth of vegetation that, if eaten by wildlife, could introduce heavy metals into the food chain. In May 2025, water began flowing into the newly constructed ponds. By fall migration, the first 2,010 acres were almost full and wildlife responded almost immediately.

When we visited in late August, the results were astonishing.

Although we could not step outside because millions of flies were swarming around the car, it hardly mattered. Even from inside the vehicle, the scope of the project was impressive. Thousands of birds had already moved in only three months after water was released.

Neotropic Cormorants were nesting on branches poking out of the flooded ponds. Red-necked and Wilson's Phalaropes darted in spinning circles. Black-necked Stilts and other "usual suspects" of the Salton Sea were everywhere. We even spotted a Yellow-footed Gull, a species that usually inhabits the Gulf of California. There was also a Reddish Egret, a species rarely seen in inland California. And then came the pelicans.

American White Pelicans filled the ponds in a way I have never seen in my five years of birding at the Sea. Brown Pelicans were mixed among them, soaring overhead or resting quietly along shallow edges. It was a breathtaking scene, not only for me but for my colleagues. These were experienced birders who have traveled widely, yet they said it was one of the best birding experiences they had ever had. As someone from the Coachella Valley, I took that to heart. Moments like that reaffirm why this place matters.

The SCH project is a powerful reminder that when water, planning, and political will come together, the Salton Sea can change rapidly and dramatically for the better. With about 5,000 acres of habitat already constructed and 2,000 of those acres filled, the State recently announced an expansion of the project to roughly 10,000 total acres.

For a region where progress can feel painfully slow and often invisible, SCH represents real, visible, and hopeful change.

Even with its success, SCH occupies only one part of a very large and very stressed lakebed. The Salton Sea receives most of its inflow from agricultural drainage supplied by the Colorado River. Every month, new headlines describe shrinking flows, shrinking reservoirs, and new negotiations among the seven states and Mexico that rely on the river. The future of the Sea hinges on the future of the Colorado River. Because of this, we must plan for habitat solutions that use less water and rely more on local and reliable sources.

Small but meaningful opportunities are emerging in places where natural or local water sources exist. One of the most promising examples is the Bombay Beach Wetlands Project. This project, co-led by the State and Audubon, is currently in design and permitting and is expected to break ground in late 2026 or early 2027. It spans 564 acres and is sustained by geothermal spring water rather than Colorado River imports.

Local sources like these matter. They are less vulnerable to interstate negotiations and create new habitat

Bombay Beach Wetlands. Mike Fernandez/Audubon

with a higher degree of certainty. Wetlands also naturally improve water quality, support bird life, and provide buffers against dust. They are among the most efficient habitat types we can invest in.

Emergent wetlands appear elsewhere around the Sea as well, especially along farming edges. In 2020, Audubon estimated that roughly 7,000 acres of such wetlands existed. Many have changed since then due to fluctuating water availability, but they remain an important part of the restoration landscape.

As the Salton Sea Management Plan approaches its conclusion in 2028, the urgency to align remaining restoration efforts with water reality continues to grow. Projects must balance habitat value, water efficiency, and public health outcomes.

The north end of the Salton Sea presents its own set of challenges. The absence of clay layers makes the soils porous, which complicates the ability to retain water on the surface. Recognizing the urgency, the State has initiated scoping and early design for a new wetlands-focused effort on the north shore. This work sits adjacent to the Salton Sea Authority's North Lake Pilot Project, and the vision is to replicate the approach taken at Bombay Beach wherever possible. The goal is to blend habitat creation with dust suppression and community benefits, even in a landscape that is geologically complex and historically underserved.

Progress here must accelerate. The north end cannot continue to wait while conditions worsen.

My visit to SCH in August left me feeling hopeful. It also reminded me that while invisible progress happens quietly—through design meetings, permitting hurdles, contracting, and engineering—visible progress matters for public trust. It matters for communities who have waited decades for meaningful change, and it matters for the birds whose presence tells us what is working.

The Salton Sea is not an easy place to work. It is layered with environmental, social, hydrologic, and political complexity. Yet it remains one of the most important migratory stopovers in the Pacific Flyway and one of the most vulnerable landscapes in the West.

As new projects begin taking shape, especially in the north, we must keep pushing forward. Momentum cannot slow. The landscape, the wildlife, and the surrounding communities do not have time to wait. The success of SCH shows what is possible. The responsibility now is to build on that success and ensure that every corner of the Sea, especially the communities on the north end, sees the same kind of tangible and hopeful change.

Camila Bautista is the Salton Sea and Desert Program Manager for Audubon California and a Coachella Valley native working at the intersection of habitat restoration, community engagement, and environmental justice.

Thank you

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Future Desert Committee Meetings

The next Desert Committee meeting will be held on February 21 and 22 at the Flower Building in Shoshone, CA. The meeting will be held noon-5:00pm Saturday and 8:00am-noon Sunday. There will be a Happy Hour and a potluck supper on Saturday evening. Jora Fogg (Jora@conservationlands.org) will be chairing the meeting. Please contact her if you would like to present on a topic.

WALTER FELLER

Join Us On The Desert Forum

If you find Desert Report interesting, sign up for the Desert Committee's e-mail Listserv, Desert Forum. Here you'll find open discussions of items interesting to desert lovers. Many articles in this issue of Desert Report were developed through Forum discussions. Electronic subscribers will continue to receive current news on these issues — plus the opportunity to join in the discussions and contribute their own insights. Desert Forum runs on a Sierra Club Listserv system.

