

## Our Recommendations

- The Bureau of Land Management should invite the National Park Service, Fish and Wildlife Service, other federal and state land management agencies, non-governmental organizations, citizens' groups, and other relevant stakeholders to participate in solar project approval processes on the individual project level, in recognition of the shared natural resources at stake. It is important that the National Park Service collaborate with BLM and other public and private stakeholders in order to protect park resources, critical wildlife corridors, and recreational opportunities—priorities identified in the administration's recent *America's Great Outdoors* report.
- Information is the key to making good decisions about where to situate solar developments, but existing vegetation, species, and cultural site maps are incomplete. The Bureau of Land Management should invest significant resources in thorough inventories to identify important natural and cultural resources that could be affected by siting decisions.
- Solar energy projects should be sited only in designated solar energy zones; the lands currently considered as variance lands should not be considered for solar energy development. Instead of investing in variance lands to provide flexibility to industry, the administration should work in partnership with local stakeholders to nominate and adopt new solar zones in low-conflict areas.
- Reuse and repurpose areas that have previously been used for industrial purposes or have otherwise been ecologically degraded—they are premier sites for solar facilities. Bringing other federal landholders that manage such degraded lands, such as the Department of Defense, to the table makes sense when decisions are being made on solar facility siting. Additional opportunities for public-private partnerships exist on hundreds of thousands of fallowed agricultural lands throughout the desert Southwest.
- Much of the land being considered for solar developments harbors a variety of endemic species and species with limited geographic ranges, including state or federally listed endangered or threatened species. These plants and animals should continue to be a primary focus as land managers evaluate the suitability of potential solar development sites, particularly since many of these species are the focus of existing management plans aimed at long-term preservation of the species.
- Companies applying for solar rights-of-way on public lands should use available technology and data gathered on critical resources to minimize or reconfigure each project's footprint and limit water consumption in this arid region. In some cases, projects are planned for locations where natural and/or cultural resources and recreational values would be destroyed or greatly compromised. These projects should relocate to lands identified within Solar Energy Zones or to lands that have already been disturbed by other activities.

On the Cover:  
The diverse desert landscape.

### Contact Us

To read NPCA's full report, *Solar Energy, National Parks, and Landscape Protection in the Desert Southwest*, or the executive summary of that report, visit [www.npca.org/cpr](http://www.npca.org/cpr). For more information on California's desert national parks, including details on solar developments that could affect these parks and actions you can take to protect them, please contact NPCA:

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Desert tortoise

# Getting it Right with Renewable Energy in the Desert Southwest



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The American Southwest is a storied region evoking images of the Wild West, of gold and silver miners striking off to chase fortune, of the expansion of America's railways, and of the family roadtrip on Historic Route 66. Today, this remarkably diverse landscape protects Death Valley National Park, the largest national park in the lower 48 states; iconic wildlife such as desert tortoises and bighorn sheep; stunning wildflower blooms; and dark night skies boasting countless stars. The Mojave Desert, which stretches across parts of California, Nevada, Arizona, and Utah, is home to dozens of endemic species. California's portion of the Mojave hosts 14 vertebrate and 22 invertebrate species that are found only within that region—nowhere else in the world. More than 500 bird species can be found, at one time or another during the year, in the nearby Sonoran Desert. The nationally significant resources of these deserts have been formally recognized over the last few decades, most notably with the creation of Mojave National Preserve, Death Valley National Park, and Joshua Tree National Park.

**More than 150 years after "forty-niners" flooded California in search of gold, another "gold rush" is currently under way.**

More than 150 years after "forty-niners" flooded California in search of gold, another "gold rush" is currently under way, this time in California's deserts—it's a rush to develop critical renewable energy resources. These important projects have been fraught with conflict and litigation due to unfortunate siting choices. It doesn't have to be this way. Developing renewable energy resources, such as solar energy, can be accomplished while protecting our shared investments in our Southwestern national parks and protected landscapes. The National Parks Conservation Association is calling on the administration and our elected officials to protect many of America's favorite landscapes and species while pursuing needed renewable energy projects in the right places—and we need your help and support to tell the Department of Interior to make the right choices when deciding renewable energy policy.



Organ pipe cactus



Joshua trees

We recognize that recent technological advances in solar panels and other technologies are making this energy source more economically viable. Similarly, national and state-level policies geared toward reducing our dependence on foreign fuels and increasing the production of power from sources that produce less pollution are further encouraging this industry's growth. What's more, the vast, sunny, desert Southwest region receives abundant solar radiation, making it an attractive location for large-scale solar development. To that end, 11 solar developments have been approved on lands administered by the Bureau of Land Management in California, Nevada, and Arizona and 77 more have been submitted to the agency for consideration in these states plus New Mexico, as of mid-May 2012. With the high number of solar projects on the drawing board, ensuring there is a thorough review process in place that gives due consideration to the unique and often fragile desert ecosystems that could be affected by these projects is critical.

The Bureau of Land Management, the federal agency that manages much of the public land in the Southwest, is currently developing a plan to guide solar energy development in the region. This Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement will shape the character of the desert landscape as solar developments proceed. The draft statement includes three alternatives to guide decisions on where solar developments could occur (see "Three Management Alternatives" for an explanation of these alternatives); one of these alternatives will ultimately be selected.

We can continue to protect our shared, long-term investments in these landscapes, even while using appropriate locations in the desert for solar energy generation. This thoughtful approach builds partnerships, community, and support for this important nascent industry. We must pursue a renewable energy future that does not compromise the resources and qualities that characterize the Southwest.

## Three Management Alternatives

1. No Action Alternative: The Bureau of Land Management continues its current practice of evaluating solar project applications on a project-by-project basis.
2. Modified Alternative (Variance Areas): Under this alternative, the Bureau of Land Management "proposes categories of lands to be excluded from utility-scale solar energy development and identifies specific locations well suited for utility-scale production of solar energy (i.e., SEZs) where the BLM would prioritize development... The alternative also allows for utility-scale solar development in variance areas outside of SEZs in accordance with a proposed variance process" (from the agency's website). This is the Bureau of Land Management's preferred alternative.
3. Modified Solar Energy Zone Alternative (SEZ): This alternative entails creating solar energy zones and restricting future applications to those lands. This is NPCA's preferred alternative because it does the most to safeguard desert resources, which are shared across the landscape of national parks and BLM lands.

Solar energy should have a key role in a modern energy policy. Development of solar energy technology and production should continue, and public lands can play a reasonable role in that effort. As solar energy developments are pursued, it is imperative that they proceed intelligently and with due regard to the region's unique and fragile desert ecosystems. These areas foster myriad species of plants and wildlife; are home to communities of people who have a great love for their surroundings; and they include lands that are truly known as America's best idea—our national parks.

