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Balance Of Power: Clean Energy And Desert Wildlife

This guest post was written by Johanna Wald, a senior attorney at the Natural Resources Defense Council in San Francisco.

By Johanna Wald

I've had the great luck to spend my nearly forty year career protecting western lands. But about five years ago, I realized two things that changed the course of my approach to lands protection: The first was that climate change was already having real impacts on the lands and resources that I have been working for so long to protect, and second that there were numerous pending applications for renewable energy projects proposed on lands with vital wildlife habitat.



I knew then that if I wanted to achieve my goal, I'd need to find ways to balance the need for cleaner sources of energy while protecting our public lands. So I switched the focus of my work to facilitate environmentally responsible renewable energy development in the west.

Admittedly, this wasn't a simply proposition. And it's been a tough one for me to tackle.

Large-scale solar projects in our deserts come with risk. But we'd be wise to consider the return that comes with this risk. While we want to make sure we consider all of the environmental impacts that come with siting large-scale solar projects, the larger issue in the desert – and around the world – is climate change.

As climate patterns continue to change, desert ecosystems will be vastly different, with many more desert species threatened with extinction. The prospect of preserving the desert as it is today is not realistic if we don't take climate change head on. And that means seeking out pathways that allow us to protect the greatest percentage of desert lands and desert species while reducing our dependence on fossil fuels through the expansion of clean energy sources like the sun and wind.

By focusing on a "Smart from the Start" strategy that aims to site projects on public lands with the greatest possible care, NRDC and our partner conservation organizations have achieved significant success resulting in more than 2,000 megawatts of clean power on public lands in California – and we're aiming for more.

This important effort has focused on two key areas: working with solar developers to improve projects proposed for construction so they have the fewest environmental impacts; and working with the Department of Interior and the Bureau of Land Management, in collaboration with a number of stakeholders, including solar companies, utilities and state regulators, to develop a robust national solar program that would serve as a blueprint for environmentally responsible solar development on public lands and also minimize financial risk.

For instance, we worked with [First Solar](#) to identify several key improvements to its Desert Sunlight project, such as reducing its footprint by 138 acres to avoid blocking a desert tortoise movement corridor and acquiring additional conservation lands above what was required by the BLM to offset the loss



of wildlife habitat on the project site. BLM also agreed to make 14,500 acres of sensitive lands that the developer dropped from the initial project proposal off-limits to future solar development.

In the case of another project, we supported the 45 megawatt Lucerne Valley solar project in the Mojave Desert. As a result of careful planning up front, the project's site has high solar potential, is close to existing roads and transmission, and avoids sensitive wildlife areas and other key natural resources.

And just last month, we also endorsed a pair of large-scale solar projects – Mount Signal and the Calexico I & Calexico II – in Imperial County that strike the right balance by being located on private, already disturbed agricultural land with relatively few impacts to wildlife, water and air quality, and close to transmission infrastructure.

But that doesn't mean that we can accept all renewable energy proposals.

Just as we offered support for these projects, we also recently filed suit against the Calico solar project that would do more harm than good. That project, approved last year by BLM, covers 4,000-plus-acres of important wildlife habitat in the Pisgah Valley, including key desert tortoise habitat. Building a solar project here would also threaten at least six other imperiled species, including golden eagles, burrowing owls and Mojave fringe-toed lizard.

Protecting sensitive lands and wildlife while developing the clean energy we need is no easy task. And we will always have our critics – those who claim we support all renewable projects at any cost, and those who say we are giving up too much at the expense of wildlands and wildlife.

When it comes to investing in our future and combating climate change, inaction is not an option – and helping find the right choices is a responsibility. I believe that by coming to the table, we can find the solutions that strike the right balance between protecting our lands and wildlife while helping our nation transition to a clean energy economy.

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