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Desert Vistas vs. Solar Power

By TODD WOODY

AMBOY, Calif. — Senator [Dianne Feinstein](#) introduced legislation in Congress on Monday to protect a million acres of the Mojave Desert in California by scuttling some 13 big solar plants and [wind farms](#) planned for the region.

But before the bill to create two new Mojave national monuments has even had its first hearing, the California Democrat has largely achieved her aim. Regardless of the legislation's fate, her opposition means that few if any power plants are likely to be built in the monument area, a complication in California's effort to achieve its aggressive goals for renewable energy.

Developers of the projects have already postponed several proposals or abandoned them entirely. The California agency charged with planning a renewable energy transmission grid has rerouted proposed power lines to avoid the monument.

"The very existence of the monument proposal has certainly chilled development within its boundaries," said Karen Douglas, chairwoman of the California Energy Commission.

For Mrs. Feinstein, creation of the Mojave national monuments would make good on a promise by the government a decade ago to protect desert land donated by an environmental group that had acquired the property from the Catellus Development Corporation.

"The Catellus lands were purchased with nearly \$45 million in private funds and \$18 million in federal funds and donated to the federal government for the purpose of conservation, and that commitment must be upheld. Period," Mrs. Feinstein said in a statement.

The federal government made a competing commitment in 2005, though, when President [George W. Bush](#) ordered that renewable energy production be accelerated on public lands, including the Catellus holdings. The Obama administration is trying to balance conservation demands with its goal of radically increasing solar and wind generation by identifying areas suitable for large-scale projects across the West.

Mrs. Feinstein heads the Senate subcommittee that oversees the budget of the [Interior Department](#), giving her substantial clout over that agency, which manages the government's

landholdings. Her intervention in the Mojave means it will be more difficult for California utilities to achieve a goal, set by the state, of obtaining a third of their electricity from renewable sources by 2020; projects in the monument area could have supplied a substantial portion of that power.

“This is arguably the best solar land in the world, and Senator Feinstein shouldn’t be allowed to take this land off the table without a proper and scientific environmental review,” said [Robert F. Kennedy Jr.](#), the environmentalist and a partner with a [venture capital](#) firm that invested in a solar developer called BrightSource Energy. In September, BrightSource canceled a large project in the monument area.

Union officials, power industry executives, regulators and some environmentalists have also expressed concern about the impact of the monument legislation, but few would speak publicly for fear of antagonizing one of California’s most powerful politicians.

The debate over the monument encapsulates a rising tension between two goals held by environmental groups: preservation of wild lands and ambitious efforts to combat [global warming](#).

Not only is the desert land some of the sunniest in the country, and thus suitable for large-scale power production, it is also some of the most scenic territory in the West. The Mojave lands have sweeping vistas of an ancient landscape that is home to desert tortoises, bighorn sheep, fringe-toed lizards and other rare animals and plants.

As conflicts over building solar farms in the Mojave escalated earlier this year, Mrs. Feinstein trekked to the desert in April. The senator’s caravan, including the heads of two of the nation’s largest utilities, top energy regulators and a group of environmentalists, bumped along a dirt track and pulled up to a wind-whipped tent. Inside, executives with a [Goldman Sachs](#)-owned developer waited to make their case for building two multibillion-dollar [solar power](#) plants.

The presentation over, the entourage rolled on to the next solar project site to hear the developer’s pitch. Mrs. Feinstein gave the developers a hearing but was not moved by their arguments, according to five people present on the tour. The senator seemed concerned about the visual effect of huge solar farms on Route 66, the highway that runs through the Mojave, they said.

“When we attended the onsite desert meeting with Senator Feinstein, it was clear she was very serious about this,” said Gary Palo, vice president for development with Cogentrix Energy, a solar developer owned by Goldman Sachs. “It would make no sense for us politically or practically to go forward with those projects.”

Another project, a huge 12,000-acre solar farm by Tessera Solar, was canceled last week, and the

company cited Mrs. Feinstein's opposition.

Steven L. Kline, chief sustainability officer for Pacific Gas and Electric, called the proposed monument "prime territory" for solar development and noted that the loss of the planned solar projects would hurt his company's efforts to comply with state renewable energy mandates. The utility was planning a solar farm in the monument area.

"In the near term, it would have a very substantial impact," he said, emphasizing that in principle, P.G.& E. supports Mrs. Feinstein's efforts to preserve sensitive desert lands. "Over time those projects will be built somewhere else and we'll have benefits of the power."

Mrs. Feinstein has long championed desert preservation, sponsoring legislation in 1994 that created Death Valley and Joshua Tree national parks and the Mojave National Preserve. Five years later, she pushed for federal money to help acquire nearly 500,000 acres owned by Catellus.

A small Southern California environmental group, the Wildlands Conservancy, had negotiated the acquisition of the Catellus property and raised tens of millions of dollars for its purchase from a major benefactor, the financier David Gelbaum, a former hedge fund manager turned philanthropist.

The Catellus holdings consist of hundreds of small parcels that form a checkerboard across the Mojave.

"The whole objective was to preserve the core of the Mojave Desert," said David Myers, executive director of the Wildlands Conservancy. "To a large extent this land is the connective tissue that holds the desert together."

When Mr. Myers became aware that solar and wind developers had applied to lease federal land that included the former Catellus holdings, he contacted the senator.

The legislation to protect a million acres of desert land would include 266,000 acres of the former Catellus lands. (The balance of the half-million acres of Catellus property is already protected, in various ways.) The proposed renewable energy projects would have occupied about 30,000 acres of Catellus land, according to the [Bureau of Land Management](#).

"If all this solar development took place in the Mojave, the higher you climb the more industrialized the vistas would look," Mr. Myers said recently as he walked past bighorn sheep tracks and scrambled up a peak overlooking the Trilobite Wilderness Area.

Mr. Myers stresses that he is not against large-scale solar power plants but prefers that they be concentrated on already disturbed farmlands. In recent months, he said, he has worked with solar developers to find alternative sites.

On Thursday, Mrs. Feinstein introduced legislation to provide a 30 percent tax credit to developers that consolidate degraded private land for solar projects. She followed that on Monday with the legislation to create the 941,00-acre Mojave Trails National Monument and the 134,00-acre Sand to Snow National Monument.

“I strongly believe that conservation, renewable energy development and recreation can and must co-exist in the California desert,” Mrs. Feinstein said in a statement. “This legislation strikes a careful balance between these sometimes competing concerns.”

Developers and environmentalists say Mrs. Feinstein has modified the monument legislation to address some of their issues. The 2.5 million acres set aside in a draft version of the monument act has been shrunk to around one million acres, allowing at least two projects to proceed. The bill also includes provisions designed to accelerate approval of renewable energy projects on federal land.

That is not likely to mollify monument opponents, including unions that were anticipating the creation of thousands of construction jobs.

“Unfortunately, Senator Feinstein wants to wall off a large part of the desert based on historical land ownership rather than science,” said Marc D. Joseph, a lawyer for California Unions for Reliable Energy. “It seems the wrong approach to where solar should go and where it shouldn’t go.”

But John White, executive director of the Center for Energy Efficiency and Renewable Technologies in Sacramento, said the monument legislation would put so much land off limits for development that it might actually spur a more vigorous state and federal effort to compensate by creating renewable energy zones. “The problem is,” he said, “if you take a million acres off the table, what are you going to replace it with?”

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