

A plan for big plants in the Mojave Desert balances renewable energy and conservation needs

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Should we save the desert tortoise, or plow over its habitat to build solar power plants that can help us save ourselves? It's a question that has arisen frequently in recent years as solar developers have flocked to California's Mojave Desert in search of generous federal incentives to turn the sun's heat into electricity, raising conflicts with conservationists and Native American tribes who think all this "progress" will ravage natural and cultural resources.

The federal government aimed at finding a middle ground in that conflict last week when Interior Secretary [Ken Salazar](#) announced formal approval of a long-awaited plan that maps out where industrial-sized solar plants can be built and where they can't. Generally, it's a well-balanced blueprint that benefits the solar industry by providing certainty for project owners while ensuring that the most environmentally sensitive lands are protected. But that doesn't mean everybody is happy.

[Solar development](#) "should all be happening on rooftops and in cities," Janine Blaeloch, whose conservation group Solar Done Right has opposed big [solar projects](#) in the Mojave, told Times staff writer Julie Cart. "But that wouldn't profit the big utilities, and industry wouldn't be able to get tax breaks, so we wreck the desert instead."

She has a point. Utilities have been supportive of big solar plants because they stand to profit by building transmission lines from the desert to

cities and raising their rates accordingly. Meanwhile, California has barely scratched the surface of the potential for rooftop solar power.

But this isn't an either-or equation; replacing carbon-intensive power with clean, renewable power will require every possible tool. Rooftop generation and desert [solar plants](#) are both needed, along with wind farms, geothermal plants, ocean-[wave power](#) and anything else our brightest inventors and scientists can dream up.

Despite what its critics are saying, the Obama administration's solar plan does not pave paradise. Covering six Western states, it encourages developers to cluster projects on 285,000 acres of federal land where the energy potential is high and the environmental costs are low by expediting permitting and environmental review and offering financial incentives.

Meanwhile, it takes 79 million acres of more sensitive land off the table while designating 19 million acres as "variance" zones, where projects can be built but with fewer government incentives. This should end the project-by-project approval process that has characterized solar development so far and is a recipe for industrial sprawl.

Protecting threatened species is important. So is developing clean power. It is possible to do both, and the federal plan strikes a pretty good compromise among competing interests. In the end, the [desert tortoise's](#) future depends at least as much on our ability to slow the progress of climate change as to shield its habitat.

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