

DRECP Comment

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The policy goal of the DRECP is the increase of renewable energy in the state's energy budget, a commendable goal to be sure. However, beneath even this laudable operational goal, there must also be an even more intrinsic goal of helping California and America to build a more sensible and secure energy future. This would be the vision behind the process. Yet, even deeper than the process and the vision is the desideratum of all America's motion and momentum: to be a fruitful country whose place on this planet is worthy, deserved and deeply cherished.

To achieve our policy goal, we need engineering, which America has in abundance. To achieve vision, we need good leadership, which America has in perhaps less but still passable abundance. To achieve our desideratum, we Americans need to be wise enough to balance our national urge to be fruitful with our need to be mindful of how we achieve fruitfulness. If we want a state and a country worthy of their place on the planet, we need to be worthy stewards of that place.

The DRECP pledges that the method of its policy goal will be faithful in its stewardship of the place, that the production of its energy yield will not be paid for in the currency of environmental degradation, species extinction, ecosystem collapse or landscape disfigurement. For as commendable as the pledge sounds at first, it does fail a bit in its persuasion if the listener also hears the pledge insinuate the use of a "best practices" approach to opening up southern California's public, desert lands to a renewable energy gold rush.

Probably the DRECP and its principals have nothing but the most benevolent of intentions. Yet, the countervailing interests involved – energy and wealth on the one hand, and the natural environment on the other – have a fairly action-packed history of conflict.

Recognizing this history, the DRECP authors decided to convene an Independent Science Panel in order to help California to genuinely identify and use the best practices possible to achieve conservation friendly renewable energy goals. Yet the science panel's two reports, one in 2010 and another in 2012, both register grave concerns that the research and analysis being conducted on behalf of environmental conservation within the DRECP's planning is incomplete in some cases, flawed in some cases, and missing altogether in some cases. In the introduction to the 2012 report, the science panel wrote: "[the] DRECP is unlikely to produce a scientifically defensible plan without making immediate and significant course corrections."

Having been established to help assure that the DRECP accounts appropriately for best conservation practices in its design, it is troubling that the science panel has such reservations with the plan so far. And, it is doubly troubling that the plan appears to be moving so intractably ahead in spite of the panel's reservations.

One might wonder if the expectations for energy development outcomes of the DRECP aren't really the only outcomes that matter to many of the so-called stakeholders and plan progenitors. Perhaps science and conservation just take too long when it comes to converting wild, public lands to productivity.

Yes, the plan is purported to be subject to strict conservation oversight, is required to satisfy the standards of a number of legislative rules and regulations established to protect the

environment. However, when this plan is enacted, it will provide development with a certain shelter from some of the legislation's more rigorous demands. Theoretically, the DRECP's own vested authority will guarantee all proper requirements are met, and that makes its trustworthy stewardship of conservation policy absolutely vital.

As alluded to earlier, economics and conservation have not always laid down together in the same field peacefully. Perhaps in this case, things will be different. Perhaps the DRECP will mediate a common ground. It's just that conservation's place in the DRECP field so far seems fairly dubious due to the science panel's criticisms.

No question, doing the kind of thoroughgoing assessment of all DRECP lands that would satisfy science would be a daunting task and would take a long time. This could be why the science panel's recommendations stated in the beginning: "To the greatest degree possible, site all developments on previously disturbed land." Surely, within the seven county planning area there is enough already-disturbed land to satisfy location requirements for many renewable facilities, and without the need for protracted, contentious land-use quarrels.

For many people watching the DRECP's progress, the itch in their confidence in the DRECP itches most when it comes to the prospect of opening up the wild, public lands of this region to industrial development of any kind.

The wild, public lands that are included in the DRECP's range are a vast refuge of time and change and space that is recorded in soil, stone, plant and animal, very much of it still unstudied. They are a refuge for ecosystems that have improbably developed and prevailed against extreme conditional odds. They are a refuge for solace and silence; a place where the desert tortoise knows its surroundings; a place where the creosote has long ago earned its standing. They are a refuge of the legacy this land and this place created, and that we are in a position right now to either cherish and preserve, or corrupt and perhaps obliterate.

No one will argue that the state and the country need to devise and enact a sound, renewable energy strategy. Nor would most people protest if the generation of renewable energy produced reasonable economic reward. What will be arguable, though, is whether the renewable energy strategy we adopt is the best we can do. Will we, for instance, do our part here in California to save our planet from a climate change tragedy by developing renewable energy sources which, because of misplaced priorities and an absence of qualified oversight, in their own turn trample the ecological framework and the landscape heritage of the California desert? What will be worth arguing is whether we do the right thing for the right reason.

The DRECP needs the approval of science to even approach being valid. And, it needs to be genuinely designed as much to protect as to permit. Industrial scale energy should be consigned to already disturbed locations that are near-by established transmission corridors, and roof-top solar should become one of the plan's leading outreach goals. The DRECP's conservation authority should epitomize the best rationale possible for protecting California's public and wild desert lands from industrial scale development of any kind.

In concept, the DRECP sounds good, but it assumes a great responsibility with its warrant of authority. To great extent, it becomes the steward of southern California's desert lands, and in order to be worthy of this responsibility and the trust it entails, the plan must be exacting and wise. The DRECP's ultimate goal should really only be to do the right thing for the right reason.