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DESERT DEVELOPMENT ISSUES

Solar Power in the Desert: Are the current large-scale solar developments really improving California's environment?

Gaps in Desert Research

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California deserts are faced with unprecedented anthropogenic change. Impact factors range from expanding urban centers and military bases, to potential significant habitat loss from solar and thermal power expansions (including ground water exploitation and depletion beyond recovery, land stripping for power generation units, and fragmentation from power and associated transportation corridors), and climate change. Together these factors threaten remaining suitable habitat for endangered and for other endemic desert species. Other individuals and studies have commented on the use of out-moded technologies employed in the current American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA) projects, and the economic subsidies that are enabling individual site development and the creation of new transmission corridors in remote, previously undisturbed, areas rather than focusing on existing degraded lands and power corridors. We want to be clear that although we question the current project implementation in this article, we strongly support a transition from a fossil-fuel based energy system to one that will not further exacerbate our current trajectories of anthropogenic climate change, as well as providing energy independence and economic stimulus for our country.

Our goal here is to outline the scope of environmental changes that are underway, and to outline research needs necessary to provide long-term sustainability of federally- and state-listed species and their habitats, ensuring that energy developments are also fully compliant with the letter and intent of state and federal resource protection statutes. We identified several topic areas that are of concern to land managers and project developers in the California deserts. These represent topic areas badly in need of research using state-of-the-art techniques coupled with known expertise, tailored to the desert areas to be impacted by the proposed developments. These include the following issues and their interactions:

- Climate change and shifts in endangered species habitat location and migration potential
- Sources, recharge, and loss of groundwater from large-scale solar steam generator systems
- Persistence of endangered, threatened, and unlisted endemic species in current protected areas, and in new areas where habitat suitability is altered from climate and anthropogenic land-use change
- Exotic invasive species migration pathways, competitive abilities and productivity
- Interactions among vegetation composition, production, fire, pollution and climate change
- Carbon budgets and net carbon loss or sequestration.

Unfortunately, many federal and state agencies, as well as several non-government organizations, whose goal is to protect habitats appear to have overlooked previous results suggesting unacceptable levels of "take" for endangered species, and overlooked existing literature addressing net carbon fluxes that would be affected by the proposed solar developments. Nor have they employed state-of-the art research tools capable of integrating new ecosystem and habitat modeling approaches coupled with carefully-collected spatial and temporal data.

Most of the large-scale solar power projects utilize large quantities of water as steam power generators. The largest of these plants are steam-based thermal plants, using up to 2.9 to $3m^3$/MWh (US DOE 2006). Assuming 12h/day of active use, a 1,000MW would drain $35{,}280m^3$/day, or 28.6 acre-feet of water per day, or 10,435 acre-feet/year. One groundwater basin, such as the Palo Verde Mesa Groundwater Basin recharges only 800 acre-feet per year, largely from recharge by underflow from the Chuckwalla Valley (Department of Water Resources 2003). Even with a low water system, with less energy efficiency, the water use may still likely be well more than the recharge rates. The use of water affects agriculture, existing housing and businesses, the mining industry, military training grounds, and wildlife habitats. Plant species, such as the *Amargosa niterwort* (Hasselquist & Allen 2009), and animals including the desert pupfish populations in Ash Meadows (Deacon et al. 2007, Martin 2010) that are dependent upon surface waters and a high groundwater level are once again threatened this time by solar development. Despite the Department of Interior's call that conservation is a high priority, this is not apparent for these developments.

While researchers in the region, including UC Riverside scientists, have been addressing factors that challenge the ability of desert ecosystems to sustain themselves with state-of-the-art analyses, many state and federal agencies have continued to employ outdated models and decision tools (e.g., see "Harness sun wisely" Riverside Press-Enterprise 12/26/2010, and "energy developers need better tortoise counts, officials say" Riverside Press-Enterprise 11/4/10).

Federally-listed species such as the desert tortoise and those of concern like the Mohave fringe-toed lizard (Fig 1) are already impacted by new energy developments (e.g., the Ivanpah bulldozing of prime tortoise habitat), roads and urbanization, invasive plants, and changes in military base activities. Relocating species like the tortoises to unoccupied habitats, even those postulated "suitable" by experts, is conceptually flawed. Over 50 percent mortality is reported in short-term experiments (Desert Tortoise Council 2010). If environmental factors like climate change is included, the potential habitat in the desert is reduced even further (Fig 2).

Figure 1. Species that are directly impacted by the current and proposed developments in the California deserts, include the desert tortoise (a federally-listed endangered species) and the Mojave fringe-toed lizard (local populations are of concern to ecologists) (photographs by Cameron Barrows).