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BY JOHN PINSON

Desert Icon: Dr Edmund C Jaeger and his Curious Palaver

A way to gather for aimless conversation in the desert

When it comes to desert characters, few people deserve the clichéd introduction of "the man, the myth, the legend" as much as Dr Edmund Carrol Jaeger. Some remember him for his definitive books like *Desert Wild Flowers* (1940) or *The North American Deserts* (1957). Others know him for having "discovered" the hibernation of the Common Poorwill. A few of us have come across his botanical specimens in herbaria. Others have heard stories of his kooky health practices, including vegetarianism and nude sun bathing.

It all began on January 28th[1], 1887, in Loup City, Nebraska. His father, John Philip Jaeger, suffered from chronic health problems, which led him to the Battle Creek Sanitarium and Dr John Harvey Kellogg. Known today as the inventor of corn flakes, Dr Kellogg was a strict Seventh Day Adventist and proponent of rigorous exercise, a strict vegetarian diet, sun tanning, and abstinence from tobacco and alcohol. Jaeger's family adopted Adventism and credited Dr Kellogg with saving the patriarch's life. The family moved to Riverside, California in 1906 for the healthier weather.

Being a true legend, online information on Professor Jaeger is confused and fragmentary. The definitive source on Jaeger is the biography *Son of the Living Desert, Edmund C Jaeger 1887-1983* by Raymond E Ryckman, Ph.D. and James L Zackrison, M.A. In 1914, Jaeger attended Occidental college, but left the next year to teach in Palm Springs, where he built his own cabin. There he formed a "Creative Brotherhood" with the artists Carl Eytel and Jimmy Swinnerton, and the author Joseph Smeaton Chase, among other locals who shared a love of the desert. He was a bit of a poet during this period. Jaeger graduated from Occidental College in 1918 with a major in Zoology and a minor in Botany, lived in a cabin on Mt Palomar, spent time at UC Berkeley, but landed a teaching job at Riverside City College in 1922, where he became a local fixture. He never married. Ryckman describes him as a modern-era figure who was a product of the Victorian era. Because his sister never married, he was responsible for her care and obliged not to marry. This suited him because it allowed long weekends in the field.

On December 29th, 1946, Jaeger found and studied a hibernating Common Poorwill in a small niche in a rock in the Chuckwalla Mountains, still the only bird known to enter an extended state of torpor rather than migrate. The same poorwill returned two more winters. He published his findings in the journal *The Condor* and in *National Geographic*. The location of the "poorwill niche" has been protected in the Edmund C Jaeger Nature Sanctuary, now within the Chuckwalla National Monument. Many affectionately call him "Doctor Jaeger," though his Doctorate in Science was given as an honorary degree by Occidental College. In his later years, he visited and studied the deserts of South America, Africa and Australia.

Later in his academic life, Professor Jaeger noticed the sciences fracturing into small areas of focus, with researchers confined to their labs. To address this, he

Top: Dr. Edmund C Jaeger. Photographer unknown
Poorwill in the crypt. Photographer likely Jaeger himself

A desert palaver. John Pinson

founded a group he called the "Palaver," an obsolete term meaning "aimless conversation." The goal of the group was to bring experts, students, and interested parties to the field to converse in the context of the desert environments. The first Palaver was the weekend of October 9-10, 1954 near Lucerne Valley. However, as Jaeger aged and became less the driving force of the group, the Palaver became more ritualized and less science oriented. The Palaver meets in spring and fall. Invitations are mailed, folded yellow legal paper. Historic Palaver signs point the way to the meeting place. There is a cowbell ceremony at 2:30 PM, where the youngest person rings the very cowbell Jaeger found in the desert. The effects are kept in an old apple box with a hand-made lid, hand lettered with the word "Palaver" across it. After ten Palavers, participants receive an embroidered patch. There is a guided nature walk, and an evening program, usually a slide show and talk on desert topics.

Unfortunately, one of the rituals became gender exclusion. This was understandable in the 1950's, but by the 1970's the culture had shifted. The group developed a reputation as a kooky men's club. There are stories of women coming to Palavers during this period. One longtime "Palaverite" came with his wife, who would hide her hair in a hat and come to evening programs. The journalist Ann Japenga came to a Palaver for an article, although the director at the time was opposed to including women. Jaeger himself encouraged women in the sciences, took women on field trips as early as the 1920's, and taught a Zoology class in the fall of 1944 that had 22 female students out of 28 enrolled. Despite being an early supporter of women in the sciences, the continuation of his namesake group's gender exclusion policy meant fewer professional scientists could associate themselves with the group.

At the point when I came into it, it had dwindled to a couple families who treated the Palaver as a male family ritual, plus a small group who were ready to move closer to Jaeger's vision. We opened the group to women, really anyone interested in the desert, and brought back more of the scientific focus. We honor Jaeger's legacy by maintaining an interest in the science of the desert, and by not allowing smoking or alcohol at cowbell or the evening program, keeping the cultural memory of the group alive.

It's been a slow process of working back toward involvement with local faculty and students. We now meet the first weekend of April and the second weekend of October. The scope has been broadened to include history, culture and art of the desert, as well as science. We hope to partner with a 501(c)(3) non-profit, to codify policies and procedures, as well as to spread out the work of putting on Palavers and to have some way to pay honoraria to guest speakers.

Edmund Jaeger was perhaps the last of the great naturalists who were conversant on all topics of natural science. This allowed him to bring a broad knowledge to bear on solving questions of the desert. He was an interesting character who was a passionate student and writer working toward a greater appreciation of desert environments. With that in mind, hopefully he and the Palaver will be remembered for the curiosity and rigor that brought a generation of researchers into the study and preservation of the deserts.

John Pinson coordinates the Edmund Jaeger Palaver, teaches English at Chaffey College in Rancho Cucamonga, and is a cultural photographer. Please contact John Pinson at john.pinson@chaffey.edu.

