



March 1, 2023

Mr. Jeremy Bluma, Acting Division Chief
National Renewable Energy Coordination Office
Bureau of Land Management, HQ-300
1849 C Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20006

Via Electronic Filing to ePlanning:

<https://eplanning.blm.gov/eplanning-ui/project/2022371/510>

Re: Scoping Comments for Western Solar Programmatic Environmental Impact
Statement/Resource Management Plan
DOI-BLM-HQ-3000-2023-0001-RMP-EIS

Dear Mr. Bluma:

Friends of the Inyo, on behalf of our nearly 1,000 members, submit these scoping comments for the Western Solar Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (PEIS)/Resource Management Plan (RMP), hereinafter referred to as the Western Solar PEIS. Our comments are limited to the lands within the Inyo and Mono Counties in California. Friends of the Inyo (FOI) is a grassroots non-profit organization based in Bishop, California. Our mission is to ensure the public lands of the Eastern Sierra exist in an intact, healthy natural state for people and wildlife through preservation, stewardship, exploration, and education. Over our 30-year history, FOI has actively engaged with land and water management agencies in the Eastern Sierra, including the Bureau of Land Management (BLM).

Comments

Friends of the Inyo supports the Administration's energy goals in Executive Order 14008, "Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad." We also support the Administration's land and climate resilience goals, including the America the Beautiful 30x30 Plan. In addition, we strongly support California's clean energy, climate resilience, and 30x30 goals. We offer the following comments:

The Western Solar PEIS should take a landscape-scale approach to planning. This includes ensuring lands for conservation and recreation are identified before new areas for renewable

energy development are identified and that any development is balanced with additional conservation. Any consideration of the suitability of wind or geothermal energy development on BLM lands should occur in a separate review process.

Resource Management Plans (RMP)

Many BLM RMPs, including the Bishop Field Office, are decades old and must be reviewed and updated. As BLM considers the lands it manages for renewable energy development, it cannot rely on outdated information from existing RMPs. For example, the 1993 Bishop RMP predates utility-scale renewable energy development in the region and just last fall, Manybristle Cinchweed (*Pectis papposa*) was recorded for the first time in the Alabama Hills National Scenic Area. RMPs must be updated based on robust environmental analysis that reflects new information, land uses, and data, including identifying new or expanded areas for Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC), National Conservation Lands (NCL), and Lands with Wilderness Characteristics (LWC). Drought and changing water management are changing how species utilize the landscape and must also be considered. We also urge the BLM to update its BLM Solar Mapper to include all of the ACECs, including Olancha Greasewood, Mohave Ground Squirrel, Sierra Canyons, Conglomerate Mesa, and Owens Lake.

Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan (DRECP)

We appreciate BLM's February 28, 2023 announcement that the DRECP would be excluded from the update to the Western Solar Plan. This is an important acknowledgment of the DRECP's 8-year collaborative planning process and that the DRECP is working. Including the DRECP lands in the Western Solar Plan would have undermined this previous work and the current balance of renewable energy, conservation, and recreation in the California Desert. The DRECP should be used as a model for future BLM renewable energy development planning.

Important Natural Resource Areas

BLM lands outside the DRECP in California include important natural resource areas, including the Bodie Hills, Adobe Valley, Granite Basin, Chalfant Valley, Owens Valley, and Mono Basin. Many of these areas include rare and intact landscapes found nowhere else. BLM should evaluate these areas carefully and avoid developing in remote areas, intact habitat areas, and areas that connect or are near already protected areas. Existing disturbed areas (brownfields, abandoned ag, vacant lots, urban edges, etc.) are low-conflict areas and should be prioritized for renewable energy development.

Cultural Resources and Tribal Consultation

The 2012 Solar PEIS designated variance lands in the Owens Valley despite opposition from the Big Pine Paiute Tribe.¹ These lands are regarded as traditional tribal territory and are some of the only variance lands that were designated in the entire state. An analysis of removing these variance lands should be conducted in consultation with the relevant Tribes. Removing the variance lands in the culturally and biologically significant Owens Valley should be strongly considered.

Robust tribal consultation and input must be sought throughout the Western Solar PIES process. The BLM needs to engage in tribal consultation early and often in the PEIS process to ensure that tribal cultural resources and tribal concerns are identified, included in the analysis, and protected or mitigated.

Exclusions

We request Exclusion Criteria #3 to 32 from the 2012 Solar PEIS, including protection for Bi-State Sage Grouse habitat, continue to be applied. We herein incorporate and reiterate proposed new exclusion criteria in the March 1, 2023, California environmental group's comment letter. We specifically highlight the following:

Slope

The BLM should carefully consider the ramifications of eliminating the slope criteria. Eliminating the slope criteria would open a significant amount of BLM land at the base of the Sierra Escarpment and the Inyo Mountains, e.g., the Tungsten Hills, alluvial fans, Round Valley, etc. These areas are critical habitat for Sierra Nevada Bighorn Sheep (endangered), Desert Bighorn Sheep, Mule Deer, Tule Elk, and Pronghorn. We also note these important areas aren't showing up on the BLM Solar Mapper as FWS Critical Habitat for Fauna in California.

Lands with Wilderness Characteristics (LWC)

Exclude all Lands identified as having Wilderness Characteristics. The 2012 Western Solar Plan excludes LWCs from development, but only if they are protected by an RMP. Numerous BLM RMPs across the West are either outdated or are in the process of being updated/revised. In places where robust LWC inventories have been completed but final plan decisions have yet to be made regarding the management of these lands, all lands identified as LWCs should be excluded from development.

¹ Letter from the Big Pine Paiute Tribe of Owens Valley. "Re: Comments on the Supplement to the Draft Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for Solar Energy Development in the Six Southwestern States (Supplement) (BLM/DES 11-49, DOE/EIS-0403D-S), and related draft Programmatic Agreement (PA)." Submitted by Virgil Moose on January 27, 2012.

Water Resources

Exclude riparian areas, wetlands, and streams in dry habitat areas with limited water sources. Areas with water will be climate refugia and migration corridors for wildlife and must be protected. Areas de-watered due to the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power's groundwater pumping and/or surface water diversions should be excluded from solar development.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to provide scoping comments for the Western Solar PEIS. We look forward to continued participation in the development of the Western Solar Plan and reviewing the draft PEIS. Please contact Wendy Schneider at Wendy@friendsoftheinyo.org with any questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Wendy Schneider". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Wendy Schneider
Executive Director