PROTECTING OUR NATURAL AND CULTURAL HERITAGE

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March 17, 2009

Via email: docket@energy.state.ca.us
with one hard copy mailed to address below

California Energy Commission
Dockets Office, MS-4
Re: Docket No. 09-Renew EO-01
1516 Ninth Street
Sacramento, CA 95814-5512

Dear Commissioners:

The Coachella Valley Mountains Conservancy ("CVMC") is a state agency within the Resources Agency. Our mission is to conserve mountainous and Natural Community Conservation Plan lands in the Coachella Valley area in Riverside County. We acquire or provide grant funding for the acquisition of lands with biological, cultural, scenic, and recreational resources. The purpose of this letter is to provide input to the California Energy Commission regarding the implementation of the Renewable Energy Executive Order. Our comments, which focus on how the energy initiative affects the Coachella Valley, are as follows:

1. CVMC's first exposure to the RETI process was accidental, as it was brought to my attention by community members. In reviewing the draft report from last fall, I noticed that a transmission line was shown on the maps through the Santa Rosa Wilderness in the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument. CVMC, as well as Wildlife Conservation Board, the Bureau of Land Management, the Resources Legacy Fund Foundation, and the Friends of the Desert Mountains have spent many millions of dollars over the years to protect the resource values in this area, which include critical habitat for the endangered Peninsular bighorn sheep, significant cultural resources, scenic resources, recreational resources, and Wilderness values. The area is also part of the Coachella Valley Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan/Natural Communities Conservation Plan ("NCCP") Reserve System. Identifying this as a potential transmission corridor seriously undercut the credibility of the process. Such an alignment may be characterized as "conceptual" by the RETI process for the purpose of estimating transmission costs, but when conceptual is functionally impossible, the value of depicting it in the first place is dubious if the process is intended to be reality-based and have any credibility as such. Based on environmental constraints, a realistic transmission corridor connecting points "A" and "B" in this area would be so dramatically different than what was depicted that it seems highly unlikely that any meaningful estimate of transmission costs results from the conceptual corridor used by RETI. The RETI report also showed a CREZ area in the western part of the Coachella Valley that included land within the National Monument, the NCCP Reserve System, the Whitewater Canyon Area of Critical Environmental Concern, and possibly in the San Gorgonio Wilderness (the resolution of the RETI maps being insufficient to allow that determination). This raised the same issues about how reality-based the process was.

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2. It appeared to us that the RETI process lacked critical baseline information that should have been used in its initial assessment of areas, and this apparent lack of information raised the concern that RETI may have had too ambitious a timeline to enable it to gather essential data to avoid adverse impacts to conservation values. There is clearly a tension between the need for expeditious planning to site renewable energy facilities and the need to protect natural and cultural resources in the process. The designations in the draft report raised questions about whether RETI was adequately managing that tension and about the appropriateness of some of RETI's assumptions. CVMC, along with the County of Riverside and representatives of local environmental organizations, met with CEC staff (Roger Johnson) and RETI members in early January to discuss these issues and our concerns; and the Coachella Valley Association of Governments subsequently provided GIS shape files of Coachella Valley areas designated as National Park, National Monument, National Forest, federal or state Wilderness, Area of Critical Environmental Concern, State Park, Ecological Reserve, University of California Natural Reserve System, Coachella Valley Fringe-toed Lizard Habitat Conservation Plan (CVFTL HCP) Preserves, and NCCP Conservation Areas. Our hope is that the process of designating appropriate areas for transmission corridors and renewable energy generation areas will be consistent with the protection of the Coachella Valley's conservation areas, on which tens of millions of public and private funds have been spent to protect biological, cultural, scenic, geological, recreational, and other natural resources of statewide and national significance. Based on its January 2009 report, questions remain about whether the RETI process is achieving a reality-based delineation of CREZ areas and transmission corridors which acknowledge and protect existing conservation areas.

3. CVMC is certainly supportive of the use of renewable energy as a way to limit the impacts of greenhouse gas emissions and other pollutants as this will contribute to the long-term preservation of the resources which it is our mission to protect. At the same time, it is imperative that the generation and transmission of renewable energy minimize immediate impacts on these natural and cultural resources. In general, it would seem to be most appropriate for the renewable energy program to:
   - Minimize the need for all additional energy by maximizing energy conservation through standards for new construction and incentives for retrofitting existing structures.
   - Maximize the generation of renewable energy as close to the "use location" as possible. In the first instance, this would focus on rooftop solar where energy is generated right at the point of use. As an example, the City of Palm Desert, here in the Coachella Valley, has instituted programs to provide incentives for installing roof-top solar. In the next instance, generation facilities would be sited as close to the point of use and the existing transmission system as possible to minimize energy loss through long distance transmission and to minimize impacts to areas set aside for conservation.
   - The last option would be siting energy generation facilities in remote areas where inefficient, long-distance transmission would be required.

   To address the Coachella Valley area specifically, minimizing the impacts of energy generation and transmission would best be accomplished by siting renewable energy generation and transmission facilities outside of the conservation areas described in #2 above. The California Department of Fish and Game permitted the Coachella Valley NCCP in 2008 and is quite familiar with its Conservation Areas. CVMC prepared the NCCP under contract to the Coachella Valley Association of Governments and is, therefore, intimately familiar with the Conservation Areas and Conservation Objectives of the Plan. While the NCCP does not preclude all development in Conservation Areas, it does minimize any development in the Conservation Areas. The basic premise of the NCCP is to ensure the permanent protection of the Conservation Areas as mitigation for and facilitation of development outside the Conservation Areas. Thus, development of new energy generation and transmission facilities would be much easier and less impactful if it occurs outside the Conservation Areas.

4. CVMC would be pleased to be a resource for the CEC in the consideration of areas for siting renewable energy facilities and transmission corridors in the Coachella Valley.

Sincerely,

Bill Havert

Bill Havert
Executive Director