



Renewable energy projects meet opposition from environmentalists

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By **JENNIFER BOWLES**
The Press-Enterprise

A rush to build environmentally friendly renewable energy in the windy, sunny Inland region has stirred up some unlikely foes: environmentalists.

They say the projects mean new transmission lines and towers across some of the very mountains and desert vistas people have fought to protect.

"It seems kind of silly to have a solar project in Blythe (in eastern Riverside County) and send it along transmission lines," said Jeff Morgan, chairman of the Sierra Club group in the Coachella Valley. "They should put them on the roofs of Los Angeles. It's best and most efficient when it's used where it is generated."

It's not just environmentalists who are objecting. A Riverside County supervisor said he opposes plans to erect 400-foot-tall wind turbines for the first time on the 4,000-foot elevation of Mount San Jacinto, near Palm Springs. And a San Bernardino County supervisor has strongly urged Los Angeles to abandon plans to string new transmission lines to carry renewable energy through the Morongo Basin east of Joshua Tree National Park.

Apple Valley leaders passed a resolution in April opposing plans to erect wind turbines along the ridgeline of the Granite Mountain range east of town.

"There's almost a Gold Rush type of thing happening in the Inland Empire and up in the desert to capture what we have here," said Scott Nassif, an Apple Valley town councilman.

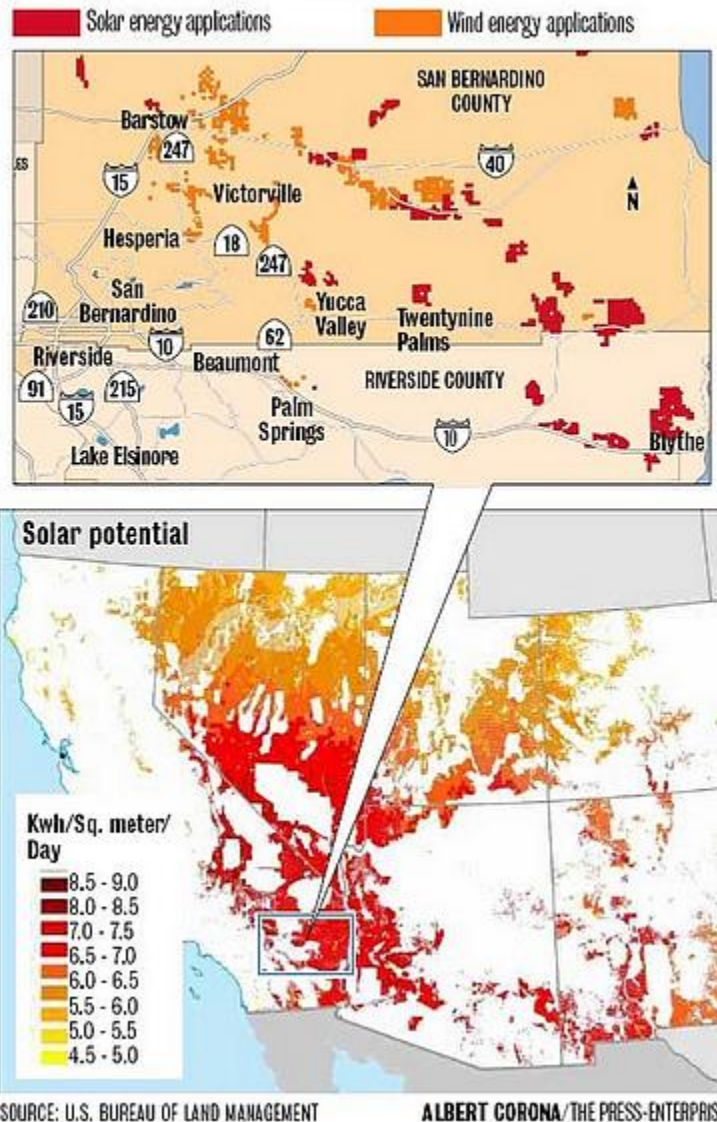
"They're great resources," Nassif said of the wind and sun, "but we need to make sure we're approaching it the right way and know the impacts on the communities."

He noted that while the projects might be located in the Inland region, they benefit much of Southern California by feeding into the electricity grid.

Mike Marelli, power contract manager for Southern California Edison, said the state's utility companies may not have much choice about building new transmission lines. Edison and other utilities must meet a legislative mandate to have 20 percent of their energy production from renewable sources by 2010.

"For renewable energy to really move forward," Marelli said, "there has to be a significant investment in transmission."

