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MOJAVE DESERT: \$20 million tortoise habitat deal in the works

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State fish and game officials and the BrightSource Energy Co. are considering a \$20 million land deal that would allow the Oakland-based solar energy developer to make up for desert tortoise habitat losses from its solar plant now under construction in northeast San Bernardino County, state officials said.

BrightSource would pay into a state habitat land-bank fund and the company would get credit for preserving about 7,100 acres of desert tortoise habitat that the state has preserved since 2010 by funding grants to conservation land trusts, said Armand Gonzales, a special advisor for the California Department of Fish and Game.

Roughly half of the \$20 million would cover the state's land grant and administrative costs, Gonzales said. The other half would be used to create an endowment to pay for managing and monitoring land as wildlife habitat.

These habitat parcels are scattered about in the western Mojave Desert, with some parcels more than 100 miles from the company's "power tower" solar energy plant now under construction in the Ivanpah Valley off Interstate 15 near the Nevada border.

The habitat land includes a checkerboard of parcels northeast of Kramer Junction between U.S. 395 and Harper Lake; an area north of Joshua Tree National Park just east of Yucca Valley; and the Hidden Valley area between Barstow and the Mojave National Preserve.

The deal would allow BrightSource to meet its state obligation to preserve 7,164 acres of desert habitat that was required in October 2010 when the California Energy Commission approved its 5.6-square-mile project on public land.

The state has since rejected a proposal by the company to meet the requirement by acquiring mining interests in the Castle Mountains in the eastern Mojave, because the area was not robust tortoise habitat, said Eric Knight, manager of an environmental protection office for the energy commission.

BrightSource declined to comment on any of the specific aspects of the deal.

“We’ve placed \$34 million into an escrow account and continue to work on finalizing an agreement,” said an email from company spokeswoman Kristen Hunter. “Until a formal agreement is reached, the negotiations remain confidential.”

BrightSource also is working separately with federal officials to help tortoises by fencing roads and enhancing habitat on federal land, said a Bureau of Land Management spokesman.

BrightSource initially had until April of this year to acquire tortoise habitat, but energy commission staff have twice extended the deadline, which is now set for January of next year, Knight said.

Desert tortoises are listed as threatened with extinction, and the habitat acquisitions were required to offset habitat losses from the project and to help species survive.

Before BrightSource broke ground in the Ivanpah Valley, surveys commissioned by the company found only 16 tortoises in the project area, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service subsequently issued a permit to move a maximum of 38 tortoises.

But the company had to temporarily stop construction last year after many more reptiles than expected were found in the path of heavy machinery. Federal officials had to reassess the situation and issue a new permit before work resumed.

So far 75 adult and about 50 juvenile tortoises have been captured at the site, and another 50 babies have hatched in captivity, said Larry LaPre, a wildlife biologist for the federal Bureau of Land Management.

David Lamfrom, California desert program manager for the National Parks Conservation Association, said habitat lands in the proposed state deal need to be preserved, but he added that conservation is needed in the Ivanpah Valley, where more solar development, an airport and high speed train line are planned.

The Ivanpah reptiles are genetically unique and are needed to help the species survive, he said.

“We need to go into this with eyes wide open about the trades we are making, and (see) whether we are ultimately dooming the important, biologically diverse Ivanpah Valley,” Lamfrom said.

BrightSource's 392 million-megawatt project will consist of thousands of mirrors focused on three central towers where heat will be used to generate power. The first phase is expected to produce power by early next year.

President Barack Obama has hailed the project as a step toward reducing the nation's reliance on fossil fuels and cutting greenhouse gas emissions that contribute to global

warming. It is one of several alternative-energy projects in California approved by the administration under a “fast track” policy that expedited environmental review.