

Calif. solar firm hits desert swarm

September 29 2009, By George Avalos

BrightSource Energy has encountered some storm clouds in its quest to bring a solar future to large stretches of the western United States. The Oakland, Calif.,-based developer of solar farms has been forced to scuttle its plans to build a solar energy plant in the Broadwell Dry Lake area of California's Mojave Desert.

Plus, BrightSource must deal with environmental fears linked to its plans to build a solar energy field in the Ivanpah section of the Mojave. But the company believes it will ultimately prevail in its efforts to build a three-plant [solar electricity](#) complex at Ivanpah that could ultimately generate 440 megawatts of power.

The abandonment by BrightSource of the Broadwell site is a reminder that development of big solar plants can be a tricky endeavor.

[Renewable energy](#) projects are in theory designed to reduce use of fossil fuels. Yet these projects require considerable acreage and can also run afoul of competing environmental interests.

At the Broadwell site, BrightSource once was contemplating a trio of 200-megawatt solar plants. Construction was expected to begin in 2014.

But BrightSource's Broadwell project ran afoul of a plan by U.S. Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., to create a national monument in the area.

"We have ceased all development activities at the Broadwell site in light of the monument proposed by Senator Feinstein," said Keely Wachs, a

spokesman for BrightSource.

The monument was expected to encompass hundreds of thousands of acres stretching from Joshua Tree National Monument to Mojave National Preserve -- and include the Broadwell site.

"We are pleased that BrightSource is dropping the project," said Barbara Boyle, western regional representative of the Sierra Club.

The senator and environmentalists were concerned about habitat preservation for an endangered species of desert tortoise. Feinstein saw creation of the monument as a vehicle to protect the tortoise.

BrightSource might have other hurdles to clear at its Ivanpah project, which also could impact tortoise habitats, according to some environmental groups.

"We have concerns about Ivanpah," Boyle said. "Ivanpah has some very important tortoise habitats as well as a number of plant species that are sensitive. We want to explore if there are ways to address the tortoise habitat issues."

Privately held BrightSource hopes to begin construction at Ivanpah in early 2010. First, though, the company needs to obtain permit approvals from the state Energy Commission and the federal Bureau of Land Management.

"The permit process is very deliberate, very robust, and very transparent," Wachs said. "The concerns raised by the Sierra Club have been voiced in that process."

The solar company also is hopeful about Ivanpah because it has struck a deal with Bechtel whereby the engineering giant will build the solar

complex as well as take an equity stake in the project.

BrightSource said it is well aware of the environmental concerns.

"We believe we have put forth a thoughtful mitigation strategy for the Ivanpah site," Wachs said.

The Ivanpah site already is affected by development and isn't as pristine as other desert areas such as Broadwell, Wachs claimed.

Wachs said Ivanpah contains two major power transmission lines and a natural gas line, overlooks a major casino area in Nevada, is across the highway from a natural gas plant, is used by off-road vehicle enthusiasts and has been used for cattle grazing.

"These projects will have an environmental impact," Wachs said. "The question is how will we help to minimize that impact. This is the first major solar project in California. We take that responsibility very seriously."

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