References and other literature cited are available on the website desertreport.org. On the home page go to the right sidebar and click on "All Posts." Then scroll down to the article that you wish to see, and the references will be at the end.

John Pinson

BY JOHN HIATT

Castle Mountains Gold Mine Phase 2

Gold at $4,000/oz makes everything look golden

Equinox Gold Corp. is in the process of expanding production at its' Castle Mountains Mine site. Because of the significant expansion of the area being mined and the processing facilities the BLM is requiring an amendment to the current plan of operations and a notice of scoping for a new Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) was recently issued.

The Castle Mountains lie in San Bernardino County, California just west of the Nevada border and are surrounded by the Mojave National Preserve and the Castle Mountains National Monument. The mine site sits almost due west of Searchlight, Nevada and is accessed from Nevada Route 164 and the Walking Box Ranch Road. The mine site was originally accessed by the Barnwell and Searchlight rail line which connected to the Lanfair Valley line at Barnwell and the AT&SF mainline at Goffs.

The first mining claims in this area were for gold and were filed in 1908 by James Hart and the Hitt brothers. Mining began soon after and resulted in the establishment of the town of Hart with a population of some 400 people. Mining continued at a rapid pace through 1912, but by 1917 the boom was over and only a few people were left in the town.

One of the old Viceroy pits at the Castle Mountain Gold Mine. John Hiatt

Geologically, the Castle Mountains are of volcanic origin and are part of the eastern rim of an ancient volcanic caldera and are mostly rhyolitic material with a very low sulfur content. There are also significant clay deposits mixed in with the gold bearing material. From the 1930's through the late '50s the Pacific Clay Co. and others, including the Wedgewood Pottery Co., mined clay here with some 200,000 tons of clay shipped in1957, the year of maximum production.

By 1981 the price of gold hit $800/oz and the process of recovering gold from low grade ores via treatment with a dilute solution of sodium cyanide (known as cyanide heap leach recovery) was well established. These two factors stimulated a boom in gold mining and interest in old mining districts which had only been profitable to mine up this time if there was high- grade ore. Areas of high-grade ore are generally surrounded by much larger areas of low-grade material. Hence, two men who had been associated with the Vanderbilt mine in the Ivanpah Valley started looking at the Hart mining district, as the area was known at the time, and decided it was worth exploring. Following some exploratory work, they began acquiring old claims and purchased the clay pit patents. Viceroy Gold Corp. was formed in 1984 and by 1985 the company had acquired some 12 square miles of claims.

It took several years to put together an actual plan of operations, obtain BLM permits and acquire financing, but in April 1991 Viceroy Golds' Castle Mountain Venture began construction. The first gold bar was poured in 1992. At that time the cost of production was about $200/oz of gold on ore that assayed on average at 0.046 oz/ton of gold. Gold recovery was 65-70% of assay value.

Viceroy Gold purchased the Walking Box Ranch from Carl Weikel as their local headquarters and managers' residence. Carl Weikel was willing to sell his ranch property and grazing operation due to the grazing restrictions being imposed as a result of the ESA listing of the desert tortoise as threatened in 1989. As Viceroy Gold wound down their operation in the early 2000's

they transferred ownership of the Walking Box Ranch to The Nature Conservancy who eventually transferred ownership to the BLM, the current owner. While they owned it Viceroy did quite a bit of restoration work on the ranch house and immediate surroundings, so today the house, which is on the register of historic places, is in pretty good condition.

In 2015 the price of gold was just above $1000/oz. By 2018 it had moved up to $1500/oz and in early 2019 hit $2000/oz before backing off and hovering around $1850/oz through 2023. In January 2024 the price hit $2500/oz and by mid- year $3000/oz. In October 2025 the price exceeded $4000/oz for a time and at the end of the month sits right at $4000/oz. At this price, mining gold can be very profitable and the Castle Mountain property is especially valuable as known quantity due to all the prior exploration that has been done at the site. Hence, Equinox Gold is anxious to move forward and greatly expand their current operation, which is producing about 20,000 oz of gold/year. Their announced production goal is 200,000 oz/year. In addition to BLM approval of an updated plan of operations, they also have some infrastructure issues to deal with.

When Viceroy Gold operated the mine they installed a fairly high capacity electric power line from near the Walking Box Ranch to the mine, a distance of about15 miles. That line was removed and the right-of-way relinquished about ten years ago as part of Viceroy's reclamation agreement. Equinox needs to rebuild that line so that they don't have to use diesel generators to power their crushers and other processing equipment. In order to do that, they need a new right-of-way from BLM in both Nevada and California. They also need to deal with the issue that the mine, in California, is in Southern California Edison's service area but they want to hook into Nevada Power's grid in Nevada.

Storm water storage pond with floating cover of interlocking plastic blocks to retard evaporation. John Hiatt

A bigger issue is water. The mine currently has access to 625 acre-ft/yr from a well near the mine. The current operation is set up to use that water quite efficiently. Instead of sprinklers to distribute the cyanide solution over the leach pile they use a drip system that is buried about a foot beneath the surface. The stormwater storage pond which is several acres in surface area is covered with an interlocking system of plastic blocks, each of which is about a foot square. The nearest new water source that they can reasonably access is in the Ivanpah Valley which lies to the northwest of the mine. The only wells in that valley that could be used, or a new well drilled, would have to be on private property in the north end of the valley outside of the Mojave Preserve boundary. That new water would have to be piped along the Nipton Road (Hwy 164 in Nevada) to the Walking Box Ranch Road and then to the mine, a distance of 25-30 miles depending on the well location. This pipeline would also require a right-of-way, either from the BLM or CalTrans and the Nevada Dept. of Transportation if the highway right-of-way is used. California's Sustainable Groundwater Management Act considers the Ivanpah Valley a low priority basin so a Sustainability Plan is not due until 2040. Hence, the State of California will probably not be intervenor in the effort to obtain water from the Ivanpah Valley, although Equinox will have to prepare a California Environmental Impact Report (EIR), which may trigger some State action. The nearest private property in the Ivanpah Valley is at the hamlet of Nipton. A high capacity well at that location could easily lower the water table to the point that existing wells would go dry. It is also possible that a water table drawdown could result in the intrusion of very low-quality water with nuclear contaminants from under the Ivanpah playa to the Nipton area.