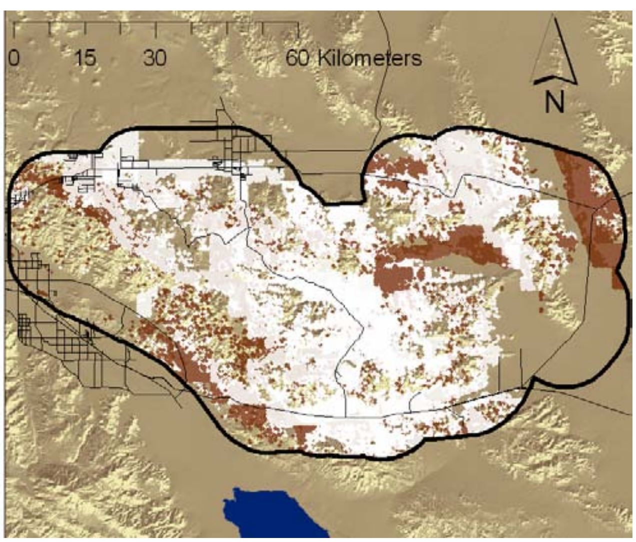

Figure 2. Potential response of desert tortoise to projected climate change at Joshua Tree National Park (C. Barrows). The white plus brown areas represents current habitat. White is the area lost with a 1°C increase in temperature, and a 75mm drop in precipitation, with the brown showing the remaining habitat. Transplanting animals, such as the desert tortoise is conceptually suspect, and the data presented to date suggest that this is not a viable approach. Even if accepted, "unoccupied" habitats are both currently suspect, and certainly have not been vetted against future climate change.

Solar development is essential to reduce carbon inputs to the atmosphere and global warming. But solar development needs to incorporate the best available science into planning and production efforts. The proposed large scale solar developments in California will impact dramatically current habitat and potential habitat of species of concern. We already understand that development patterns can dramatically affect current and potential habitat, as published for the Coachella Valley fringe-toed lizard (Barrows et al. 2010). Coupling climate change and development impacts could easily lead to local extinction for many populations of these species, and even extinction in some cases (Barrows et al. 2010).

Infrastructure and transportation associated with urban expansion and energy development is likely to impact significantly desert environmental quality. Almost all areas outside of the National Parks, and the existing military bases are among areas potentially subject to these developments (Fig 3). A decade ago, we demonstrated that in developed areas, such as along highway 62, nitrogen in the