RENEWABLE ENERGY: The top map shows where companies have applied to the federal government for permits to install wind and solar energy projects. The bottom map shows the level of potential solar energy in the Southwest



Flurry of Plans

The U.S. Bureau of Land Management has received so many applications for solar energy projects that the agency last week put new applications on hold and launched an environmental review for such projects on public land in six Western states.

In California's desert, which includes eastern Riverside County and much of San Bernardino County, the agency has 66 applications for solar projects on more than 518,573 acres, BLM spokeswoman Jan Bedrosian said.

The agency will host hearings this month to gather public input on what environmental and socioeconomic issues should be considered.

Besides the potential for the renewable-energy projects to change the landscape, Bedrosian said, a number of threatened and endangered species, including the desert tortoise, live on the land where companies want to build.

San Bernardino County Supervisor Brad Mitzelfelt said the review will help decide where such projects are appropriate and where they should be restricted.

"At a time when the desert has become smaller because of urban growth, set-asides for (endangered species) habitat and wilderness, and expansion of military bases, we cannot surrender huge areas of public land without a serious discussion about which resources we can sacrifice and which need to be protected," he said in a statement.

Good Example

On Friday, Rep. Mary Bono Mack, R-Palm Springs, and Riverside County Supervisor Marion Ashley helped dedicate a new wind farm in Palm Springs that a Sierra Club representative held up as a way to harness wind energy without doing other damage to the environment.

Known as the Dillon Wind Power Project, the Iberdrola Renewables wind farm north of Interstate 10 encompasses 45 turbines that produce 45 megawatts of energy, or enough to power 13,500 homes.

Carl Zichella, Sierra Club regional staff director, said he attended the dedication because Iberdrola did everything right with this wind farm, in part because the project sits among existing turbines and will tap into existing transmission lines rather than string up new ones.

But, he said, tough questions remain to be answered about the larger push for renewable energy. Solving climate change by reducing reliance on traditional coal-fired power plants -- a major contributor to greenhouse gases -- and focusing on renewable energies has challenged some environmental groups because of the potential to mar the landscape and disrupt wildlife.

"It's a very difficult issue for an organization like ours, which helped to protect millions of acres of this beautiful desert all around us, to figure out how to do this right," he said. "We have to change the way we think about this, and how we work with people to make that happen."

Energy Vs. View

One of the the more controversial projects in Riverside County would put about 50 turbines as tall as 438 feet in the San Jacinto Mountains. The wind farm would be at the 4,000-foot level, on private property within the boundaries of the San Jacinto and Santa Rosa Mountains National Monument -- which was created through legislation spearheaded by Bono Mack.

Bono Mack said she is not endorsing the wind farm. However, the law that created the monument protects the property rights of people who own land within its boundaries. It's up to county officials, she said, to decide the project's merits.

Ashley said he and fellow Supervisor Roy Wilson oppose the project as proposed because it would mar the view and sit within the monument.

Riverside County, unlike San Bernardino County, hasn't taken a position on the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power plan to build a system of electrical towers and power lines from Desert Hot Springs to Hesperia to transmit energy from geothermal, solar and wind projects in the Imperial Valley.

San Bernardino County officials have asked the city of Los Angeles to stay out of environmentally sensitive areas in the Morongo Basin. And Supervisor Dennis Hansberger last month asked Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa and the City Council to abandon any plans to build transmission lines in the Morongo Basin. The basin encompasses several land preserves that are open to the public.

Hansberger said the Green Path North project will create "environmental devastation" in desert communities of San Bernardino and Riverside counties.

"Your current proposal shows a complete disregard for our pristine desert," said Hansberger, whose 3rd District includes the Morongo Valley.

Joseph Ramallo, a spokesman for the Los Angeles utility, said a final route has not been determined.

April Sall is preserve manager for the Pioneertown Mountains Preserve, owned by The Wildlands Conservancy in Oak Glen. She said one of the route options for Green Path North would cut through the conservancy's Sawtooth Mountains and another route would line up near the group's headquarters in Oak Glen in the San Bernardino Mountains.

She said the emphasis should be on energy conservation and local generation to avoid new transmission lines.

"You have a project that is benefiting a constituency 100 miles away, and it's doing all the impact in a completely different county and community that will not receive the benefits," she said. "It's an unnecessary approach, and that's the bigger issue."

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Solar energy meetings

The U.S. Bureau of Land Management will hold meetings to gather public input on plans for solar energy in six Western states, including California.

Riverside

When: June 16, 6 p.m.

Where: Courtyard by Marriott, 1510 University Ave.

Barstow

When: June 17, 6 p.m.

Where: City Council Chambers, 220 E. Mountain View St.

More information: <http://solareis.anl.gov/index.cfm>