There are also other infrastructures issues that will need to be addressed in the EIS such as the traffic on the Walking Box Ranch road, currently a gravel road that is right at the upper elevation limit of desert tortoise habitat. There is a tortoise fence along that road from Hwy 164 to the far edge of the Walking Box property. Equinox estimates that the current number of employees, about fifty will increase to between 250 and 300. Equinox has already agreed to transport employees to the mine by van or bus rather than by workers' private vehicles. There will also be significant very heavy truck traffic on that road as the mining ramps up in order to bring in a lot of very large earth moving equipment.

In addition to infrastructure issues there are several

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BY KEVIN EMMERICH

Greenlink West Transmission Project Is Under Construction

Yet the huge high-voltage line has delays

The giant 100-acre-plus Sagebrush Substation under construction in November 2025 in Amargosa Valley, Nevada, for the Greenlink West Transmission Project. Kevin Emmerich

Greenlink West is a system of new transmission facilities crossing mostly lands managed by Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and some private land from Las Vegas to Yerington, Nevada, and is crossing Clark, Esmeralda, Lyon, Mineral, Nye, Storey, and Washoe counties. The project will also include three 345 kV lines from Yerington, NV, to the Reno, NV, area.

The project will expand four existing substations and build two new substations in Nye and Esmeralda Counties. The project is also building a series of new roads on unspoiled public lands as well as new microwave towers to be located on remote peaks and ridges including one next to the Longstreet Inn and Casino in Amargosa Valley near Ash Meadows National Wildlife Refuge.

In May, 2025, two conservation groups filed a lawsuit in the US District Court for Nevada against the Interior Department's decision to issue a Record of Decision for approving the Right of Way for the Greenlink West Transmission Project in September, 2024. The Friends of Nevada Wilderness and Basin and Range Watch are objecting to the approval of a 525 kiloVolt (kV) transmission project being built across 472 miles of public lands with impacts to natural and cultural resources on nearly 4,000 acres.

According to NV Energy, the goals of Greenlink are to improve system reliability, promote economic growth and facilitate development of renewable resources in remote Nevada. Yet the huge transmission line starts at natural gas power plants at Apex, NV and is designed to feed gargantuan data centers and tech factories.

The lawsuit focuses on the lack of review of reasonable alternatives, enabling solar energy sprawl in Esmeralda County and other regions, failure to protect the federally threatened Mojave desert tortoise under the Endangered Species Act, and violations of the National Park Service Organic Act in Tule Springs Fossil Beds National Monument.

The 110-acre Esmeralda Substation is now under construction and is expected to transmit one gigawatt of energy. BLM is considering approving 7 large-scale solar projects in this area known as the "Esmeralda 7" and all are connected to the future substation. In total, these projects could develop up to 62,000 acres or about 100 square miles of public lands. Recently, the environmental review for Esmeralda 7 was canceled, and BLM stated in various media outlets that solar developers might have the option to re-submit new applications individually.

In Esmeralda County, Greenlink will cut directly through wilderness-quality lands, a stronghold of desert bighorn sheep population, rare plant populations,rich paleontological sites and very old and unique archeology sites. The Friends of Nevada Wilderness have created a conservation plan for this area as an alternative to industrial development. The Esmeralda Area of Critical Environmental Concern would protect 850,000 acres of this region from energy sprawl, and focus on conservation and public recreation such as hiking and dark skies viewing.

Greenlink West is being developed through about 150 miles of desert tortoise habitat. It is being built in the Indian Springs and Mercury Valleys – two regions that the US Fish and Wildlife Service have determined to be "the most crucial desert tortoise connectivity corridor in Nevada". The area connects genetic populations to both the Amargosa and Pahrump valleys. In 2022, Basin and

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Castle Mountains Gold Mine Phase 2

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wildlife issues to consider. One of those is the presence of Ravens that may prey on juvenile desert tortoises. Ravens readily make use of human associated subsidies such as nesting sites and anything edible, and are currently observable at the site. There is a herd of about a hundred bighorn sheep on the mountainous area around the mine. The mining company has provided water sources for the sheep and their numbers have increased substantially as a result. Bighorn sheep can co-exist fairly well with human activities as long as they are not harassed, so their presence may not be a problem. Most of the potential wildlife issues can be prevented by keeping the mine site clean of food items that attract animals.

In order to meet its production target the company estimates that it will need to move 40,000 to 60,000 tons of material per day. Some of that will be waste rock, which, as much as possible, will be used to back fill the existing pits. The gold containing rock will be crushed to 3/8 inch or finer gravel and then placed on leach pads for treatment with cyanide solution to remove the gold. It takes several years of cyanide leaching to remove all the recoverable gold.

The expected working life of the mine is fifteen to twenty years, after which the areas of disturbance will be recontoured, if necessary, and reclaimed by establishing native vegetation by seeding or use of containerized plants. There is already a well established plant nursery and greenhouse on site and some of the older workings have been reclaimed, a process that has been underway since Viceroy was mining there. The long-term goal is reestablishment of the vegetation to the point that the mined areas and the process piles do not look significantly different than the undisturbed area around the mine. The York fire, which started near Caruthers Canyon in the Mojave Preserve in 2023, burned right up to parts of the mine infrastructure on the property and the burned area may serve as a control to compare active reclamation in the Mojave Desert with natural post fire restoration.