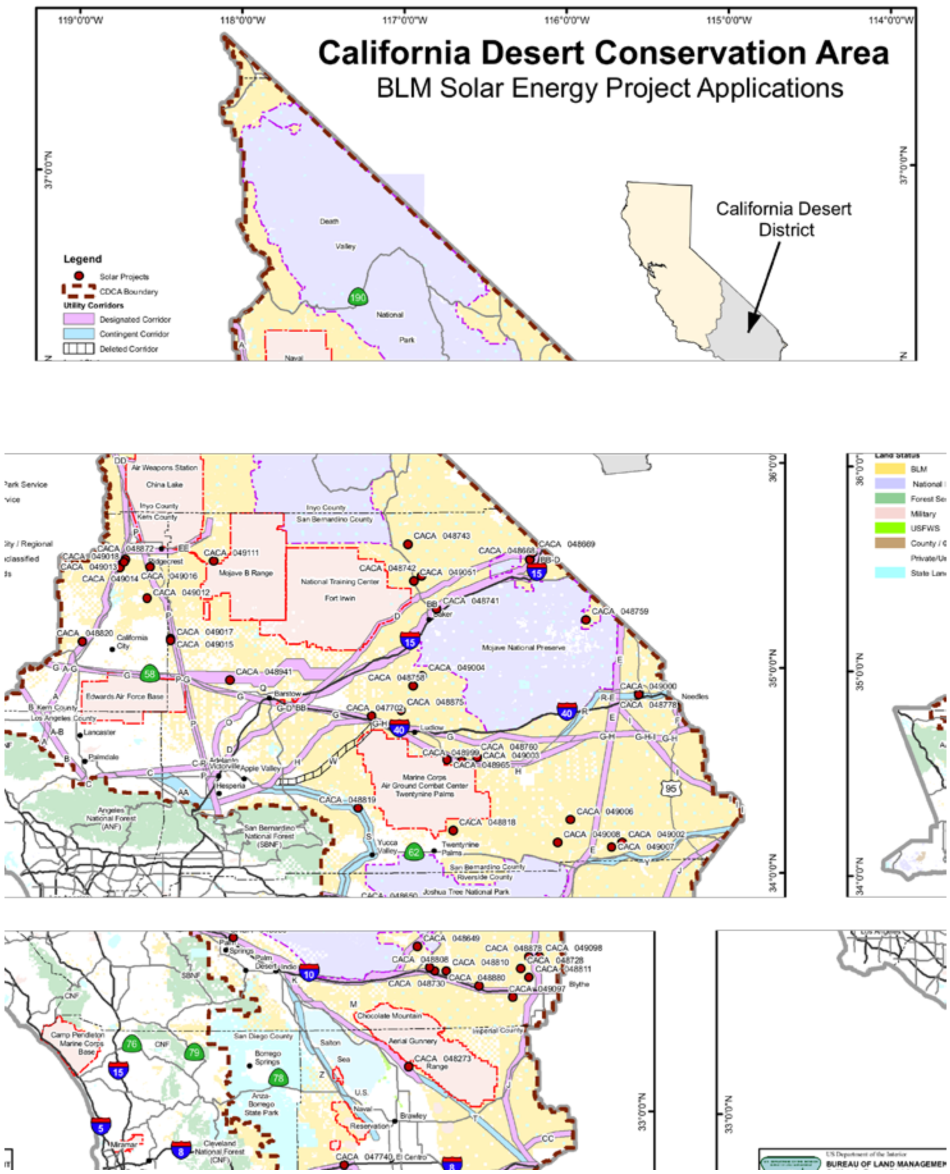

Figure 3. Proposed large-scale energy projects (http://www.energy.ca.gov/siting/solar/cdd_energy_points_8_5x11_solar.pdf). These areas will be subject to increased habitat fragmentation, vehicular traffic and development resulting in significantly increased air pollution, and N deposition.

soil accumulated during the dry season from vehicular-derived air pollution (Fig 4, M. Allen unpublished data). These soil depositions functioned as fertilizer and were subsequently leached and absorbed by vegetation during the wet season, contributing to the massive increase in exotic grass production, to a level capable of carrying fire (Rao et al. 2010). Regional nitrogen deposition models (Fig 5) show that the military bases and solar developments are in locations undergoing increasing air pollution, threatening endangered species and land management protocols. Continued disregard of these changes likely will have dramatic impacts on the natural resource management issues of the region.

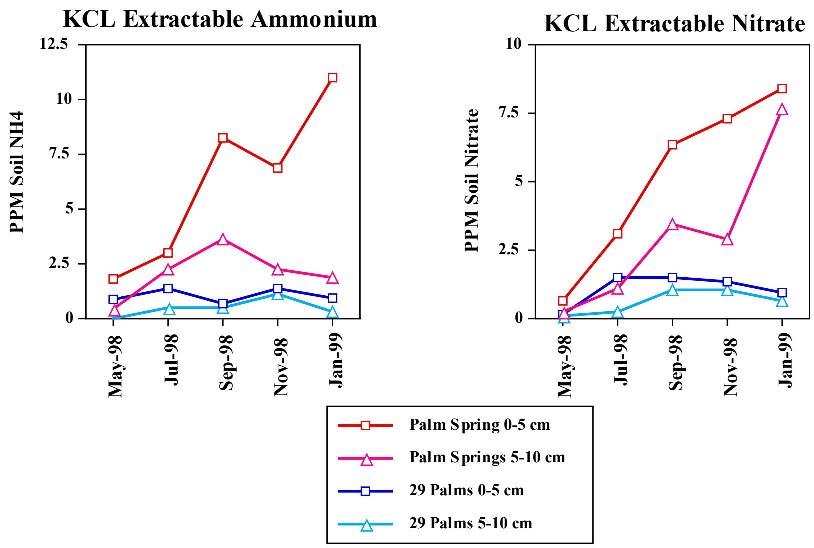

Figure 4. N changes in soil in response to development activity (M Allen unpublished data) showing seasonal increase in N in a developed area (near Palm Desert) versus a remote site (29 Palms Marine Corps base) in 1998. As the Yucca Valley and other desert regions continue to develop, and new energy developments are placed, the potential for more problems with N deposition, fire, and invasive species continues to grow.

