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Submitted via email: corridors@anl.gov and online:
<http://corridoreis.anl.gov/involve/stakeholder-input/>

Re: Comments on Corridor Abstracts for Section 368 West-wide Energy Corridors
Regions 4, 5 and 6 Regional Review

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments in the WWEC region 4,5,6 review for abstract 18-23. Friends of the Inyo is a 30 year old grassroots nonprofit conservation organization based in Bishop, California, dedicated to the stewardship, exploration and preservation of the Eastern Sierra's public lands and wildlife. With over 900 members, FOI is an active partner with federal land management agencies including the USFS and BLM. In Inyo and Mono Counties, the Sierra Club Range of Light Group is a member of the Toiyabe Chapter of the Sierra Club and offers outings and advocates for public lands and environmental protection on a wide range of issues with 450 members. The Bodie Hills Conservation Partnership is a coalition of organizations working toward permanent protection of the Bodie Hills, an American treasure with exceptional scenic, historic, recreational and ecological values. We work to create a healthy sustainable future for the Bodie Hills that combines conservation and public access, preserves current uses and promotes the region's scenic beauty for the economic benefit of local residents.

Corridor 18-23 traverses a national and international tourist destination that provides abundant wildland and non-wildland based recreational opportunities to millions of visitors annually. The region's lifeblood is its tourism-based industry. There is substantial concern about the impact not only of new powerlines and transmission infrastructure being developed within this scenic wonderland, but also that prioritizing this corridor via the Section 368 process would facilitate development of inappropriately-sited renewable energy facilities and related infrastructure in the greater Eastern Sierra region. See, e.g., letters from Mono County (May 27, 2014) and Inyo County (October 8, 2016).

While portions of this corridor already exist (and it currently hosts the Pacific DC intertie in Mono County and several additional transmission lines in Inyo County), *it is the possibility of new powerlines, pipelines and other transmission infrastructure, including appurtenant energy and facilities development, that is of concern.* The iconic scenic landscapes, world class tourism, and fragile biological, cultural and recreational resources between mile posts 66 and 240 of abstract 18-23 makes this corridor particularly problematic for future transmission infrastructure. It is our general recommendation this corridor be removed all together in light of the numerous issues raised by previous stakeholders and below in our MP specific comments.

Within California, the agencies should adjust or delete the following corridors to address unacceptable environmental impacts.

MP 66-70: This corridor crosses extensive habitat for the Bi-State Distinct Population Segment (DPS) of Greater Sage-grouse (aka Bi-state sage grouse, BSSG) and intersects critical habitat within the Bodie Hills Population Management Unit (PMU). Due to an August 24, 2018 court ruling vacating the Service's 2015 withdrawal of 2013 proposal to list and designate critical habitat for the BSSG under the ESA (*Desert Survivors v. U.S. Dept of Interior*, 321 F. Supp. 3d 1011 (N.D. Cal. 2018)), the Service is initiating a new status review of the BSSG which will entail updating its assessment of the status of and threats to the BSSG, as well as ongoing and anticipated future conservation actions. The court's ruling reinstated the October 28, 2013 proposed rules to list the BSSG with a 4(d) rule and designate critical habitat (78 Fed. Reg. 64,328). The ruling also directs the Service to provide a new opportunity for public comment on these proposed rules, and then subsequently develop a new and final listing determination on the proposed rules. This final listing determination must be published in the Federal Register by October 1, 2019 with an anticipated comment period in the Federal Register this summer. We are deeply concerned about the potential impacts of development of new transmission lines, gas pipelines, and associated infrastructure on the Bi-State sage grouse given the proposed corridor is within or very near proposed critical habitat for these sensitive birds.

The BSSG population as a whole has been declining since 2011. Scientific data shows the Bodie Hills PMU as stable or slightly increasing, and is a major source

population for other PMUs that are in consistent decline. If population demographics were to decrease within the Bodie Hills it could have dire consequences for the population as a whole. Detailed information can be found at <https://pubs.usgs.gov/of/2018/1177/ofr20181177.pdf>.

Infrastructure is a moderate priority threat in the Bodie Hills PMU. Predation (from raptors, ravens, coyotes and other mammals) is an increasing problem currently being studied. The development of increased infrastructure in any of these areas could further exacerbate risks to the survival of the BSSG. In addition to providing perches for predators, linear structures, like transmission lines, fragment habitat and increase potential for direct mortality from infrastructure strikes. Increased human and vehicle traffic associated with development and maintenance of infrastructure also increase the potential for direct mortality through vehicle strikes.

