

CA Wild Sheep Foundation says proposed Soda Mountain Solar Project will jeopardize wildlife populations

Bechtel's project along I-15 would likely add "another nail in the coffin" to wild sheep unless modifications are made. Pending legislation may help wildlife

Millbrae, CA ([PRWEB](#)) February 05, 2015 -- Scientists and representatives of the California Wild Sheep Foundation say the proposed 4,300-acre Soda Mountain Solar Project in the Mojave Desert would likely add another nail in the coffin of the species if a critical migration corridor across Interstate 15 is blocked by the solar plant. See the recent commentary by wild sheep experts in the San Gabriel Valley Tribune from Jan. 15, 2014 at <http://www.sgvtribune.com/opinion/20150112/protecting-desert-bighorn-sheep-migration-corridors-in-mojave-desert-guest-commentary>.

"The freeways across our deserts have fragmented what was once a continuous network of interconnected bighorn sheep populations," said John D. Wehausen, Ph.D., an applied population ecologist who has studied bighorn sheep populations in California since 1974. "With the final environmental impact report expected to be released soon, we urge the Bureau of Land Management Director Neil Kornze and California State BLM Director Jim Kenna to work with Bechtel and other governmental agencies and nonprofit organizations to either relocate the project to an area with less harmful resource impacts or provide some alternatives, such as overpasses or underpasses to protect the migration corridor."

Soda Mountain Solar, a subsidiary of the construction firm Bechtel, reportedly plans to place about 1.5 million solar panels on the six-mile site which would straddle I-15 southwest of Baker, CA and cover areas on the northwestern edge of the Mojave National Preserve. The proposed development is adjacent to some of the best desert bighorn sheep habitat in the Mojave National Preserve, which is also home to the federally threatened desert tortoise and the Mojave fringe-toed lizard, along with burrowing owls and desert kit foxes.

"While we recognize the importance of investing in a renewable energy future that enhances our nation's energy independence, we strongly believe this can be done in a way that doesn't jeopardize the ecological integrity of our national parks, wilderness areas and wildlife," said Dr. Clinton Epps, an associate professor at Oregon State University who specializes in mammal conservation.

Epps said small populations of bighorn sheep reside in numerous desert mountain ranges in the area that are separated by expanses of relatively flat desert, which make the sheep vulnerable to a loss of genetic diversity and local extinctions.

"The Soda Mountains connection is a particularly important restorable corridor in the southeastern desert region of California where a wildlife overpass or possible underpasses could reestablish connections between the two major desert bighorn sheep metapopulations," said Epps. "It's possible underpasses could be modified to allow bighorn to move underneath. But the arrays would have to be constructed in the proper locations."

Freeway crossings for wildlife have been successfully constructed in the western U.S. and Canada, including those for bighorn sheep in Arizona just south of Lake Mead. Epps said movement across the Soda Mountains connection would restore gene flow between bighorn sheep populations in the central Mojave Desert, including the Mojave National Preserve and populations as far north as Death Valley National Park.

California Senator Dianne Feinstein has been working on legislation to establish two new national monuments in the Mojave Desert to protect more than 1.1 million acres. The new legislation would protect 942,000 acres of federal land between Joshua Tree National Park and the Mojave Preserve, along historic Route 66 in San Bernardino County. Visit Senator Feinstein's website at [<http://www.feinstein.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/press-releases?ID=5ba6393a-ced0-410f-a165-8ed88783dd2d>] to see her discussion draft of the bill posted Nov. 2014.

It would also create the Sand to Snow National Monument covering about 135,000 acres of federal land between Joshua Tree National Park and the San Bernardino National Forest in San Bernardino and Riverside counties. The bill would protect 23.6 miles of the Pacific Crest Trail and the habitat for nearly 240 species of migrating birds.

“We need a broad-based effort to analyze and identify lands appropriate for renewable energy projects that will not jeopardize the ecological integrity of public lands, including iconic wildlife like the desert bighorn sheep,” said Kyle Meintzer, the California Wild Sheep Foundation’s founder and the chapter's liaison to the California Department of Fish and Wildlife and the California Legislature.

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The California Wild Sheep Foundation was formed and incorporated in California in 2001. The chapter exists to ensure generations to come are able to experience the phenomenal beauty of wild sheep through conservation, education and the promotion of professional management of North American wild sheep in order to augment the number and size of game herds. For more information: www.cawsf.org.



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