

# Editorial: Blueprint for harvesting California's sun and wind

BY THE EDITORIAL  
BOARD

Though it has been under the radar for most Californians, a major land-use decision is fast approaching, with implications throughout the state.

The [Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan](#) has gotten less attention here than in Southern California, largely because the 22.5 million acres it will eventually cover [are in southern desert counties](#). But the plan is intensely important to California's ambitious effort to get half of its electricity from renewable energy by 2030.

Drawn up over more than six years by energy, environmental, governmental and other interests, it balances the environmental impact of dramatically expanded solar, wind and geothermal power infrastructure with the ramped-up demand for clean energy.

While far greener than other power sources, renewable facilities can consume thousands of pristine acres and disrupt habitat for desert tortoises, bighorn sheep and other signature California species. Birds can get caught in windmills and [incinerated by hot solar towers](#). The power lines needed to carry the electricity can create visual blight.

A recent study found that [fewer than 15 percent of large-scale solar facilities](#) have been sited on compatible land. So the state is looking to the Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan to identify upfront where renewable power facilities will and won't work so some can be fast-tracked.

The [first phase of the plan](#) covers about 10 million acres of U.S. Bureau of Land Management property, mostly in the Mojave Desert from Death Valley to San Diego County and from Palmdale to the Nevada state line. It identifies sections appropriate for conservation, renewable energy production, recreation and industry.

About a million acres of already industrialized land would be approved for big renewable energy projects. Another 3.5 million acres would be earmarked for conservation. After much wrangling and many hearings, the emerging plan has received generally positive reviews.

If the current "preferred" version prevails in November when the Bureau of Land Management is expected to release its final plan, it'll be a good blueprint. The proposed national conservation land will link other protected sectors and will preserve desert along the state's eastern border from Inyo County to Mexico.

But because of gaps in federal law, and because of the unconventional way the new national conservation areas will be designated – in a planning document rather than by federal legislation or a [presidential declaration](#) – the Bureau of Land Management needs to make it clearer that the land being placed in conservation will be permanently protected. There are also gold, salt, aggregate and other environmentally destructive mines in the area, not all of them active, and the bureau needs to make it clearer that new claims won't be tolerated in protected areas.

More broadly, the rest of California should pay attention. The desert isn't the only part of the state with utility-grade solar and wind power potential.

The Central Valley has the potential to harvest much more sunshine and wind than it does now. A good template for directing that development, and making those choices, is the Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan.