

# Feds see desert's future in solar

Written by

**K Kaufman**  
**The Desert Sun**

A federal report on solar development on public lands envisions a future where industrial-scale solar plants could virtually blanket the now-open, pristine desert spaces east of the Coachella Valley.

The draft report, issued by the Departments of Interior and Energy, calls for solar projects to cover 80 percent of the Riverside East zone, a 202,000-acre, U-shaped curve of land lying between Joshua Tree National Park and Blythe.

Putting that much solar in the region could generate between 18,000 and 32,000 megawatts of power, and pump up to 11,000 permanent jobs and \$424 million into the local economy, the report said.

Environmental impacts include noise levels well over county-mandated limits, thousands more vehicles on Interstate 10 and a major influx of non-native plant species as desert vegetation is cleared for solar projects.

Federal officials will hold a meeting for public comment on the plan, called the Solar Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement, or PEIS, at 7 p.m. Tuesday at the Hyatt Grand Champions Resort in Indian Wells.

The document, thousands of pages long, is intended to provide a framework for renewable energy development in 24 solar zones on public land in six western states, including California.

Riverside East is the largest of all the designated zones discussed in the report. Two solar projects have already been approved for the region and should break ground this year, with two more in the pipeline.

But Riverside County Supervisor John J. Benoit called the 80 percent goal for solar development in the region "very

Advertisement

  
**Kodak**  
**Bring in any old printer to**  
 **and save an additional**  
**\$50 off any new Kodak Printer**

[WWW.BESTBUY.COM/KODAKSWAPFORSAVINGS](http://WWW.BESTBUY.COM/KODAKSWAPFORSAVINGS)  
1.888.BEST.BUY

OFFER EXPIRES 2/19/2011  


Print Powered By  **FormatDynamics™**

optimistic and overly aggressive.”

“What you're looking at is an absolute worst-case, highest-density possibility,” Benoit said. “I can't see it would ever get to that kind of density.”

Renee Castor, chairwoman of the Desert Center Chamber of Commerce, was similarly concerned about the agencies' plans for the public lands near her town of 400 about 50 miles east of Indio.

“The solar panels are going to be an eyesore,” she said. “You drive across the freeway and our valley floor is a pristine, unobstructed view.”

Officials from the Energy and Interior departments were not available for comment Friday. John Kalish, field manager at the Bureau of Land Management's Palm Springs office, said his staff is still reviewing the document.

But solar developers and environmental advocates, who have dug into some of the report's details, are raising a number of concerns.

Transmission: The report notes that the current 500 kilovolt transmission line running along the I-10 corridor would not be able to handle the tens

of thousands of megawatts of power future solar plants might produce. But federal development estimates do not factor in how much land would be needed for additional lines.

“That's the lynchpin,” said Fred Bell, chief operating officer of Noble Renewables, a solar and wind energy developer in Palm Desert. “If you don't have the ability to take a product to market, you don't have a product.”

Views and recreation: Having millions of reflective solar panels in the desert will undoubtedly reshape the visual landscape in the region, the report said.

That could mean an end to the clear night skies and wide desert vistas sought by visitors at Joshua Tree National Park, said Seth Shteir, California field representative for the

Advertisement

The advertisement features the USA TODAY logo at the top left. Below it, the word "AutoPilot" is written in a large, bold, black font, with a blue airplane icon to its right. A smartphone is shown in the center, displaying the app's interface with various travel-related items like flight status and weather. To the right of the phone, the text reads "The new travel app for iPhone® and iPod touch®". Below this, it says "Presented by: Hampton" with the Hampton logo. At the bottom right, a blue button with white text says "SEE HOW IT WORKS >>".

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™

National Parks Conservation Association.

“Parks were created not only to protect national resources; they were created to protect public enjoyment,” he said. “Those renewable energy developments will damage visitors' experience in the park.

Andrea Compton, chief of resources at Joshua Tree, said park officials are recommending making the western end of Riverside East zone off limits for solar development to minimize impacts to the park.

Opening more public land: In addition to the 24 existing solar zones — 667,384 acres in total — the report recommends opening up another 21.5 million acres of federal land for renewable energy development. In California, 1.7 million more acres would be opened for new solar and wind projects, including another 205,000 acres in the Palm Springs region.

Alex Daue, renewable energy coordinator for The Wilderness Society, said the government's reason for creating the zones in the first place was to put renewable projects on land with existing roads and transmission lines and the fewest environmental problems.

Opening the additional land could mean “wasting time, money and really the public's good will on trying to push through projects in places not appropriate for this development,” he said. “We feel focusing on the zones will allow solar development that is faster, cheaper, better.”

## If you go

What: Public comment meeting for the Solar Programmatic EIS

When: Doors open at 6 p.m.; meeting begins at 7 p.m., Tuesday

Where: Hyatt Grand Champions Resort, 44-600 Indian Wells Lane, Indian Wells

Read the draft PEIS online at: <http://solareis.anl.gov/documents/dpeis/index.cfm>

Deadline for written comments: March 17

Advertisement



**Mom Dilemma #36:**  
Your daughter insists on wearing her princess costume to the grocery store. Allow it or not?

YES, at least she's dressed!

NO, I have some rules!

**momslike** me .com  
where Local moms meet

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™