The main environmental issue raised by this proposed project has to do with water use. In addition to the possible impacts to the aquifer in the Ivanpah Valley the mine would eventually be expanded to the point of mining below the water table. That would require dewatering of the mine site and result in lowering the water table over a large area around the mine. Also, unless the pit(s) extending below the water table is not backfilled as currently required by the CA Mining & Geology Board, there will be a permanent evaporation lake that will consume groundwater forever and cause all or most springs in the area to cease flowing.

John Hiatt, a long-time resident of Las Vegas, Nevada is a desert activist deeply knowledgeable about issues affecting the Mojave and Great Basin Deserts. He is currently Vice Chair of the Desert Committee.

Desert Website

The Desert Report website features material in a more timely manner than the interval between printed issues. The material that appears on the Home page will also be more action oriented than has been customary in the past. The archive of past issues will be largely unchanged. The Index to past issues and References provided in articles can be accessed from the bottom of any page.

www.desertreport.org

Let Me Tell You a Story of a River

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edly dry soils in the mountains of the Upper Basin and the sublimation (evaporation) of snow directly into water vapor without an intermediate liquid state that would percolate into the soil or run off to the nearest stream or river.

The ice cream truck driver is the current U.S. Government Executive Branch, which has canceled Inflation Reduction Act funds for conservation of Colorado River water. These were to be used for greater recycling and underground storage of treated urban wastewater, repair of water-inefficient irrigation systems, restoration of habitat, and cash payments to farmers to forego farming during summer or for a whole year.

Some of you may wonder why no Native American children were among the students. This represents the U.S. Government and basin states' exclusion of Native American Nations of the Colorado River Basin from the negotiations among the seven basin states even though the thirty tribes of the basin are sovereigns with the right to self-government on par with the states.

While nearly all independent authorities on the river agree that deeper and immediate cuts in water use are essential for the Colorado River system, the Bureau of Reclamation is using inadequate procedures (the 2007 Interim Guidelines and 2019 Drought Contingency Plans) to determine how much water will be available to users in the Lower Basin in 2026. Between August 1, 2024, and August 1, 2025, Reclamation drew down Lake Powell by 29.33 feet to keep the level of Lake Mead (farther downstream) above 1050 feet so that its releases in 2026 would be the same as for 2025. Lake Powell will also be called on to deliver 7.48 million acre-feet of water to the Lower Basin for 2026, but as of October 30, 2025 there were only 6.8 million acre-feet of water left in Lake Powell. Even if Reclamation wanted to, Lake Powell can't be completely drained because the water intakes behind the dam are well above the dam's base level. It would take an extremely wet winter for Lake Powell to meet next year's projected release. This is unlikely because it's a La Niña year, which usually means less rainfall and warmer temperatures for the southwestern United States.

Outlet pipes at Glen Canyon Dam, June, 2025. The intake pipes behind the dam are much higher than the outlet, so the reservoir cannot be completely drained, This is what is known as "dead pool."
(C) 2025 Cary Meister

Glen Canyon Dam and Lake Powell view from the Visitor Center, June 2025. The whitish area on the rocks is the "bathtub ring" of mineral deposits which appeared as the water was released for downstream use.
(C) 2025 Cary Meister

Principal Ross could have suggested that since the students couldn't resolve their dispute, they should agree to mediation or binding arbitration, but for either to work the parties must be willing participants and willing to abide by the solution rather than going to court. Nobody in government seems to be suggesting mediation or arbitration either.

The Bureau of Reclamation set a November 11, 2025, deadline for all seven states to reach agreement, which didn't happen, but apparently would be willing to wait as late as March 2026 to include the states' collective proposal for an alternative. This would be analyzed in the draft environmental impact statement that must be issued and receive public comment before Reclamation can issue a decision. No one involved seems to be mentioning how long post-26 guidelines would apply.

The Colorado River Water Users Association, to which all the basin states belong, holds its annual meeting in Las Vegas from December 16-18, 2025. Reclamation in

past years has often announced significant agreements at this conference but whether the states will be able to pull off such a Christmas present seems increasingly unlikely.

If there is no all-state agreement and one or more of the states go to the Supreme Court, how does Reclamation manage water releases in the meantime? They have the legal authority to do this for the Lower Basin, but Reclamation's authority to impose a solution on the Upper Basin states is much more tenuous.

What of the estimated forty million people, millions of acres of farmland, Mexico and thirty Native American Nations who rely on the Colorado River? If your view of things tends to the apocalyptic, you might want to consult Paolo Bacigalupi's dystopian thriller The Water Knife imagining dysfunctional government in the Colorado River Basin.

There is another approach to the current impasse that seems to be getting some press. It's not unfamiliar, having been employed before in the development of the 2019 Drought Contingency Plans which has led us to where we are today: kick the can down the riverbank for a few years and let someone else figure it out!

Wanna play kick the can?

Cary Meister Chairs the Sierra Club's regional Colorado River Sub Team,, and in his spare time still hosts a jazz program on NPR affiliate KAWC in Yuma after 33 years. He also volunteers for service projects with the California-Nevada Wilderness Committee.

The Bill Williams River joins the Colorado River just above Parker Dam. Its delta forms a marsh and farther upstream, a riparian forest of cottonwoods and willows. This is the last live stream to enter the Colorado and contains several federal threatened and endangered species which reside on the Bill Williams National Wildlife Refuge. Photo taken in March 2025.
(C) 2025 Cary Meister

Greenlink West

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Range Watch proposed the 58,000-acre Cactus Springs Area of Critical Environmental Concern for this region as an alternative to both the transmission and proposed solar projects. BLM initially rejected this proposal, but we believe they could still act on it.