MP 66-80: This corridor is adjacent to the USFS Excelsior Roadless Area and intersects the BLM Excelsior WSA and the Excelsior citizens-proposed wilderness area. This area provides habitat connectivity between the northern White Mountains and the eastern wild lands of the Bodie Hills. It represents a wild, untouched chunk of the western Great Basin, containing extensive intermountain basin big sagebrush shrubland and great basin pinyon juniper woodland with isolated ephemeral lakes, unique geologic dune systems, and locally limited but ecologically critical springs and associated riparian systems. This area has wetlands and dry alkali lakes unique to the Inyo National Forest (INF). The INF recently identified the area between MP 66-80 as having high ecological integrity in its wilderness evaluation narratives for Land Management Plan (LMP) revisions. Rare plant species include globe spring parsley, and dune horse brush; USFS sensitive species include William's combleaf and Long Valley milkvetch. The corridor footprint is within and adjacent to priority Bi-State Sage Grouse habitat. Desert bighorn sheep occasionally use the area traveling from the White Mountains. Although largely un-inventoried, the area is extremely rich in archeological resources. The INF LMP revision is underway with an expected Final Record of Decision by the end of 2019. The agency should incorporate the new LMP in their assessment of the feasibility of this alignment. The LMP identifies Inventoried Roadless Areas as Designated Areas pursuant to the Roadless Area Conservation Rule.

MP 71-77, 81-88, 94-102: The corridor is directly within BSSG critical habitat in the South Mono PMU. Please see above MP 66-70 comments regarding BSSG impacts.

MP 96: Existing transmission lines run outside of the Benton Paiute Reservation, however the proposed corridor is routed directly through the reservation. MP 96 is under the jurisdiction of BIA and the agency must receive approval from both BIA and the Tribe on the alignment through their property.

MP 102-104: The corridor is very near to BSSG critical habitat. Please see above MP 66-70 comments regarding BSSG impacts.

MP 110-111, 114-116: The alignment is within the Casa Diablo WSA and it intersects the Chidago Canyon WSA. Infrastructure development is prohibited by law in WSAs. The abstract also contains inappropriate and presumptive language indicating that transmission lines will need to be shared (within the existing corridor) “until one or all of the WSAs are released to non-wilderness uses by Congress.” (See discussion of “potential compatibility issues” for the Chidago Canyon, Casa Diablo, Fish Slough and Volcanic Tablelands WSAs in the Abstract, pp. 8-9.) This biased language that presumes specific action by Congress should be eliminated from the corridor abstract and from all future analyses.

MP 112-113. This alignment is within the Fish Slough Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC). The Abstract for corridor 18-23 indicates that the corridor intersects the Fish Slough Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) (see Abstract, p.10). Fish Slough is not only highly important habitat for resident and migratory birds, it contains habitat for rare and endemic fish species and other critical habitat and resource values. The area hosts three of only five small remaining populations of the Owens pupfish (*Cyprinodon radiosus*), an Owens Valley endemic that is not only a California Fully Protected species but is also listed as endangered at the state and federal levels.

The Fish Slough ACEC is an extensive system of springs and marshes cooperatively managed by the Department, BLM, Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (LADWP), University of California Natural Reserve System, and USFWS. Two sites within Fish Slough, 'BLM Spring' and the Owens Valley Native Fishes Sanctuary, have lost pupfish populations following illegal introductions of largemouth bass. BLM Spring was restored in cooperation with BLM in 2002, and reintroduction of native-dwelling pupfish occurred in 2003. This project included dam reconstruction, fabrication and installation of a new type of fish migration barrier, vegetation control, and exotic fish removal. Two additional populations tenuously persist in marshy areas of Fish Slough. At present, the federally threatened Fish Slough milk-vetch (*Astragalus lentiginosus* var. *piscinensis*) is restricted to the same range as it was at the time of listing, a 10 kilometer (km) (6 mile (mi)) stretch of alkaline flats paralleling Fish Slough. The slough supports the species on fewer than 540 acres (ac) (219 hectares (ha)). For more information see <https://www.wildlife.ca.gov/Regions/6/Desert-Fishes/Owens-pupfish> and https://inyo-monowater.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/Fish-Slough_Milk-vetch_5yrReview_2009.pdf. Allowing transmission development within these locations could adversely impact the values for which these areas were designated.