Many of the areas that are proposed to be developed for the solar development include Microphyll woodlands (Fig 6). The dominant plants (legume trees) have deep roots capable of reaching groundwater (several meters). When desert plants grow, they absorb carbon dioxide (CO_2). The carbon (C), as sugars, moves into roots and soil organisms. Carbon dioxide is respired back into the soil, part of which reacts with calcium (Ca) in the soil to form calcium carbonate. This is how our deserts sequester large amounts of C and thus function to reduce atmospheric CO_2. ***The magnitude of this carbon storage process is still a crucial research question and remains unknown for our California deserts.*** However, values of up to 100g/m2/y of C-fixation are reported for deserts in Baja and Nevada (Serrano-Ortiz et al. 2010). After vegetation is removed to make

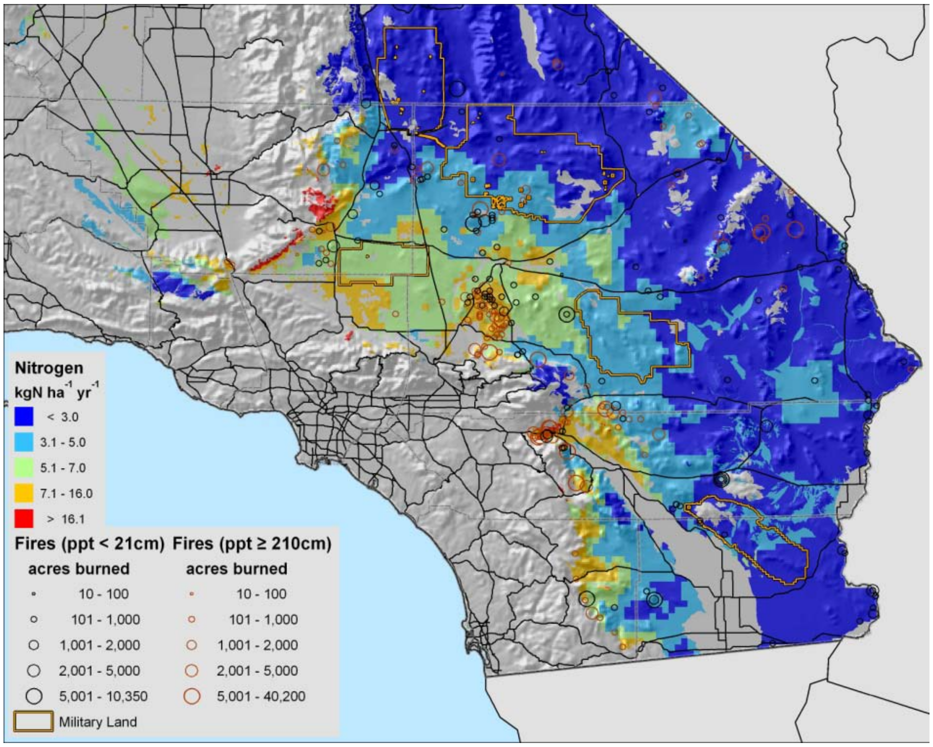

Figure 5. Fire in the desert and nitrogen deposition (from CCB, R. Johnson and E. Allen). Research in the Mojave desert (Rao et al. 2010) shows that in these regions, N deposition (largely from transportation and suburban development) above 3-9 kg/ha/y is above the "critical load" that facilitates exotic grass production, can result in fire and permanent ecosystem degradation. As development increases surrounding these areas, the potential for invasive species, land degradation, and risk of fire increases as it has in other developing areas.

Figure 6. Microphyll woodlands are among the most productive ecosystems that will be affected by solar power facilities. There are no data documenting the amount of carbon sequestration that will be lost with the loss of these stands. However, because these stands access groundwater, they are among the most productive of desert ecosystems.

way for solar arrays, carbon dioxide will be left to return to the atmosphere that ordinarily would have been used to form soil organic matter buried up to several meters deep, or released by roots and soil microbes as soil CO_2, which in turn, binds with soil Ca to form caliche.

Our deserts have large amounts of CO_2, stored as caliche ($CaCO_3$). The amount of C in caliche, when accounted globally, may be equal to the entire C as CO_2 in the atmosphere. This caliche is formed from weathering of Ca in desert soils binding to carbonates that originate in large part from respiration of roots and soil organisms. Most of the caliche in our deserts was formed during the ice ages, when vegetation was more dense and more productive. These deposits likely have been stable since (Schlesinger 1985). Being stable, though, means that inputs equal exports. Carbon in caliche may in fact be released, especially when vegetation and soils are disturbed. Mielnick et al. (2005) reported losses of up to 145g C/m^2/y. Additional research is needed to understand and quantify these exchanges (Schlesinger et al. 2009, Serrano-Ortiz et al. 2010), as there are C exchanges in desert ecosystems that we do not understand. This loss may be especially critical following removal of the vegetation for thermal solar power units. The net C loss due to a loss of native desert vegetation could be as high as 50g C/m^2/y plus weathering and dissolution of carbon dioxide from caliche up to 150g/m^2/y for an area of 7,000 acres (a common size for solar plants of 1,000MW). This translates to an annual loss of nearly 6,000 metric tons of C released by caliche, or retained in the atmosphere due to the loss of vegetation. This does not include the land disturbed by transmission corridors and maintenance roads through desert lands.