A delay occurred on Segment 2 of construction near Beatty, NV, when in September 2025 the Department of War brought up concerns to BLM about the tall transmission towers planned to be built next to the Air Force's Nevada Test and Training Range and within adjacent restricted air space which has a low flight ceiling in this region. Whether the issues can be resolved at this pinch-point between military land and Death Valley National Park by mitigation measures such as aircraft warning lighting, or whether the line segment will need to be relocated, remains to be resolved.

The final phase of the Greenlink construction will cross about 1.5 miles of National Park Service (NPS) land in Tule Springs Fossil Beds National Monument near Las Vegas, NV. Greenlink is building very large pads and poles up to 180 feet tall. While the NPS did their best to minimize the impacts, building 11 of these poles in this national monument clearly is in violation of the National Park Service Organic Act which is to "preserve unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the National Park System for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations." Ground penetrating radar found an "elephant shaped anomaly" under one of the proposed poles indicating a Columbian mammoth fossil would be impacted.

Greenlink West has already inflicted heartbreaking impacts on Nevada's Mojave Desert. It has destroyed and displaced several cacti and yuccas including approximately 1,200 Joshua trees. It has impacted habitat for the desert tortoise, bighorn sheep and many other wildlife species such as chuckwallas. It will impact 59 BLM special status species. While many species, cultural sites and scenic landscapes have already been compromised, it is not too late for the BLM to take a closer look at less impactful alternatives in regions that have not been developed, but the clock is ticking.

The Plaintiffs are represented in this litigation by the public interest law firm Eubanks & Associates, PLLC.

Kevin Emmerich is a former National Park Service ranger and Co-founder of the conservation non-profit Basin and Range Watch. He lives near Death Valley National Park.

BY LISA BELENKY

NEPA in Flux

Where are we now and where are we going?

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)[1] is still with us despite rumors of its demise. The statute requires federal agencies to "Stop, Look, Listen" before decisions are made. But who they hear from and what information agencies listen to may be much more limited than in the past. In this article I will explain a bit about the statute, the current regulations, and a few potential strategies for members of the public to continue to engage in the NEPA process to protect public lands resources.

The Statute: NEPA is a procedural statute that requires agencies to "Look Before You Leap." Nothing in NEPA requires a specific outcome for the federal agency decision, but a thorough review provides a basis for informed decision-making. The statute is under attack but it still stands and agencies are still required to comply with it. As detailed below, the status of the regulations is in flux, therefore, it is important to keep in mind the NEPA statutory language itself and rely directly on statutory language where possible in comments to the agencies.

NEPA requires federal agencies to prepare an "detailed statement" of the reasonably foreseeable environmental effects of and a reasonable range of alternatives to "major Federal actions significantly affecting the quality of the human environment." Over the decades that NEPA has been in place, the quality and specificity of environmental reviews has improved markedly, with more detailed information provided to the public and decision makers, and this process has helped federal agencies in many cases avoid unintended consequences of projects and plans they approve.

In 2023, amendments to the NEPA statute by Congress narrowed the likelihood that a full EIS would be prepared for many federal approvals in several ways.[2] In sum, even for projects on federal lands these new NEPA definitions provide broader avenues for federal agencies to utilize environmental assessments or categorical exclusions in decision making, and to limit the use of full EISs.

Caselaw: Courts have weighed in on NEPA since its inception, and have elaborated on many issues including the need for a "hard look," public notice, detailed responses to comments, and the need to address extent of effects beyond the narrow limits of a project footprint.[3] Overall, there is a large body of caselaw on the "adequacy" of environmental review by federal agencies—and the cases have always been a mixed bag, some requiring more from the agencies and others deferring to the agencies discretion or expertise.

Mojave Desert in the Castle Mountains.
Laura Cunningham

A recent Supreme Court decision has some troublingly broad language: "Courts should afford substantial deference and should not micromanage those agency choices so long as they fall within a broad zone of reasonableness."[4] What "substantial deference" to the agencies means is not clear but it cannot be unquestioned acceptance.[5] Further, a close reading of that case shows that despite this expansive language the Court's holding was limited to a particular question.[6] "Courts should defer to agencies' discretionary decisions about where to draw the line when considering indirect environmental effects and whether to analyze effects from other projects separate in time or place."[7] So, while this case is sure to be relied on by agencies to do less, it still leaves room for courts to review NEPA compliance for reasonableness and to ensure that agency explanations make sense in light of the record before it.

The regulations: Many of the earlier NEPA court decisions were codified as best practices in the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations, however, issuance of those regulations was found to be unlawful by the D.C. Circuit Court of Appeals.[8] But the caselaw remains relevant.

Recently, Trump's Executive Order 14154 "Unleash-

ing American Energy" encouraged agencies to quickly revise their regulations to expedite permitting approvals. Other recent executive orders encourage limiting NEPA review and promote excessive use of categorical exclusions, allowing truncated review for certain categories of projects that agencies have previously determined to not "normally" have significant environmental effects. And subsequently CEQ issued a memorandum on NEPA implementation and guidance for agencies.[9]

Because federal agencies like the BLM and the Forest Service also have regulations, plans, handbooks and policies that incorporated the old CEQ regulations standards, the agencies have already begun to revise those regulations on an expedited basis largely rescinding their NEPA regulations.[10] Although the agencies provided a comment period on the new rules, they also said it wasn't necessary and stated that these new rules became effective immediately upon publication based on their findings of "good cause."

