

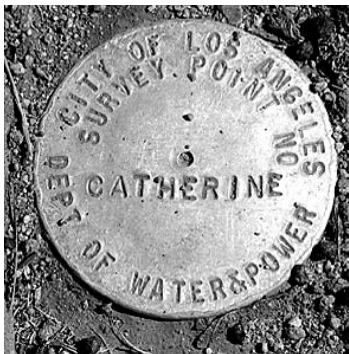
BY APRIL SALL

RENEWABLE ENERGY DEVELOPMENT: THE RIGHT WAY AND THE WRONG WAY

The Greenwash

The Mojave Desert is a landscape rich with treasure. This treasure includes far more than the historic monetary rewards of mining for minerals, and providing grazing lands, and now, production of renewable energy resources. The open vistas, unique landforms, unusually adapted plants and wildlife, unobstructed sunsets, solitude, and night skies are just a few of the immeasurable assets of this fragile ecosystem that is peppered with small, individual communities. These are the treasures that bring urban dwellers to the Desert to restore themselves.

As in the California Gold Rush of 1849, The Mojave Desert is under assault today. State mandates to reduce green house gases (GHG) and increase renewable energy portfolios have created a feeding frenzy, where energy developers are rapidly and chaotically submitting applications for renewable energy exploration and development. The targets of these applications are focused on almost free federal lands – some Right of Ways (ROW) are being leased for the bargain price about \$14/linear mile. While desert residents



are supportive of renewable energy development, they also want to insure that the energy strategy ultimately implemented includes all the factors involved in meeting our state mandates and energy needs. For example, the use of water needs to be considered in the development of these projects in the context of preserving irreplaceable ancient aquifers that are a precious desert resource.

The concerns of Mojave Desert residents begin with the promulgated premise that “We need to pave the Mojave Desert with solar panels

and wind farms to capture renewable energy and meet mandates to reduce GHG”. This idea is short-sighted and irresponsible, but not a viable long-term strategy. Instead of considering all other more appropriate solar and wind capacities throughout the Southwest, it places the entire burden on the protected, fragile ecosystem of the Mojave Desert. Solving power needs with renewable energy solutions needs to be a phased process.

In the first phase, maximizing energy efficiency and encouraging conservation strategies can relieve the urgency factor imposed by these progressive mandates. The fastest and cheapest way to reduce our green house gases is by reducing energy demands, rather than building expensive power plants and transmission lines. In the second phase, when power plants are built, power should be generated close to the source of need. These tactics will minimize environmental controversy, since little or no additional transmission will be required. Building power plants closer to urban centers frees up power presently coming from other areas on existing transmission lines, and allows renewables to occupy existing corridors. Furthermore, the technology of photovoltaic and other renewable sources is undergoing rapid change.

It is only by implementing phased tactics which protect rather than mine the Mojave Desert, that we can achieve the ultimate goal of responsible greenhouse gas reduction. In so doing, we can create a viable process for agencies, governments, energy developers, conservationists, and the public to site renewable energy projects in appropriate areas of the Southwest.

“Green” Path: the Path of Destruction

One example of an ill-conceived plan for energy production and transmission is the Green Path North (GPN) proposed by Los Angeles Department of water and Power (LADWP) and Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa. Planned behind closed doors for several years, LADWP, the largest publicly owned utility in the nation, submitted an application to Bureau of Land Management (BLM) in 2006 to build



DAVE MILLER

Top: Marker placed by LADWP along “undetermined” route. This was found in the middle ground of the immediately above photo. The coordinates are: Lat 34 deg, 12.096 min N; Lon 116 deg, 30.194 min W, Altitude 4127 feet.

Above: Wildlands Conservancy land in the foreground, Private lands in middle, BLM land on far hill where towers have been added to simulate the proposed transmission line. The mesa under the towers holds many archeological sites.

a new 500 kilovolt line. Their proposed line would traverse 100 miles of desert lands, the vast majority of which is open and undisturbed, to bring an undefined or undetermined, or unidentified amount of “renewable” energy into the LA basin.

LADWP spokespersons originally stated that only 20% would be renewable. Despite efforts to determine exactly how much, how, and when all this “green energy” was to be brought in, these facts remain secret. Backed by Mayor Villaraigosa, the preferred route described in the application would bisect the Big Morongo Canyon Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) and continue through the private 40-square-mile Pioneertown Mountains Preserve owned by The Wildlands Conservancy (TWC). Both preserves protect pristine habitat for hundreds of native species and host thousands of hikers, birders, and school children each year.

One needs only to break the surface on this project proposal to discover that it is not about green energy but about dollars, property control, and profiteering. Instead of using existing corridors designated in the California Desert Conservation Area plan, LADWP has applied for a new unnecessary corridor that would create the irreversible damage inherent in the development of a new high-tension transmission corridor. This preferred route is being sought because it will be owned exclusively by LADWP. LADWP makes a profit by securing new ROWs and putting new steel in the ground but at great expense to the Mojave Desert. LADWP claims

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the project will tap into geothermal power from the Salton Sea, but the geothermal facilities have yet to be constructed, and there is a great deal of competition for this limited resource. There is no guarantee that the majority of the power on this line will be renewable. Meanwhile, the other resources (i.e. wind and solar) have not been identified either, and the Mojave Desert seems to be taking the brunt of the sacrifice while receiving little or none of the benefit.

Pioneertown Mountains Preserve, the largest private wilderness in Southern California, was created solely from the private donations of conservation-minded citizens. Here the struggle over the protection of the Mojave Desert has taken an interesting twist into the realm of nonprofit law. Will nonprofit conservancies and land trusts be viewed as breaching their public trust and/or lose their nonprofit status if they are forced by outsiders to compromise their mission statements of land conservation and public recreation?

Nonprofits are not the only ones to suffer from the Mayor’s proposal. Under the Mayor’s authority, the LADWP is recommending Green Path North be granted official federal status in the West Wide Energy Corridors. Small property owners would see their homes and lands condemned despite the Mayor’s promises not to use eminent domain to condemn private property.

Citizens have not had successful input into LADWP’s project

despite the agency’s claims of transparency. A small group of private citizens protested the Mayor’s energy plans at the groundbreaking ceremony for the Pine Tree Wind Project, L.A.’s other proposed “green” energy project. As LADWP officials and Mayor Villaraigosa proudly unveiled this project, protestors were reminded of the Owens Valley and William Mulholland’s prophetic words, “There it is. Take it,” as he opened the LA Aqueduct. Just how much more of Southern California’s last remaining wild lands are they planning to take?

Citizens have also voiced strident concerns regarding the fact that LADWP will oversee itself in the implementation of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) process on this project. It is hard to resist comparisons to the Owens Valley debacle, if, once again, the fox will be allowed to guard the henhouse. Mayor Villaraigosa is greenwashing Green Path North, and who can stop it? It is certain that the Public Utility Commission does not regulate LADWP; it seems no one regulates this agency.

As California and the country face the challenge of combating climate change many will try to profit at the expense of preserved lands. Some of the applications before the BLM bear the name green and therefore imply that such projects will reduce GHG, but closer inspection is needed. It is critical that those who reside in and cherish the Mojave Desert stay vigilant and active to make sure that desert lands are not needlessly and carelessly sacrificed. Energy needs and green house gas reductions can be realized while still preserving in perpetuity the treasures of the Mojave Desert for present and future generations. There are many paths to energy efficiency and renewable development: let’s not rashly take those that rip through California’s last wild lands. ♦

April Sall is a third generation resident in the Mojave Desert. She worked with the Department of Natural Resources for the National Park Service before accepting a position with The Wildlands Conservancy. She is currently manager for the Mission Creek and Pioneertown Mountains Preserves.

Take Action Now!

Send comments about the protection of the Mojave Desert to:

U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein
750 B Street, Suite 1030
San Diego, CA 92101
Phone: (619) 231-9712
Fax: (619) 231-1108

Send comments about GPN to:

Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa
City Hall
200 North Spring Street, Room 303
Los Angeles, CA 90012
Phone (213) 978-0600
Fax: (213) 978-0750

For more information visit www.cadesertco.org and see the March 2008 issue of *Desert Report*.