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OPINION

WHITE & WALD: Finding balance in desert renewable energy development

By V. JOHN WHITE and JOHANNA WALD / Contributing writers
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Last year was the warmest on record, shattering numerous global highs – so says the sobering 2015 State of the Climate report recently released by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. And this year, once again, Riverside County’s air quality scored an “F” on ozone and particle pollution measures, according to the American Lung Association’s annual “State of the Air report.”

We really don’t need more reminders that climate change is real and happening now, but the evidence keeps mounting. Thus, we are heartened that state and federal agencies are taking steps to increase clean energy and reduce fossil fuels that cause climate change and pollute our air.

In the coming weeks, California, in partnership with the Interior Department, will take a groundbreaking step to combat climate change by finalizing a landmark plan – the Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan – that will facilitate renewable energy development while protecting wildlife habitat and public lands in the California desert. Over the course of eight years, state and federal agencies have engaged local governments, conservationists, renewable energy developers, utilities and many other stakeholders to find a careful balance between protecting our desert region and identifying the best places to locate large-scale renewable energy and transmission. In doing so, the DRECP charts a path forward for California.

Of the 22 million acres of land in the California desert, the vast majority are owned by the federal government. The DRECP will zone appropriate areas on federal land for streamlined renewable energy development, with greater predictability and shorter timelines than ever before. The plan identifies more than 600 square miles of federal land for potential renewable energy development, carefully selecting places where impacts to wildlife and scenic desert landscapes are minimized. This plan also will permanently protect wildlife habitat and publicly accessible open space, building on the desert region's strong conservation legacy.

The DRECP is one critical piece of a comprehensive plan to fight climate change that includes energy efficiency; community-based solar panels on rooftops, buildings and parking lots; and a modernized electric grid that can combine different sources of clean energy. As we strive to meet state and federal clean-energy goals, we will need a diverse portfolio of renewable resources, including solar photovoltaic projects in places with low wildlife value such as contaminated and degraded San Joaquin Valley agricultural lands that can no longer be farmed. Geothermal development near the Salton Sea can provide balance and reliability, and is a win-win for the environment and Imperial County's disadvantaged economy. And high-value, low-cost regional wind energy from neighboring states can keep the lights on when the sun goes down.

Along with rooftops carpeted with solar panels from Temecula to Tahoe, California's diverse renewable portfolio can provide an economically and environmentally sound pathway beyond fossil fuels, help slash global warming emissions and clean up our air.

California and the Interior Department deserve our praise for this careful, collaborative planning effort that will guide us toward a balanced and integrated renewable resource portfolio helping us build our low-carbon, clean-energy future with the lowest possible impacts.

V. John White is executive director of the Center for Energy Efficiency and Renewable Technologies. Johanna Wald is a former Lands Program director for the Natural Resources Defense Council.

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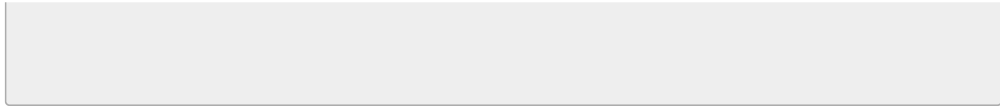
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