The new rule which applies to BLM eliminates many of the earlier regulations, limits required public comment opportunities providing that it is only required at the scoping stage for an EIS,[11] allows the use of multiple categorical exclusions for a single project including other agencies' categorical exclusions,[12] broadens the ability for applicants to prepare their own environmental documents, and attempts to further limit the scope of review with new definitions.[13]

The new rule applying to the Forest Service eliminates the requirement to provide the public an opportunity to comment on categorical exclusions or environmental assessments.[14] It also curtails public involvement in the EIS process by requiring notice and comment only at the Notice of Intent stage, and eliminates any requirement the Forest Service prepare a draft EIS, or provide public participation in any such draft.[15]

These regulations may be further revised and will likely be challenged but are being followed by the agencies for new projects as they arise.

What this means for public lands advocates

Because in many instances agencies will not be providing any public notice before, or even after, a project is approved under a categorical exclusion, the vast expansion of the use of categorical exclusions is extremely troubling. Many projects may not truly fit within these exclusions if all of the information were known, and should be excepted, for example because there are listed species or riparian resources that may be significantly affected. But without public comment that information will not be before the agencies. As just one example, BLM recently provided a public comment period for a mineral exploration project in the California desert without providing any NEPA documentation – only a plan of operations was on the eplanning site, and it was unclear if this was intended to be a scoping period or if there would later be an EA prepared or not, even though this project is in occupied desert tortoise habitat.

Because in many instances agencies will not be providing any public notice before, or even after, a project is approved under a categorical exclusion, the vast expansion of the use of categorical exclusions is extremely troubling.

As we navigate the changes to NEPA, the agency regulations and handbooks, and as the new "streamlined" bureaucratic process moves forward, public lands advocates will have to work harder to make sure potential impacts of site-specific projects are known to the agencies before a decision is made. Because there may not be any notice of many projects through email or online, advocates will need to repeatedly check BLM's eplanning website and Forest Service websites (which may or may not be updated consistently) to find out about new projects and may need to inquire directly at local BLM Field Offices and Forest Service Ranger Stations periodically to find out what projects are under consideration (or have recently been approved.)

Another co-benefit of the NEPA process that is often overlooked, is that environmental documents generally provide a comprehensive overview and explain what other approvals are needed from other federal or state agencies and the legal standards need to be met by a specific project or plan—including ESA compliance, Clean Air Act compliance, Clean Water Act compliance, and state law compliance.[16] As a result, NEPA environmental review has in many cases in the past been the central focus of the approval processes—that is likely to be less the case in future and advocates will have to do more investigation and outreach to other agencies to find out how or if those other legal requirements are being met.

Because the current administration is purposefully trying to limit public notice and expand the federal agencies' discretion to ignore some impacts, more strategies will need to emerge as we find our way through the changes to ensure public participation and fair consideration of environmental impacts as required under NEPA.

Lisa Belenky is Senior Counsel for the Center for Biological Diversity, whose work focuses on the protection of rare and endangered species and their habitats under state and federal law on public and private lands throughout California and the southwest, with a particular focus on the California Desert Conservation Area.

BY LAURA CUNNINGHAM

Solar Policies Under Trump

Uncertain road ahead for solar in the desert

Dozens of utility-scale solar projects on public lands in the California and Nevada deserts have been constructed equaling thousands of megawatts, and more project applications were moving forward under President Biden, projects such as Rough Hat Clark Solar Project, Bonanza Solar Project, Libra Solar Project, and Soda Mountain Solar Project. What is the overall status of the solar buildout now?

The new administration has been busy modifying energy policies that impact renewable energy on both public and private lands. President Trump signed legislation and several executive orders pertaining to solar power that we briefly summarize below.

The One Big Beautiful Bill (OBBB) was signed into law on July 4, 2025, by Trump, restricting many subsidies that supported renewable energy in the 2022 Inflation Reduction Act.

The bill halted the 30% Residential Clean Energy Tax Credit for rooftop solar generators at the end of 2025.

Then on July 7, 2025, Trump signed an executive order called "Ending Market Distorting Subsidies for Unreliable, Foreign Controlled Energy Sources," which directed the Treasury Department to strictly enforce the step-down and termination of green energy federal tax credits. This includes:

- "Within 45 days following enactment of the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, the Secretary of the Treasury shall take all action as the Secretary of the Treasury deems necessary and appropriate to strictly enforce the termination of the clean electricity production and investment tax credits under sections 45Y and 48E of the Internal Revenue Code for wind and solar facilities. This includes issuing new and revised guidance as the Secretary of the Treasury deems appropriate and consistent with applicable law to ensure that policies concerning the 'beginning of construction' are not circumvented, including by preventing the artificial acceleration or manipulation of eligibility and by restricting the use of broad safe harbors unless a substantial portion of a subject facility has been built." Sec. 3(a).

The Clean Energy Investment (48E) and Production (45Y) Tax Credit have been widely used by solar developers for utility-scale solar projects in the desert under Biden. The tax credits are not immediately eliminated but

View across Amargosa Valley, Nevada, looking towards mountains in Death Valley National Park. This area is under threat from utility-scale solar projects, battery storage banks, all enabled by Greenlink West Transmission Project. This is excellent habitat for burrowing owls, desert kit foxes, and Mojave desert tortoise. Photo: Laura Cunningham.

View of Chuckwalla Valley in Riverside County, California, with the Desert Sunlight Solar Farm under construction on Colorado Desert habitat which was scraped and graded to make way for the power plant. Donna and Larry Charpied.

under Trump's new order to obtain the tax credits projects must commence physical construction on or before July 4, 2026, or begin operation on or before December 31, 2027. Traditionally a solar project could qualify for a tax credit by ensuring that 5% of the project's total costs were incurred—Trump's executive order eliminated this safe harbor provision for large-scale projects. Construction must also be "continuous" with some exemptions.