MP 156-157: This area is designated a state scenic highway that may conflict with future transmission infrastructure.

MP 183-192: This corridor section is within the newly designated Alabama Hills National Scenic Area, signed into law on March 12, 2019. John D. Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act, Pub. Law 116-9 (2019). The law creating the Alabama Hills National Scenic Area, requires the agency to minimize harm to the purposes and values of the Scenic Area from any new utility facility rights-of-way which include “nationally significant scenic, cultural, geological, educational, biological, historical, recreational, cinematographic, and scientific resources.” *Id.* at 1402. The law also requires a determination that any new rights-of-way be the “only technical or feasible location, following consideration of alternatives within existing rights-of-way or outside of the Scenic Area.” *Id.* In addition, the law also mandates that the right-of-way be in accordance with NEPA and other applicable laws, which includes the National Landscape Conservation System Act, established to “conserve, protect, and restore nationally significant landscapes that have outstanding cultural, ecological, and scientific values for the benefit of current and future generations.” 16 U.S.C. § 7202(a).

The area has significant national history implications from: a) Paiute – Shoshone inhabitation of the area for thousands of years and the culturally sensitive and significant Native American sites, artifacts, and history there; b) the historic gold mines of the Alabama Hills. It was miners in the 1860s that named the area after the CSS Alabama, a Confederate warship; c) The spectacular rock outcroppings - back dropped by the Sierra Nevada mountain crest - became the birthplace of the **‘American Western’** film genre, with over 400 Hollywood films made here from “*The Lone Ranger*” and “*Hopalong Cassidy*” serials to “*How the West was Won*” and more recently “*Ironman*” feature length movies. The area has nationally significant scenic features: a) The incredible jaw-dropping view-scape that is formed by the wind and water erosion of unique 90 million year old granitic boulders and hundreds of natural arches that dominate the area. Hundreds of thousands of visitors annually are drawn to this very unique and visually stunning landscape; b) the scenic beauty has attracted legendary landscape photographers - like Edward Weston, Ansel Adams and David Muench - to the Alabama Hills; and led to hundreds of films, print ads and commercials, that capture this magical landscape for the viewer; c) spectacular spring wildflower blooms, which serve as a colorful contrast to the stark background of the desert and rocks. The abstract must be corrected to include the new designation and future management direction.

MP 194-210. We object to the characterization of Owens Lake as “medium conflict” as depicted in the Conflict Map Analysis. See Abstract, Figure 3, p. 3. It is known that the shoreline and body of Owens Lake is very important to local Tribes, both historically and present day. See, e.g., <http://nahc.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Owens-Valley-Investiagtion-Memo.pdf>. Owens Lake and the surrounding shoreline should be characterized on the Conflict Map as “high conflict.” Owens Lake has been nominated by the Native American Heritage Commission to the National Register of Historic Places as an Archaeological District, Cultural Landscape and/or Traditional Cultural Property. This designation was proposed in 2017. Our understanding is that people are presently working to

complete the paperwork necessary to allow the nomination to proceed. See <http://nahc.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Resolution-%E2%80%93-Support-for-Placing-Owens-Lake-on-the-National-Register-of-Historic-Resources.pdf>. Additionally, Los Angeles Department of Water and Power has spent more than a billion dollars on restoration and mitigation at Owen Lake.

MP 207: This section of corridor is within Sierra Nevada Bighorn Sheep Critical Habitat, and this particular area is a source population for reintroduction efforts to aid in the recovery of the species. The CA Department of Fish and Wildlife and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service should be consulted and a Biological Opinion prepared, regarding impacts to the species.

MP 212-224, 230-235, 238-240: These corridor locations are within the Mohave Ground Squirrel (MGS) ACEC and California Desert National Conservation Lands identified in the DRECP (2016). The ACEC was established to protect the long-term survival of this species and ensure connectivity for MGS between this ACEC and the large, mostly undeveloped and protected MGS habitat found within the China Lake Naval Air Weapons Station to the east. The goal in establishing this ACEC/NCL is to allow for unimpeded movement of wildlife in this bottleneck area for the species. The corridor is within one of 11 core population centers for the MGS. The corridor is inconsistent with the goals of the ACEC to protect MGS habitat; maintain wildlife habitat connectivity and characteristics of climate refugia and prevent fragmentation; and to retain healthy desert habitat for this and other sensitive species. (See DRECP App. L, west desert and eastern slopes subregion p. 1293.) The corridor is the site of ongoing studies of MGS core populations. We identify other issues below within these MPs.

MP 222-240: This area has been identified by USFWS as a “Desert Tortoise Connectivity Area”. Furthermore, there have been recent sightings of tortoise in this area by BLM Ridgecrest Field Office staff as animals are moving northward and up in elevation with warmer and drier temperatures across the species’ habitat.

MP 223-225: This alignment is within the Rose Spring ACEC and NCLs, which were designated for significant prehistoric cultural resource values. At the Rose Spring archaeological site complex, excavations revealed a well stratified subsurface archaeological deposit which was successfully used to date the introduction of bow and arrow technology to Eastern California. The bow-and-arrow event, about 1,500 to 1,000 years ago, changed the patterns of prehistory not only in this region but throughout the Great Basin and neighboring southwest (DRECP App A, pg 19-20). The alignment runs along the Pacific migratory bird flyway. Songbirds, shorebirds, and waterfowl pass through Rose Valley on their way to breeding grounds. The flyway has stopover riparian and wetland habitat in the Sierra Nevada canyons and at Little Lake, Owens Lake and Haiwee Reservoir. This area also includes Mohave ground squirrel (MGS) core habitat within the MGS Conservation Area. This is one of only 11 core population centers.

MP 224-226, 229-240: This alignment is within the Sierra Canyons ACEC and overlapping NCLs, which have important cultural significance and history as well as recreational resources. These canyons provided a critical water source, access points to the hunting grounds of the Sierra Nevada, and routes for trade with people on the other side of the mountains. Multiple sites within this corridor include many large, prehistoric National Register of Historic Places eligible properties in relatively undisturbed contexts and have high densities of obsidian and other types of lithic material. The sites in these canyons have the potential to answer some of the most pressing questions in California archaeology, particularly about trade, human adaptation to changing environments, and culture contact and interaction (DRECP appendix A p. 20). The area provides habitat for numerous special status plant species including Charlotte's phacelia and Latimer's woodland gilia. The area also contains excellent habitat for the federally and state-listed threatened desert tortoise and the East Monache mule deer herd. This is the largest of the three winter ranges and runs for approximately 30 miles along the base of the Sierra Nevada range between Olancho Creek and Five Mile Canyon. About 600-700 deer spend their winters here. Healthy creosote habitat supports a high variety and density of resident bird species such as the Le Conte's thrasher and loggerhead shrikes (DRECP appendix L, west desert and east slope subregion).


MP 234-237: This alignment is within the Fossil Falls ACEC. This ACEC was designated for wildlife values, significant prehistoric and historic cultural values, unique geological formations east of the Sierra Nevada Mountains and west of the Coso Range Volcanic Field. It contains sites associated with the earliest prehistoric Native American occupation in California and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places as the Fossil Falls Archaeological District. In this district cultural research attributes the rock art as a distinctive style termed Coso Representation, associated with local Numic-speaking groups such as the Northern Paiute, Panamint Shoshone, Coso Shoshone, and Kawaiisu. Studies including excavations at the Stahl Site, south of Fossil Falls, have identified cultural components from more than 10,000 years before present. Such significant history draws thousands of visitors each year to Fossil Falls (DRECP App L, Basin and Range subregion). There is also a popular BLM campground located in the vicinity of the proposed corridor.

Conclusion

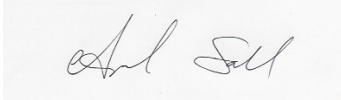
We strongly recommend the Agencies to reanalyze the corridor 18-23, focus on prioritizing efforts on key corridors, and complete additional necessary steps in the process for the Regional Reviews to correct corridor alignments and address conflicts. We support the ongoing commitment shown by the BLM, Forest Service, and the Department of Energy to improve the siting and functionality of the WVEC. A strong public engagement process is crucial for improving the WVEC and appropriate siting of new infrastructure on public lands. We look forward to attending the June 2019 public meeting in Nevada to follow up and share our comments in person with agency staff.



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