Solar power units that generate 1,000MW would save nearly 560,000 metric tons of C per year. However, we do not know the life-span of these solar power units. This net loss of caliche could continue or even increase as temperatures warm for centuries or more, given the incredibly large amount stored in our California desert valleys and vegetation recovery following disturbance for developing desert lands can also take a century or more (Fig 7). If we include the C savings from an active use of photovoltaic cells in the locations where demand is heavy (see Warmann and Jenerette 2010), then the entire regional C balance becomes even less weighted toward the large desert thermal developments.

Finally, what is the life-expectancy of a thermal solar energy development? A common presumption is that these extend indefinitely into the future. But water quality is a crucial issue for solar development, because water from both the Colorado River and the groundwater basins of the regions are highly corrosive to the project plumbing. This means additional land disturbance from maintenance and replacement activities, and a reduced lifespan of these solar projects. Given changes in government subsidies, the over-exploitation of groundwater supplies, and the heavy replacement and maintenance costs associated with the corrosive water quality, this may not be a reasonable assumption. Even when plant re-establishment occurs, disturbed lands will be dominated by annual grasses and forbs with shallow roots instead of deep-rooted shrubs, potentially for a century or more. Soil organic C likely will rapidly cycle back to the atmosphere. We do not know how soil inorganic C behaves. Understanding the lifespans of the solar plants, compared with this long-term slow C balance is a critical need for determining if these solar developments represent a net long-term reduction in greenhouse gases. Does calcium carbonate then weather back into CO_2 with no plants to replenish the soil CO_2? Could large-scale solar developments in our deserts actually increase atmospheric greenhouse gas levels over the next centuries?

Figure 7. Overlook from Desert Center, CA, looking eastward across lands designated for solar power development. The combination of developments has the potential to fragment populations of desert species, degrade soils, and reduce carbon sequestration potential of these arid lands.

The areas of the California deserts where the mega- solar projects are to be built are mainly in areas where water is the limiting factor for production and organism survival. Precipitation is highly variable in space and time, and hydrology is not well documented. The basins are interconnected. Yet we know little about the rates or even directions of the subsurface flows and small transient perched water pockets created by earthquake fault lines that support plants whose roots must reach the groundwater, such as palms, ironwood and mesquite. Water extraction at large scales could have critical impacts on desert ecosystems, including animal species like deer, bighorn sheep, and mountain lions, more than just tortoises. Microphyll woodlands and mesquite stands support various endangered species and species of concern, both directly as habitat and food, and indirectly by supporting annual forbs that serve as food sources as the soil dries out. We do not know how or where water is connected between basins, nor if the water used for individual projects is continually recharged, or comprised of water laid down in the Pleistocene.

Concluding Remarks

These development impacts are particularly questionable given the incredible surface area located in regions with high solar radiation such as southern California. Warmann and Jenerette (2010) estimated that 10 percent of the rooftop areas suitable for solar photovoltaic systems could supply 80 percent of the annual energy requirements for the region. Given the large acreages of private, already disturbed lands scattered across the California deserts, use of more pristine habitat of endangered species like the desert tortoise and the *Amargosa niterwort* seems counterproductive.

Again, we are not objecting to renewable energy development in the California deserts. Indeed, we have worked for decades with military installations and with energy companies to enhance environmental management and restoration. We can do the same with renewable energy projects. However, without careful planning and management, massive detrimental impacts over extremely large areas could result from the current energy development proposals. For society to benefit from solar energy while preserving our desert ecosystems, we must obtain and use sound existing scientific methods, and fund credible new science based on accepted review and award principles, as practiced by agencies with experience in peer-reviewed funding such as National Science Foundation or National Institute of Health. We must apply principles as judged by published peer-reviewed literature in top journals, and defendable, innovative ideas judged by scientific experts without conflicts of interest.

If the construction of poorly placed solar arrays in California leads to the loss of endangered species, destruction of plant and animal habitat, increased environmental contaminants, diversion of water and increased global warming due to more carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, then any justification for placing solar arrays in our deserts is seriously undermined.

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