- Treasury is also directed to implement the Foreign Entity of Concern restrictions in the OBBB.

This refers to certain countries and businesses deemed to be a threat to the US, such as China and Russia. Projects obtaining solar panels and components from China are therefore barred from receiving tax credits, and this could have large impacts to desert projects. The Yellow Pine Solar Project in Pahrump Valley, NV, now under construction on public lands, was noted to have pallets of Chinese solar panels on site.

- Trump is also pushing domestic manufacturing of solar cells instead of imports. To access the 45X Advanced Manufacturing Production Tax Credit must have the final product containing at least 65% (by cost) domestically manufactured content. This could put a delay on desert solar projects as they figure out how to wean off imported Chinese solar panel materials.
- Another order directs the Interior Secretary (responsible for millions of acres of public lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management) to "conduct a review of regulations, guidance, policies, and practices under the Department of the Interior's jurisdiction to determine whether any provide preferential treatment to wind and solar facilities in comparison to dispatchable energy sources. The Secretary of the Interior shall then revise any identified regulations, guidance, policies, and practices as appropriate and consistent with applicable law to eliminate any such preferences for wind and solar facilities." Sec. 4(a).
- In August of 2024 Trump signed Secretarial Order 3438 which introduced capacity density as a new measure which will be used to assess energy projects on public lands. Capacity density is defined as the amount of energy a project can generate divided by its acreage. High-density energy projects are those such as nuclear power plants and natural gas-generating facilities, while lower-density energy projects include utility-scale solar and wind projects. According to the Nuclear Energy Institute, 1,000 megawatts of nuclear energy generation needs approximately 843 acres for the power plant.[1] In comparison, a real-world example of a large-scale solar project proposal is the Rock Valley Energy Center proposed on land in Amargosa Valley, Nevada, managed by the Bureau of Land Management: the Rock Valley photovoltaic solar project proposes 1,600 megawatts on 10,105 acres of Mojave Desert land.[2]

Trade tariffs: Trump has imposed tariffs on China which are still under negotiation, and this is likely to increase costs of materials for solar projects.

How these measures are likely to play out in the desert remains to be seen. Many environmental reviews of utility-scale solar projects seem to be holding on pause, but with no clear indications of the future from federal agencies tasked with permitting renewable energy projects.

Laura Cunningham is California Director at Western Watersheds Project and a Co-Founder of Basin & Range Watch.

1. https://www.nei.org/news/2022/nuclear-brings-more-electricity-with-less-land
2. https://www.blm.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2024-10/BLM_NV_SNDO_Rock-Valley-Energy-Center-Project-Fact-Sheet.pdf

Site of the proposed Rough Hat Clark Solar Project in Pahrump Valley, southern Nevada, with Joshua trees.

BY NEAL DESAI

Soda Mountain Solar – Back Again

More problematic than ever

In 2016, the San Bernardino County Board of Supervisors rejected key permits for the industrial-sized proposed Soda Mountain Solar Project immediately adjacent to Mojave National Preserve and in a critical wildlife connectivity area. This project was opposed by virtually all environmental organizations as one of the most controversial large-scale renewable energy projects in the country. The County's denial was its demise -- or so we thought.

But now the project is back, being pushed by new owners (New Jersey-based VC Renewables) through a fast-track process designed to allow a State energy agency to essentially overrule the County's prior decision.

It's worthwhile to look at the history of this project to understand how problematic it is – even more so than first envisioned.

The project's placement in the California desert requires it to secure federal and state permits. When it was first proposed, National Park Service scientists vehemently objected, describing the negative impacts to important habitat for desert bighorn sheep, kit foxes, burrowing owls and migratory birds that it is entrusted to preserve. But BLM approved it.

Soda Mountain Solar. National Park Service

What was inspiring was the desert defenders who stepped up for the Mojave National Preserve, a 1.6 million-acre crown jewel of the California desert, in its time of need. Senator Dianne Feinstein urged the project proponent to abandon its efforts. World-renowned scientist E.O. Wilson took to the pages of the New York Times to criticize the project. California Department of Fish and Wildlife scientists objected. From hunters and wildlife conservationists to local communities like Baker, calls to protect the Preserve piled on.

The County listened. In rejecting the project, County Supervisor Robert Lovingood said "It is hard to justify damaging sensitive desert lands when we have disturbed lands near transmission corridors that are ideally suited."

The project recently resurfaced, hoping that it can secure state approval, but the problems with project have only grown since 2016. State legislation passed in 2023 requires the construction of a wildlife crossing at the Soda Mountains, one of the most important desert bighorn sheep populations in the State.

The country's leading bighorn sheep scientists recently informed the Energy Commission that the project would subvert wildlife use of the crossing and increase risk of regional bighorn extinctions. They warned of the consequences of the state undermining this legislatively-required conservation effort costing the state tens of millions of dollars.

Neal Desai is the Senior Pacific Region Director for the National Parks Conservation Association.

Take Action

Now is the time to reaffirm our collective resolve to defend the Mojave National Preserve and the ecological integrity of the region from this project, and weigh in with the Energy Commission at tinyurl.com/29c5dme4 and scroll down to "Submit an E-comment." Thank you!

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The Sierra Club California/Nevada Desert Committee works for the protection and conservation of the deserts of California, Nevada, and other areas in the Southwest; monitors and works with public, private, and non-profit agencies to promote preservation of our arid lands; sponsors education and service trips; encourages and supports others to work for similar objectives; and maintains, shares, and publishes information about the desert.

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Because Desert Report currently has no Managing Editor, this issue was put together by the Desert Comm ExComm. If you would be interested in taking an active role in creating the next Desert Report, please contact Joan Taylor.

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